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ORIGINAL PAPER

The Child Labor in Social Media: Kidfluencers, Ethics of Care, and Exploitation

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Abstract

Kidfluencing, a social media business in which children serve as primary influencers of audience opinions or behavior, is a rapidly growing entrepreneurial phenomenon where parents build enterprises around the likability and antics of their children. Proponents argue that kidfluencing is simply monetizing the existing antics of kids, critics argue that it is child labor. We explore the ethical implications of kidfluencing through the abductive lens of four leading kidfluencer cases—Ryan's World, Vlad and Nicki, Ninja Kidz, and The Bucket List Family—in light of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Through a comparative case analysis of these four highly successful kidfluencing channels, we demonstrate both the ethical challenges as well as the trade-offs between rewards and rights risks within kidfluencing. We develop a model of five fundamental threats to the rights and freedoms of children involved in social media influencing, proposing a framework by which parents, platforms, and policy-makers can assess and regulate this industry. In so doing, we make contributions to the literatures of child labor and the ethics of care.

Keywords Kidfluencing · Social media influencing · Entrepreneurship · Ethics of care · Child labor

Introduction

Social media has disrupted how we communicate, how we relate, and, through the rise of the influencer, how products are marketed and sold (e.g., Marshall et al., 2012; Murthy, 2012). Social media influencers are individuals with established public relationships that can influence an organization's stakeholders through content production, distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web (Enke & Borchers, 2019). The power of social media influencers to impact young people is well known (Lajnef, 2023; Sweeney et al., 2022), and the reach of young people influencing other young people has been established (Establés et al., 2019; Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020); however, most of this research focuses on older children (i.e., teenagers): those with agency and a certain degree of independence. Largely ignored is the emerging trend of young child influencers (those younger than the legal work age): individuals with little agency, operating under the auspices of a legal guardian, and the entrepreneurial exploitation potential that exists therein.

The *exploitation* of children, through their labor, is ethically unambiguous: it is wrong (Hindman & Smith, 1999). Child labor, conjuring up all too real images of children crushing rocks (Andre & Godin, 2014), mining cobalt (Kara, 2023), or in sweatshops (Hartman et al., 2003; Smestad, 2009), is disturbing. However, child labor where the children are media products, is uniquely challenging to assess and adjudicate because it is situated between and across boundaries (Hudders & Beuckels, 2024; Humbert, 2009). First, it is neither an entirely ethical nor an entirely legal question (Kolk & Van Tulder, 2002). Most modern societies agree that child exploitation and underage labor is morally reprehensible, yet many nations have carved out legal protections for parents to utilize their children's labor for the furthering of the collective family good (Light et al., 1985). Second, the ethical responsibility of protecting children in this context falls somewhere between the individual and the institutional level (Humbert, 2009). Indeed, the issue of who is responsible for underage children as social media influencers

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(herein kidfluencers), be it regulated by a child's parents or guardians, by media platforms and their terms of service, or by governments and their regulations, has no consensus (Shomai et al., 2024). Third, like all entrepreneurial pursuits, the ethical nature of kidfluencing is in question both in terms of how the opportunity is pursued and the effects of pursuing it (Lundmark & Westelius, 2019).

The morality and ethics of employing children as social influencers is ambiguous. There is generally an international prohibition[1] of children under the age of 12 engaging in any type of work. Altogether, while the benefits of kidfluencing is clear—they can relate to the target demographic, earn money, have fun, etc.—the scope, risks, and opportunity for the exploitation of children working as kidfluencers is far less clear. This moral gray area falls into the realm of the ethics of care (Held, 2005: 10) where "the moral claims of particular others, for instance, of one's child, whose claims can be compelling regardless of universal principles." In light of this tension, where the individual's and caregiver's needs abut universal principles around child labor, caregivers are in a precarious position of negotiating an exception to a seemingly overly restrictive universal principle. To better understand this ambiguous ethical territory, we ask: "*What are the ethical risks associated with kidfluencing and how can we assess them?"* To address this research question, we use core tenets of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1990)—an ethics-based policy guideline—applied to four highly successful cases of kidfluencers and their families (earning millions of dollars), all with substantial presence on YouTube, to abductively develop a framework of child exploitation in social media.

In doing so, we make three contributions to the ethics literature. First, we establish kidfluencing as a new form of child labor. However, we question whether it should be assessed against the universalist perspective on child labor (Hindman & Smith, 1999) or regulated, both by private and public institutions. Child labor in social media is an understudied phenomena with little theory or definition to guide it (Geider, 2021). On its face it is seemingly benign, but we find that the practice comes with many of the same rights risks as other child labor, which we model herein. Second, we contribute to the literature of ethics of care (Held, 2005) where parents as caregivers are challenged to balance the wants of the child and family against the theoretical risks those activities entail, while their own impartiality is questioned. Kidfluencing represents a critical strain on relational dynamics as the children may come to represent the family's primary form of income, subsequently obscuring the distinction between the best interests of the child and those of the family, identifying conflict within the multiple responsibilities of the caregiver. Third, we propose a multi-level locus of responsibility for protecting children in this type of work. Based on our findings, we provide a framework of indicators for monitoring and ensuring ethical kidfluencing for families, platforms and governments. In so doing, we shed an ethics light on a rapidly emerging commercial activity seemingly blind to child labor rules.

To facilitate this conversation and promote further ethical inquiry we explore four case studies where child labor was not a requirement for family survival, but a direct entrepreneurial exploitation of a specific opportunity requiring child labor. Kidfluencing is a massive and growing part of the social media landscape (see Supplementary Data, Table A), representing enormous revenue. We follow these cases (Table 2) with the development of an ethical framework of child rights (Tables 3 and 4) as they are risked: given the unique context, this framework is much narrower than that of Hartman et al. (2003).

Kidfluencing: Child Labor as Family Opportunity

The advent of social media platforms—those on which content is created and consumed by the users of the platforms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010)—has spawned a variety of new, online-first business types with new business models, where the individual is the product and the brand. So was born the social media influencer, an online content creator who makes money by sharing one's life, experience, expertise in the hope of attracting, persuading, and thereby monetizing large numbers of followers. While it is more difficult to manipulate an individual through online communication than it is in person, social media influencers are often more effective at swaying behavior because of their ability to reach more people, faster (Jin et al., 2019), and that their followers have already self-selected into the influencer and their brand (Boucher, 2016).

In 2015, YouTube launched YouTube Kids an app providing access to the YouTube library of content within certain limitations: content deemed appropriate for younger viewers, the sale of data prevented in accordance with child privacy regulations, and parents having the ability to define what children could watch. Between 2016 and 2022 YouTube Kids was downloaded more than 400 million times (Leci, 2023). Indeed, YouTube, and social media videos, are becoming ubiquitous of the modern childhood experience with as many as 80% of kids 0–7 in developed countries watching YouTube videos either directly or through the kid's

[1] The minimum age convention of 1973, ratified by 176 nations sets a minimum work age for the country between 14 and 16 years of age, with "light" work exceptions for those two years younger than the individual country minimum (ILO, 2023). Work under the age of 12 is prohibited, therein.

app (Neumann & Herodotou, 2020). While children have long been the target of advertising (Linn, 2005), regulations designed to protect child consumers (Beagles III, 2003) and the prevention of direct advertising to children on YouTube, have driven marketers to embrace influencers as a marketing channel to reach kids (Verdoodt, van der Hof & Leiser, 2020), and while many of those influencers are adults (e.g., Blippi), an increasing number are themselves children.

Kidfluencers are children who hold similar widespread appeal online or facilitate acquisition of appeal for their caregivers. Given that kidfluencers are minors, Kidfluencing ventures are typically family run, with parents or guardians producing and managing the social media channels on which their children appear, and subsequent commercialization. For legal and practical reasons, guardians are responsible for the content appearing on those channels and the level of their children's involvement therein. This business structure creates a number of challenges. First, the fact that kidfluencing is a type of family entrepreneurship (Nordqvist & Melin, 2010; Randerson et al., 2015) means that it is strained by the competing goals of being a family, and an opportunity-seeking venture. Kidfluencer's caregivers are often torn between their roles as entrepreneurial business owners and as parents (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017), given that ethical and commercial considerations regarding their children's involvement in the venture may be more aligned with one role than the other. Second, as YouTube (and other social medias) prevent young children from owning revenue generating accounts, the funds flow directly to the guardians who are acting both as employers and fiduciaries for the children. Thus, the fact that kidfluencing necessitates the work of a minor child as directed by an adult-parent, the business model introduces a new form of child labor.

Choice, Child Labor and the Ethics of Care

Child labor in the context of a family traditionally produces two sets of tensions. The first tension is economic, revolving around the fact that a child's security is only as assured as the family's. Thus, if the choice is the family's starvation or the child's labor, then child labor is excusable. Many businesses (e.g., farming) rely on family labor, including children's, for survival because family members make cheaper employees that turn over less frequently (Song, 1997). Whether such economic advantages warrant child labor is often a gray question, and it is why the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1990) moves agency from the parents to the state in certain circumstances: namely that it is the state's responsibility to ensure this standoff between the family and the child does not happen. In practice, this move has only partially achieved global protections for children and only highlighted the tension between ethical and economic priorities. One in five countries still permits children to conduct dangerous work, and countless more have loopholes to allow it (de Guzman Chorny et al., 2019). Kennedy (2019) further demonstrates how some states (i.e., Myanmar) may even exacerbate the issue through strategic injustice. While in these cases the abuse of children is clear, it is the context and the responsibility for preventing abuse that is less clear (e.g., Hartman et al., 2003). As such, the tension is a more societal one, existing at the intersection of multinationals, business associations, governmental and non-governmental organizations (Kolk & Van Tulder, 2002), and cultural values (Song, 1997), and less related to individual decision-making.

The second tension is developmental, revolving around the direct costs and benefits to the child. Children who grow up on farms and are expected to be farmers when they grow up are essentially engaging in apprenticeship when they help on the farm, learning the skills they will need to be successful later in life. The cost to this work-study is in potentially limiting other avenues of opportunity for the child, while the benefits are about creating and exploiting a singular unique opportunity. Emerson and Knabb (2006) refer to this as dynastic utility, such that when the day-to-day survival is not an issue, families will make child labor decisions around long-term wealth creation: will the family dynasty be better served by the child working within the family business versus pursuing other paths (i.e. getting an education). Indeed, it is this dynastic wealth argument that informs the ethics of family business literature (e.g., Hanson et al., 2019), and the relational justice compromises made within the family. Based on relational ethics, encompassing notions of trust, loyalty, and fairness (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986), parents can insist on their child's labor in the presence of the understanding that the child later benefits from the business. This latter perspective raises the question: when survival and basic needs are removed from the equation, in what circumstances, if any, do the benefits to the child (and the family) actually outweigh the opportunity costs (including the loss of rights to the child)?

Kidfluencing, seemingly produces a third tension, where greater success in the venture actually increases risks to the participating child's rights. At low frequencies or at early stages, the positive gains of play, personal expression, and developing positive personal representations can make kidfluencing appear at worst harmless and at best positive (Hudders & Beuckels, 2024). Indeed, the observable risks are likely small and acceding to the child's desires seemingly harmless (Harvey & Light, 2013). However, as kidfluencing proceeds to the point at which it generates significant income, activity habituates and closer approximates labor, and the ethics become muddier. Ethics of care (Held, 2005, p. 13), recognizes the tensions that exist between "care and justice, friendship and impartiality, loyalty and universality" and the caregiver's decision-making position becomes increasingly challenging.

Where moral theories tend to examine the tension between self-interest and universal moral principles, ethics of care has the caregiver in-between negotiating the relationships of the self-interested but nonautonomous child against the moral principles of society (Held, 2005). Caregivers are making decisions that the needs of the one are not reflected by society's principles (e.g., Capozzo, 2020). Indeed, when the perspective is solely that of child labor with regards to kidfluencing, the caregiver is probably correct: the child still can go to school, is not placing their body at hard injury-prone labor, and is not being obviously exploited by others (the platform's benefits from the content, notwithstanding). However, kidfluencing differs substantially from other forms of enterprise in terms of the type of work required from a child. While potentially less physically demanding, content creation work carries more emotional and psychological pressure that is far more central to the success of the venture. Social media and its related industries are essentially unregulated in most parts of the world due to the technology's relative newness. However, there is already ample evidence that kidfluencing may pose consequential risks to the children involved, with a number of kidfluencers' parents charged and convicted of various forms of child abuse (Durkin, 2019; Hanson et al., 2019; Levin, 2017). As such, we do see real cases of caregiver ethics degrading into traditional moral spheres, where their own self-interest is compromising the rights of the child. Due to the newness of the kidfluencing industry, research has yet to provide a holistic evaluation of the legal and ethical considerations of the new type of child labor. There is a need for a new framework that provides clarity to caregivers, policy-makers, and businesses about the risks and threats inherent in kidfluencing, providing those decision-makers with a more nuanced lens than "child labor" that is relevant to kidfluencing, and offering a barometer for assessing the extent of children's rights abuses and protections.

Method

Background Research

To ensure that we understood the landscape of the kidfluencing business and the major players within it, we began our sample selection by conducting substantial background research. First, we did a comprehensive search of popular and online press, including major outlets (i.e. New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, etc.), local news stories, blogs, and discussion boards. We noted the kidfluencers that were mentioned in each, which, together, represented the set of *subjectively* most popular kidfluencers. Second, to determine the set of *objectively* most popular kidfluencers, we examined the top one thousand channels on YouTube—a user-generated video content platform purchased by Google in 2006 (Helft & Richtel, 2006) that attracts more than 2.7 billion unique visitors per month—in terms of cumulative video views. To do so, we examined the channel descriptions and images of each channel to determine if children were prominently featured in the content. If any description was unclear, we watched between one and three videos on the channel, as needed for clarity. The kidfluencing channels that make up the top one thousand are shown in Supplementary Data, Table A.

Case Selection

To ensure that we covered the kidfluencing landscape as thoroughly as possible, we selected our specific cases through purposeful sampling. Such an approach allowed us to find and select information-rich cases offering a more thorough picture of our phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). The case we were first aware of and included in the sample was Ryan's World, primarily because our own children were watching the YouTube channel. In addition, Ryan's World is largely credited as being the originator of kidfluencing on YouTube. Our background research revealed that the primary style of videos on Ryan's World channel is called "Unboxing", described below, and that the channel has achieved enormous financial success from videos of a toddler named Ryan "Kaji" Guan (henceforth Ryan). These facts then prompted two follow-up questions; what *other* types of kidfluencing channels existed and did they have similar levels of success? As such, we identified cases largely on a snowball of Kaji's financial success, specifically looking for different genres and the most successful entrant in each genre, to facilitate horizontal analysis. Focusing on the most successful entrants[2] was deemed important as we soon realized that this is a highly reductive medium where leaders tend to attract copycat followers; thus, we could capture practices likely to be echoed in smaller and less successful channels.

To this end, we established a set of guidelines against which to evaluate potential cases. First, each kidfluencing venture needed to have originated or become successful primarily through creating content on YouTube. Holding the primary commercialization medium constant allowed us to compare kidfluencing ventures with similar origin stories and initial business models. Second, to be relevant to a "child labour" analysis cases needed have produced a significant amount of content featuring children over many

[2] Success is necessarily subjective based on a combination of longevity, revenue, and views across multiple channels. When there were several similarly highly successful cases in a genre, we chose the one with the most significant presence outside of YouTube to facilitate the case building.

years to demonstrate both ongoing and time intensive activity, such that it could be legitimately considered work, and to reflect significant income, such that potential labor was worthwhile to the family. Third, given the hallmark of thorough qualitative research is the use of multiple data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2015), cases needed to have significant secondary sources, including web sites, popular press articles, and other shorter-form social media content (e.g., on Instagram, Facebook, X, etc.). Last, to facilitate thorough analysis, kidfluencer ventures needed to have YouTube channels that were primarily in English.

Using the above criteria, we selected four cases representing four different genres of kidfluencer videos[3]: Ryan's World as representative of the "unboxing" genre, Vlad and Niki as representative of the "adventure play" genre, Ninja Kidz as representative of the "sports" genre, and The Bucket List Family as representative of the "travel" genre.

Ryan's World

Ryan Guan (known as Ryan Kaji, b. 2011 as Ryan Haruto Nguyen) may be one of the most famous children in the world. Ryan's first video was uploaded in 2015, in which he and his mother, Kieu-Loan Guan (known as Loann Kaji) pick out a toy from the toy store, bring it home, play with it, and review it. Originally, the videos primarily featured Ryan with his mother and father (Shion Guan, known as Shion Kaji), but twin siblings Kate and Emma began appearing in the channel's videos shortly thereafter. The Guan family lived in Houston (they have since moved to Hawaii), Kieu-Loan Guan was a high school chemistry teacher and Shion Guan a former structural engineer, who gave up their careers to run the family's production company and their son's channels (Butterfield, 2019). The Ryan's World brand now consists of 9 affiliated YouTube channels, including a Spanish-language channel and a Japan-targeted channel. New videos appear 5–6 days per week and range in length from a few minutes to over an hour long. As Ryan has aged the videos have become more (cartoonishly) violent, casting Ryan as a ninja or superhero. Most videos feature Ryan and his father, with his sisters and mother appearing less often. The videos use a variety of styles, but show a general trend of growing complexity, sophistication and production as the channel matured. Some recent videos employ special effects, costumes, sets, animated characters, multiple takes, and sophisticated editing. The family incorporated a video production business, Sunlight Entertainment LLC, in 2017 and has produced more than 2400 videos, and employs 30 full-time creative staff (Sunlight, 2022). Ryan's World was the most popular channel in the US and the second most popular in the world in 2016 (Popper, 2016), and earned $22 million in 2018, the year prior to the move to television (Robehmed & Berg, 2018), and then $24 million the next year, the highest earning YouTube channel for consecutive years (Bulger, 2021).

Vlad & Niki

Vlad and Niki is one of the most popular channels in the world, not just for children but overall. The channel published its first video in August of 2018, and was an immediate hit. By the end of its first month, the channel had 4 million subscribers. It has continued to gain one to two million subscribers per month ever since (WikiTubia, 2023), and earnings from the channel are estimated to be $3–$9 million per month.[4] When the channel launched, the boy's father (Sergey Vashketov) was still employed in sales and therefore recorded videos at the family's home in Miami, FL, on weekends (VanHoose & Juneau, 2020). The content of the channel is primarily geared to pre-school-aged children. The Wall Street Journal adeptly described the style as a "live action cartoon" (Watson, 2022) that is enhanced with sound and visual effects, animation, and music. The videos tend to fall in one of three categories: pretend play with a variety of (often oversized) toys; real-life outrageous activities, such as driving a water-going car with their father; "educational" content, such as how to wash your hands, how to ride the bus safely, and the importance of brushing teeth. The family now runs a production company, which is responsible for 21 YouTube channels that are translated into 18 languages. They have won numerous awards for their popularity, both from media and parent associations (Carpenter, 2021). In 2021, Vlad & Niki received a seven-figure deal from HBO Max to stream their content on the platform (Moneycontrol.com 2022). The Vlad and Niki brand now includes branded video games, podcasts, toys, and other merchandise. As Vlad and Niki have largely aged out of the type of content the channel produces, their younger siblings, Christian and Alice, are now the primary stars of the channel.

Ninja Kidz

The Ninja Kidz TV YouTube channel revolves around Shane and Alyson Myler and their four children—all of whom are martial artists. Shane and Alyson have owned a Taekwondo

[3] Our classifications are representative not exclusive—i.e., an unboxing channel might have a narrative play video from Ryan in it. We do not profess that these classifications represent the totality of videos, just significant and different genres within the kidfluencing space.

[4] https://vidiq.com/youtube-stats/channel/UCvlE5gTbOvjiolFlEm-c_Ow/

dojo in West Jordan, Utah since 2003.[5] Their children "were raised in a martial arts studio"[6] since they were young and now practice martial arts and gymnastics competitively. Posted on March 30, 2017, the channel's first full video was a parody of the popular television show and movie Power Rangers, showing the Myler children defeating alien invaders. It has been viewed over 101 million times. The channel has evolved to focus more on the children's lives and athletics. In most videos, the Myler children are competing against each other in a variety of ways: martial arts competitions, physical fitness, best pranks, girls versus boys, etc. The Ninja Kidz brand has expanded into various types of merchandising and licensing, including: an app that teaches children martial arts moves, Ninja Kidz branded vitamins, a video game, toys, and a 36,000 square foot "action park" in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas area. Social Blade (2023) estimates the family's annual earnings to be in the millions.

The Bucket List Family

Garrett Gee sold his startup—Scan—to Snapchat in 2014 for $54 million at the age of 25. He and his wife Jessica made the decision not to spend their money, but to sell their belongings, for $45,000, and travel the world with their three children for as long as the $45,000 lasted. To prolong this excursion, they lived and traveled frugally and documented their life on social media (Loudenback, 2017). Revenue from social media activities allowed them to maintain this lifestyle for 4 years before they settled in Hawaii (Dobson, 2018), though they have not stopped traveling, and still post videos regularly. Their videos feature the parents and children and their adventures around the world. The parents are the primary protagonists but seeing the adventures through the eyes of the children is an important component of the series. The family are religious, Garrett and Jessica met missioning in Russia (The Bucket List Family, 2023) and include their faith, their philosophy of life and health, and parenting as elements in their videos. Jessica Gee (2024) has authored a book for National Geographic regarding their adventures and there is an increasing focus on obviously sponsored, but still conceptually appropriate, content, such as Disney Cruises, high-end resorts, business class seats on Qatar airlines, VRBO rentals etc.

The cases and genres they exemplify are summarized in Table 1.

Data Collection

To understand the cases more thoroughly, the authors assessed each case's origins, content themes and patterns, performance, media attention, and audience response. We began with a comprehensive investigation into each kidfluencer's primary YouTube channel content. First, we watched every video posted on the channel in the first 2 months. Then, we scrolled chronologically through the thumbnails and descriptions of subsequent videos and watching those that appeared to the researcher, from the thumbnails and descriptions, to either (a) potentially contain content relevant to child labor rights or (b) represent a different type, subject, or form of child participation from previous videos. If a video contained any evidence of violation or preservation of the child(ren)'s rights, we would (a) watch the several videos immediately before and after it and (b) search the channel for videos of similar type or with similar content in the hope of gathering more context about our observations. In most cases, we did not watch the entirety of each video but rather watched relevant sections in great detail while scrolling ahead through other sections. The number of videos varied by channel, determined by when there were no new codes being developed. In total we watched approximately 424 videos of 11,018 min in total duration; this represents an average equivalent of two videos posted every other month, per case. Our estimates of the quantity and duration of footage sampled are shown in Table 2.

Initially, we hoped to supplement our analysis of the content with interviews of the case families. However, access to the families is intermediated by public relations companies, who either rejected our requests for interview or did not respond to them. Therefore, we utilized available secondary sources, such as the families' websites, social media accounts, mainstream news outlets, blogs, review sites, etc. by conducting systematic news and web searches. The authors then synthesized primary and secondary data, wrote thorough summaries of each case, and discussed their findings.

Analytical Approach

We approached our data using comparative case analysis (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Goodrick, 2014). As the goal of this study was to understand the potential risks to the child's rights and rewards of kidfluencing activities in social media to the children involved, it was important that we employ a method that allowed us to both survey the breadth and depth of the practice and come to analysis-based conclusions therein. Kidfluencing involves neither one-off events, as successful kidfluencers produce considerable amounts of content, nor are they in any way uniform; indeed, there are potentially endless variations of kidfluencing styles and

[5] https://pommartialarts.com/about-us/west-jordan

[6] https://www.ninja-kidz.com/about-us

Table 1 Summary of cases

	Ryan's World	Vlad and Niki	Ninja Kidz	The Bucket List Family
Channel Inception	March 17, 2015	April 23, 2018	March 30, 2017	July 5, 2015
Genre	Unboxing *Unboxing videos involve a child opening a box, usually (though not exclusively) holding a toy. The child then explores the toy, engages in some kind of play either solo or with others with the toy, and narrates their way through play or otherwise reviews the toy*	Adventure Play *Adventure play videos involve children engaging in elaborate narrative play. They frequently involve props, costumes, special effects, and multiple characters. These are arguably the most popular genre of videos*	Sports *Sports videos featuring children engaged in a wide range of athletic endeavors. They tend to be naturalistic videos documenting the children participating in one or more sports and chronicling related activities*	Travel *Travel videos generally focus on the exotic adventures of an entire family and feature both the parents' and children's points of view. It is a challenging genre as it tends to be costly to produce at a high level, and channels frequently rely on sponsorship for foreign travel*
Subscribers	36 million*	109 million*	21 million*	2 million*
Views	57 billion*	85 billion*	12 billion*	230 million*
Videos	2600	700	300	400
Family Members (birth year, for children)	• Shion [Kaji] Guan (F) • Kieu-Loan [Loann Kaji] Guan (M) • Ryan (b. 2011) • Kate & Emma (b. 2016)	• Sergey Vasketov (F) • Victoria Vasketov (M) • Vladislav (b. 2013) • Nikita (b. 2015) • Christian (b. 2019) • Alice (b. 2022)	• Shane Myler (F) • Alyson Myler (M) • Bryton (b. 2004) • Ashton (b. 2006) • Paxton and Payton (b. 2008)	• Garrett Gee (F) • Jessica Gee (M) • Dorothy (b. 2013) • Manilla (b. 2014) • Calihan (b. 2018)

*At time of publication. (M)other and (F)ather, denote the parental roles as depicted within the videos

Table 2 YouTube sample summary

	Total videos viewed	Total duration (minutes)	Total duration (hours:minutes)
Ryan's World	129	5,375	89:35
The Bucket List Family	109	2,209	36:49
Vlad & Niki	97	1,598	26:38
Ninja Kidz	89	1,836	30:36

types of videos. Comparative case analysis has been used in a wide range of fields including management (Collins, 2001, Collins & Porras, 2002, Collins & Hansen, 2011); global development (Goodrick, 2014); and education (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The method promotes an in-depth independent case study, where each case (in this case a kidfluencer brand) is examined holistically, with detailed research about the specific manifestation of the phenomenon, considered from multiple sources to create as complete an analytical unit as possible. As such, we analyzed the cases vertically and horizontally.

As part of vertical analysis, each case was compared against the UNCRC, which served as our analytical framework that considers how the individual case is expressed at the level of each child, the family, and the family business. The coding was based on UNCRC articles, noting incidences where a right was at risk of being violated or demonstrated to be protected. Further the case was holistically viewed against the convention, including the total number of videos produced and the estimated work time involved with producing them (based on the videos' length over time, shown in Fig. 1). Further, coding was enhanced with the evaluation of kidfluencer's families' statements off the channel and investigative reporting indicating how the child's workload, agency, and finances were handled. Traditionally child labor has been examined through one of two lenses: moral philosophy or legal. There are significant challenges to both these perspectives. From the moral philosophy perspective, child labor is generally considered immoral, and only ethically permissible when it prevents a greater ill—e.g., starvation or separation of the family (Browne et al., 2004). These kidfluencer channels, however, challenge the moral philosophy perspective in that the work the children are doing can be defended in many cases as play. Additionally complicating is that the reward is not based on avoiding deprivation but for enriching the entire family.

Further, a legal perspective is insufficient as it does not account for jurisdictional differences. Child labor laws vary wildly between countries, states, and even cities. Most legal codes are either overly restrictive to be relevant (e.g., no child under the age of 12 may engage in paid work) or conversely provide a blanket pass for work done in the home or under parental guidance. Indeed, these rules are largely guided by the local culture and economic conditions and not applicable to the reality of the global industry kidfluencing has become (Hindman & Hindman, 2014). The closest analogy to kidfluencers are child movie and television actors. Though areas with well-developed film industries, such as New York and California, have work restrictions and compensation rules for children (i.e., Coogan Laws), each jurisdiction implements them differently (McGrath, 2022). Further, existing performing arts rules assume that the parent is acting primarily as legal guardian and not employer (Masterson, 2020). Therefore, given the unique financial implications of kidfluencing, the global nature of the social

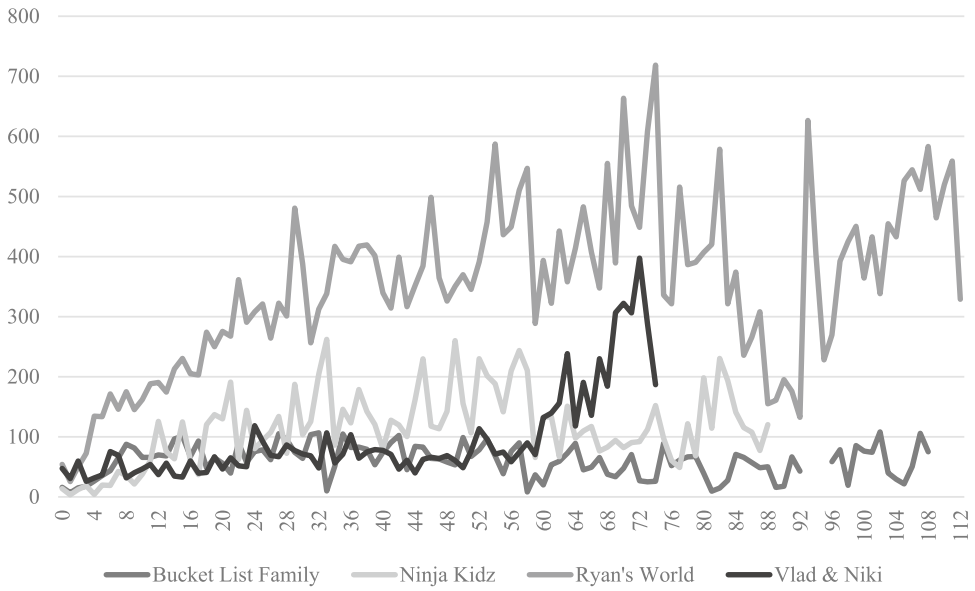


Fig. 1 Minutes of footage over time

Table 3 Relevant articles UN convention on the rights of the child

Article No	Article text	Associated right
5	*…Rights and duties of parents…to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognized in the present Convention*	Right to consent
8	*…The right of the child to preserve his or her identity*	Right to Privacy
12	*…The child who is capable of forming his or her own views has the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child*	Right to Consent
13	*…To freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice*	Freedom of expression
16	*…No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honor and reputation*	Right to privacy
19	*…To protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child*	Freedom from harm
28	*…The right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity…*	Freedom from economic exploitation
31	*…Right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child*	Freedom from economic exploitation
32	*…The right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. (a) Provide for a minimum age or minimum ages for admission to employment; (b) Provide for appropriate regulation of the hours and conditions of employment; (c) Provide for appropriate penalties or other sanctions to ensure the effective enforcement of the present article*	Freedom from economic exploitation

The above are direct quotations from the Convention text (https://www.unicef.org/media/52626/file), edited for space and relevance. Text not relevant to kidfluencing, and that would not otherwise interfere with contextual accuracy, is not included

media industry, and the nature of work involved, the use of a more holistic framework was called for.

In 1989, the United Nations (UN) created the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was signed by 140 countries and has been subsequently ratified or accepted by 196 members (the United States is the only UN member that is excluded). The UNCRC is an international treaty presenting a superseding ethical framework that nations can employ to develop domestic regulations and laws. The UNCRC[7] represents the single most accepted framework for children's rights, having been used as the basis for further regional conventions and legal frameworks (Abrams, 2023); as such, we use it to develop our framework for entrepreneurial child exploitation in social media. The UNCRC consists of 54 articles (UNICEF, 1990), each of which we considered in relation to the four cases. The UNCRC, in several cases, considers child's rights from multiple angles, and thus multiple articles; we condense many of those articles into a single right. The overarching principles of the UNCRC are captured in Article 3: *that the best interests of the child must be followed*. Kidfluencer entrepreneurship therefore raises the critical ethical question of whether it serves the best interests of the child, or if the child's rights are being violated, even if millions of dollars are at stake. To help answer this question, we apply the articles of the UNCRC (relevant extracts shown in Table 3 and expounded upon in Online Appendix A) to the business of kidfluencing and put forth a framework by which to assess the exploitation risks to children involved in such ventures (shown in Table 4).

As part of horizontal analysis, the cases were considered against each other for differences and similarities both in how they manifest the phenomenon and the overarching framework. In essence, the cases were evaluated to the extent the same codes appeared in multiple cases. Those codes that were either highly prevalent in individual cases or where repeatedly prevalent across cases were those that were included below. The inclusion of codes occurring in a single case were carefully scrutinized. For example, Vlad and Niki was coded for risking "minority culture, language and religion (Article 30)", however, this was not included in the final analysis as it only occurred in the single case. Articles of the UNCRC that were addressed by the plurality of cases were included in the resulting horizontal analysis, presented below. A summary of our analysis can be seen in Table 5.

[7] The UNCRC expands and codifies the original 1959 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

Table 4 Framework for kidfluencer rights & protections

Right/Freedom	Requirement
Right to consent	Child provides continuous consent to being a social media influencer, even in evolving circumstances associated with the effort Child is old enough to understand the short- and long-term impact of participation in social media influencer activities Child is not being overtly or covertly coerced into consent by parent/guardian-child power dynamics Child is not being bribed into consent with toys and experiences (that are recorded for social media)
Right to privacy	The content posted on social media is such as to not compromise the physical and emotional safety of the child Precautions are taken to protect the child from internet predators Participation in social media influencer activities does not harm the child in the long term by means of harming their image and reputation, both in the present and in the future
Freedom from economic exploitation (Including right to education)	Social media activities involve child work that is appropriate for the age of the child and does not interfere with the child's normal development The number of hours spent on social media work, both time on and off screen, is not so excessive that it impedes the child's right to leisure A substantial portion of earnings made from a child's influencer activities must be set aside for the benefit of the child (directly) both now and in the future The child's participation in social media activities does not come at the expense of the child attaining quality education, as measured by impartial (i.e., state-standardized) periodic testing
Freedom from harm	The creation of social media content and the activity being recorded does not pose a substantial risk of physical danger to the child The child is not neglected or abused for the purposes of shock value or attention
Freedom of expression	The child is not influenced by caregivers or sponsors to provide endorsements or opinions that do not reflect the child's authentic preferences, thoughts, and feelings The nature of products the child is being asked to endorse do not pose a potential threat to other children being influenced

Analysis

Table 5 shows our core results: we find multiple case evidence of threats to five rights of the child. In the following sections, we will organize our analysis according to each of those five rights: right to consent, right to privacy, freedom from economic exploitation, freedom from harm, and freedom of expression. Each section will proceed with a brief introduction to the right and its relevance, several paragraphs of evidence and analysis, demonstrating both the risks to the right and how some kidfluencer families had mitigated it, and a brief conclusion.

Right to Consent

Most of the kidfluencer families we examined attribute the original idea of creating YouTube videos to the children themselves implying that the children exhibited overt consent. Vlad and Niki's mother, Victoria, claims, "The boys saw other videos and were inspired. They would laugh and it was infectious. When they asked if we can start making their own videos and become 'bloggers,' my husband Sergey and I said, 'Why not?'" (VanHoose & Juneau, 2020). Children proactively asking parents to initiate content creation certainly appears as behavior of consent. However, because such origin stories rely solely on the words of the parent and attribute actions to very young children, it is nearly impossible to verify whether consent was, in fact, as overt as parents claim. In Vlad & Niki's case, the boys would have been aged 5 and 3, respectively, at the time Victoria claims they asked to become video bloggers. For instance, Loann (Ryan's World Ryan's mother), claims the idea for reviewing toys came from Ryan himself, who watched other children on YouTube do the same, stating, "One day, he asked me, 'How come I'm not on YouTube when all the other kids are?' So, we just decided—yeah, we can do that. Then, we took him to the store to get his very first toy—I think it was a Lego train set—and it all started from there" (Schmidt, 2017). However, when Ryan was asked to recall the origin of his channel in an interview, he stated, "Mommy just took me to the store, and she wanted me to like, yeah, pick anything, and I picked the Lego train and we built it" (Entertainment Tonight, 2020).

However, contrary to Loann's account, Ryan does not take credit for the idea of reviewing toys online and instead implies he did so at his mother's suggestion. Even so, asking an 8-year-old child—Ryan's age at the time of this interview—to faithfully recollect events that occurred when he was 5 years old is a challenging request. Alternatively, Victoria and Loann may be attributing the origin of these ventures to their children to avoid the social scrutiny that may come from admitting that these ventures were their own ideas, which they compelled their children to participate in. In summary, while kidfluencer parents may attribute the start of the venture to a child's initiative as a signal of consent, origin stories are difficult to prove, given that they unfold in

Table 5 Analytical summary

Right/Freedom	Ryan's World	Vlad and Niki	Ninja Kidz	The Bucket List Family
Right to consent	*Unverifiable parental ascription of origin as child's idea* *Parent(s) initialize and create a long-term plan for content creation*	*Parents ascribe venture to a toddlers' initiative* *Older child only participates in family vacation videos now—implies revoked consent*	*Children claim venture was [partially] of own initiative* *Recording child in vulnerable state, unable to consent*	*Bringing children and filming them in exotic travel experiences* *Young children being given a camera to film themselves, including reality-tv-like confessionals* *Encouragement and/or coercion of children into extreme activities*
Right to privacy	*Excluding child's malcontent from content* *Namesake reputation associated with wrongdoing or criminal activity*	*Children earning bad reputation, enshrined permanently online*	*Exposing children's private relationships and moments publicly* *Child captured at weak, vulnerable moments*	*Filming female child in two-piece bathing suits*
Freedom from economic exploitation	*Limiting filming time with child* *Maximizing child's brand for profit; the child is the product*	*Content at lower level of development than child's age* *Earnings used to buy lavish goods/homes*	*Substantial time and travel commitment for content creation* *Surprising children with unexpected challenges* *Child driven to participate in physically and emotionally taxing challenges*	*Branding of content requires child's participation* *Showing child's struggle to show "good" parenting* *Putting away money from content earnings for children*
Freedom from harm	[No evidence present]	*Family home/address is publicized in ways that make it easily identifiable and/or found*	*Child is susceptible to predatory comments* *Child made to create content about and through medical procedures and recovery*	*Children participating in risky activities for content creation; most popular content is of kids participating in risky activities*
Freedom of expression	*Not scripting child's reactions*	*Scripted video ads, as opposed to reviews, for toy companies*	*Children used to sell products with unverified safety*	*Parents posting on behalf of child*
Right to education	*Ensuring time for authentic school and extra-curricular experiences*	*Making time for homework*	*Children are homeschooled so that they have more time to create content*	*Adapting content creation lifestyle to accommodate schooling*

private, are subject to social stigma, and rely on the potentially unreliable recollections of young children. However, even if the child did initially consent, is this sufficient? Does a child have the capacity to understand the implications of being the subject of content creation? As an adult, Bryton Myler (the eldest of the Ninja Kidz) describes the origin story of the Ninja Kidz as an extension of his experience trying professional acting.

> *We were always interested in acting, and so I was also in a movie when I was 10 years old. It's called 'The Last Straw.' It's a Christmas movie. So, I did some acting, but nothing else really came from that, and so we were like, 'We're going to do our own thing. We want to make a YouTube channel.' (*Myler, 2023*)*

Myler asserts the YouTube channel was the children's idea, given a combination of their collective interest in acting and the stalling of his own professional acting career. In claiming responsibility for the original idea of the channel, Myler implies the children consented to participation in kidfluencing. However, questions about their capacity to consent remain. At ages 8 through 13, could the Myler children appreciate the downstream effects of being public figures online, given risks to their privacy, sacrifices to their education, restrictions on their freedom of expression, etc. (discussed in subsequent sections)?

Relatedly, what specifically does a child consent to participating in? The first videos on the Ninja Kidz channel resemble traditional short films, in which the children play *fictional* crime fighters in *fictional* narratives. This format is in line with their purported interest in acting. What the channel soon became, however, resembles more of a live-action reality television show, in which the children, as *themselves*, are followed through virtually every aspect of their *actual* lives. Did the children consent to the evolved format? Given the evolution of a child's context over time in kidfluencing, a child must have the capacity to observe the changes and reassess their implications. Followers of the Vlad and Niki channel undoubtedly notice that Vlad, aged 11 at time of writing, is no longer the star of the channel and, in fact, only appears in videos of the family's vacations. This would seem to imply that the type of content Vlad consents to participating in has changed over time. One-time, children's initial consent is therefore insufficient; it must be continuous and revokable at any time (Worsdale & Kosenko, 2024).

Additionally, given the relationship and power dynamics between a parent and child, is it possible for a child to consent willfully to content creation, without experiencing expressed or implied coercion? Parents have two levers of consent over their children—one legal and one relational. Legally, parents have the right and responsibility to provide consent on behalf of their minor children, in most countries, for medical treatment, participation in research, and travel. Relationally, parents have a disproportionate influence on the behavior of their children as role models, authority figures, and individuals that the child seeks to please (Staniewski & Awruk, 2021). To this end, it is likely impossible for a child not to consent to an employment arrangement managed by a parent and unlikely that a child would withhold consent for participating in activities initiated by a parent. For example, the Bucket List Family encourages their children's participation in content creation in covert and overt ways. The parents periodically give recording devices to their children to allow them to film themselves, both in action and through a confessional-like format akin to reality television. Seeing their parents engage in similar activities, the children are likely to engage in the content creation themselves. At the same time, Garrett Gee has been known to strongly encourage or arguably coerce his children into activities. In a series of Instagram videos of "cold-dipping", submerging in slightly above-freezing water, Garrett asks his youngest child, Cali, while recording, what he wants to do. Cali, aged 5 at the time, responds, saying "I want to go under the bathtub." The fact that the video begins with this interaction demonstrates Garrett's attempt to demonstrate that Cali consented to the activity. However, the video still sparked debate among viewers. In the caption, Garrett acknowledges the criticism for potentially coercing his child into the activity,

> "*We received a lot of angry comments on our last post showing Cali ice bath. That's okay, the internet can be that way. People often fear and judge what they don't understand… Do I simply invite the kids to try new things? YES! BUT do I FORCE them?? Definitely sometimes YES! They are kids and I am their loving parent who knows them (better than the internet;) and sees their potential, sometimes better than they even do!"* (Garrett Gee, 2023).

Garrett's statement demonstrates his outlook on consent as it relates to his role as a parent and Cali's role as his child. More than casting doubt on whether Cali authentically consented to this specific filmed activity, Garrett implies that he may "force" his children to engage in various activities that he deems necessary for their development—a right he has as a well-meaning parent. Akin to the 1950's American television show, "Father Knows Best."

Lastly, are parents effectively buying consent that would not otherwise be given? Vlad and Niki engage in extravagant activities: driving a water-going car with their father, having an Alice in Wonderland-themed birthday party with a full cast of story characters, or going down water slides from their yacht into open water. Ryan has gotten to play with every toy he has ever wanted. The Ninja Kidz have met famous wrestlers, opened a theme park, and been trained in acrobatics by Cirque du Soleil. The Gee children, in a few years, traveled to more countries than most people see in a

lifetime. Given all the perks, how and why would a child *not* consent? An argument can be made, however, that the benefits of kidfluencing are used to buy the child's consent.

The consent question may be both the most important and the easiest to dismiss. It is worth considering that parents ignore the consent of their children all the time, by enforcing bedtimes and bath nights, but in those cases the consent is the only right being violated and the parent is ostensibly doing so for the child's immediate developmental benefit. Additionally, it is hard to imagine why children would in fact withhold consent: these kids are not being asked to crush rocks in a river in India (Ramesh, 2007); they are playing with toys or going on adventures—activities many children would consent to. Indeed, what is the harm of them not consenting? Ryan's parents claim that the YouTube videos only take 3–4 h a week to film (Stick with Kaji, 2021), akin to many children's extracurricular activities. However, the child's consent is not simply for the activity but carries the concurrent effect of consenting to potentially surrendering their rights to privacy and freedom from exploitation etc., which are more consequential, and we discuss next.

Right to Privacy

Kidfluencing potentially threatens children's right to privacy in four ways—likeness, physical, emotional, and reputational damage.

Participation in social media kidfluencing presents the child's likeness and personality to the internet and subjects the child to all of the consequences thereof. Indeed, the larger one's digital footprint, the easier it is for a simple algorithm to ascertain one's personal and private attributes (Kosinski et al., 2013). With artificial intelligence (AI), online content can be used as training data that enables malevolent individuals to mimic a kidfluencer's voice, likeness, and behavior.[8]

Kidfluencing activities frequently prioritize, highlight, and capitalizing on the child's physical appearance. Part of what makes kidfluencers popular is that children are adorable. For instance, Ryan is described as "very cute, doe-eyed with a Beatles mop cut" (Kang, 2022). Many of Vlad and Niki's videos have "#cute" in their description. However, some kidfluencers are exposed in potentially questionable and adult ways. Because the Bucket List Family travels to exotic places, it often posts their children in swimsuits, which is expected in the context of a beach vacation. However, the family also posted their then-9-year-old daughter strutting on a treadmill in a bikini (Dorothy Gee, 2022). Though posted in her name, it is clear that it is her father, Garrett, who is recording and posting. These photos and videos posted in a public forum to millions of followers may be interpreted as exploitative and sexualizing the young girl. Viewer comments point out, "Please protect this little girl from this kind of exploitation. It's not fair that you're giving her a digital footprint that can make her vulnerable to online predators. It's perfectly fine to take videos of your baby but keep certain ones private for her sake." (m.e.isett, 2022). Another commenter elaborates,

> *"It is impossible to not see the amount of creeps commenting on these videos of their child in a bathing suit. They might delete the overtly creepy comments but just click on the profiles of some of these grown men commenting "innocent" things! They are exclusively following prepubescent little girls. How can parents be ok with this and then CONTINUE to do it? If you must profit off your child and run an Instagram account for them (😨) then why not switch her clothing and protect her??? We are all doomed" (talchatterjee,)*2022*)*

Both commenters accuse the parents directly of failure to protect Dorothy's privacy and of subjecting her to threats. By stating that "it is impossible not to see" the dangers of the post, commenter "talchatterjee" goes further to imply that this failure is a form of the parents' willful negligence. As the commenter points out, the privacy violation from the display of revealing content online is compounded by the risk of making the child a sexual object for pedophiles, either directly or by its role as training data for pornography-generating AI (Verma & Harwell, 2023; Thiel & Hancock, 2023). The authors investigated the credibility of such risks by scanning Dorothy's account followers. In fact, we found several older, male-presenting followers who made comments such a "♡♡♡" on the bikini video post and who also follow other children. For instance, one such admirer also follows the account of an AI-generated 13-year-old girl, whose account is selling her naked AI-generated photos (nerevarhazen, 2024). Kidfluencing, by capitalizing on a child's appearance is revealing their image, voice, gait, etc. to predators and to the tools that enable predators.

Kidfluencing also exposes the children emotionally. Many channels capitalize on their child(ren) at their most awkward, embarrassing, or vulnerable moments, garnering more

[8] The practice has become so widespread, Deutsche Telekom, a major mobile services provider, issued a public service announcement in which they used one family's posted photos of their daughter Ella to create a digital rendering of an older version of the child, showing her parents all the ways in which their posted content may be used—identity theft, criminal fraud, pornography, ransom demands, and more. The digitally simulated "Ella" closes the announcement with, "What you share online is like a digital footprint that will follow me around for the rest of my life. I'm telling you this because I know you love me and would never do anything to harm me. So please, Mom and Dad, protect my virtual privacy" (Deutsche Telekom, 2023). The ad points to the fact that parents often do not think about a child's right to privacy in the digital world, yet consequences of this privacy violation can have a slew of deleterious effects.

views. Ninja Kidz does so in several ways. First, the channel captures many of their children's romantic or would-be romantic relationships and films many moments that would otherwise be private, such as dates, dances and proms, and other interactions with children's love interests. Second, they film the children in weak or vulnerable moments in an attempt to create impactful content. For instance, after Peyton Myler comes out of surgery, and while still experiencing aftereffects of anesthesia, her father films a conversation with her in which she, clearly delirious, does not appear to remember she had surgery. Her brother takes advantage of her delirium to ask her who her "crush" is, which she reveals on camera. Throughout, Peyton is seen crying, confused and in pain. In watching the video (Myler, 2022), it is easy to interpret it as exploiting Peyton's vulnerability in exchange for views and, in turn, profit: as of this writing, the video, has more than 75 million views. This type of exchange, assuming it is authentic, violates the child's privacy, capturing and revealing her in a weakened and compromised state and disclosing private information she would, if in possession of all her faculties, likely not consent to be shared. In comparison, Ryan's World parents, Shion and Loann "Kaji" Guan, state they try to respect Ryan's privacy by not airing videos where he is compromised. "We try not to capture any moment that Ryan is in distress, any moment that we think he would not be proud of when he grows up. He's still a kid, and there are times when we still have to lecture him about certain things, and we do not want to showcase that." (KCAL, 2019). Shion and Loann highlight the importance of proactive and deliberate attitudes towards protecting children's privacy and preserving the right of children to behave as such, without every misstep being immortalized on the internet.

Kidfluencing therefore also risks reputational damage through the establishment of a child's permanent digital footprint, amplified by their popularity, over the short and long term, in several ways. First, it permanently enshrines the individual in their child state, and all the follies that come with it. The challenge many of the kidfluencers face is how to grow up in the real world while being asked to coexist (for profit) with their childlike image on the Internet. Ryan Kaji, almost a decade after his first video went viral, is in the midst of this maturation. In chronicling Ryan's growth, Rolling Stone magazine writes, "The chasm between preteen Kaji and the wide-eyed, enthusiastic toddler on his YouTube channel is both immense and very much expected for someone who became famous when most kids are just grasping the concept of the past tense" (Dickson, 2024). Dickinson comments on how much Ryan has changed since the launch of his channel. As children grow, they resemble their kidfluencer selves less and less, yet their identity and reputation are wrapped up in their former selves. Of Ryan, Dickson continues:

> *"Occasionally, he makes content that he doesn't publicly post. He's interested in becoming an animator when he grows up, and at one point, Shion mentions that doing a press junket like the one for the Ryan's World movie might be a good experience for him, in terms of learning how to market and promote his content. But Kaji isn't really thinking about that now. He doesn't sketch his own character or anyone in the Ryan's World universe; he mostly draws fight scenes. He just enjoys the process of building something slowly, frame by frame — something that's just for him and not his fans." (2024)*

One of the changes Dickson highlights is that while toddler Ryan may have been amenable to creating videos for the internet, teen Ryan prefers to keep his creative endeavors to himself. He has new interests and a budding new identity. However, kidfluencing legacy affects his right to leave his toy-reviewer persona in the past. In fact, Dickson insinuates that his parents persist in trying to engage him in activities that serve the Ryan's World brand, and he, as is typical for children his age, is softly rejecting their attempts in favor of his privacy.

Successful kidfluencers draw scrutiny both to their past and present with long-term reputation implications. On its face, the loss of privacy may seem a small price to pay for adoration and financial wellbeing, but for every parent and child that idolizes a kidfluencer, there are those that equally denigrate them. Indeed, all of the kidfluencer channels we studied have many vitriolic detractors—motivated by jealousy, disapproval, or dislike of the content—balancing those that praise them.

Detractors do not distinguish between the kidfluencer and the channel. One major criticism of Vlad and Niki is that the channel's aspirational and entertaining content is addictive. One parent on a discussion board notes, "If I can try and see it through my son's eyes as to why he likes it so much, Vlad and Niki are the cool kids in the class who are too entertaining to take your eyes off. They're playing with the best cars, trucks and toys that are on the market today (because they can afford it)" (Murray, 2021). Parents claim children watch Vlad and Niki as adults watch real estate flipping and makeover shows: voyeurism, providing a view into a wealthier, carefree, and more desirable world than their own. Furthermore, these critics accuse the channel, branded with the names of the children, of providing low-level, unsophisticated content, thereby conflating the children, not the channel, with primitiveness. On the more extreme end, parents have complained about Vlad & Niki teaching young children inappropriate lessons, such as reckless rambunctiousness. "They treat their house like a junkyard and in turn, it shows kids that it's okay to run around the house destroying things" (Murray, 2021). The parent insinuates

that Vlad & Niki serve as role models for other children, and toddlers watching Vlad & Niki, inevitably imitate them. Their often-chaotic play directly affects children's behavior. Another parent notes that, "Anytime my son sees it he becomes a total behavioral nightmare." (mommanannyaunt, 2022). On Reddit, a parent complains, "My son (3 y/o) was a good veggies eater. After he started watching these shows, he literally quit eating veggies. I have seen scenes on Vlad and Niki where they say ewwww no veggies I want candy! That's what he does too." (cauliflower-broccoli, 2023). In essence, these complaints highlight that kidfluencers like Vlad & Niki, whom millions of children watch every day, are put in the unfortunate position of being exemplars for their fans. Beginning with the aspirational nature of their filmed lifestyle, children inevitably look up to them and emulate their behavior, good or bad. This is a hefty burden to place on young children, because from these parent comments, it is unclear whether they are holding Vlad and Niki the children or "Vlad & Niki" the channel responsible for the change in their children. Regardless, Vlad and Niki the children, now carry a hooligan-like reputation among parents.

Successful kidfluencers also draw attention and scrutiny, shining a spotlight on infractions that might otherwise be ignored, or surfacing past family misdeeds that would otherwise have long been buried. In a complaint filed to the FTC, consumer watchdog Truth In Advertising claimed that 90% of Ryan's World videos featured unlabelled paid-for product promotions (Elitou, 2019); where Ryan's celebrity was used to provide either direct or indirect product endorsements. Were Ryan's World most other new ventures, such a misstep might have remained relatively quiet, with the venture having the ability to silently correct course. Instead, the venture attracted scrutiny of a regulator group and the media. Similarly, Ryan's family's past was investigated. A media outlet uncovered a shoplifting charge against Ryan's mother more than fifteen years prior, drawing special attention to the fact that Loann was in fact sentenced and spent several days in jail (Butterfield, 2019)—a misdemeanor that otherwise would likely have been forgotten. Both of these legal scandals were associated with Ryan's World and therefore with Ryan, because they too continue to live on the Internet. In summary, a kidfluencer's privacy is immediately infringed upon at channel launch and wholly abandoned at channel success, continuing to affect the kidfluencer for years hence.

Freedom From Economic Exploitation

The cases demonstrated how kidfluencing can be exploitative, and how families can take steps to shield children from exploitation. They highlight that Kidfluencing ventures exploit children if they (1) require work that is age inappropriate or hazardous physically or emotionally, (2) require substantial hours of work that take precedence over schooling, interfere with a child's right to leisure, or blur the line between work and leisure, (3) make the child the product, or (4) do not provide the child full and fair compensation for their contribution to the success of the venture. However, a few cases do highlight the ways in which families can protect their children's time and wealth.

First, channels vary in the type of work the children perform and its associated hazards. The barometer, per Edmonds (2008), is a comparison to what the child should or would otherwise be doing, such as learning, and the comparative effects on the child's development. In a Wall Street Journal profile of the channel, Watson (2022) notes that Vlad and Niki's videos "feature lots of 'oohs', 'aahs', applause, and minimal dialogue"; so the channel can attract a wider audience of children in terms of age and language—one that does not need speech to find the channel content appealing. However, a 10-year-old creating content for 2-year-olds, by behaving like a 2-year-old, potentially stunts the 10-year-old's growth and maturation.

Conversely, channels revolving around athletics, such as Ninja Kidz, require work that is more clearly challenging for children, both physically and emotionally. Most of the content is an exhibition of the children's athleticism. In one video, the family documents the children participating in the Ninja World Championships, an extremely challenging obstacle course competition among the world's best athletes. The following is the transcript of the beginning of the video:

> *Shane Myler (Father): We're at the Ninja World Finals in Orlando, Florida. You are all competing today, but we also signed you up for the World Cup event!*
> *Peyton Myler (Daughter): What??*
> *S: Yeah, it's right over here, this huge, long obstacle course. It's a side-by-side race and they're trying to get it into the Olympics.*
> *P: I'm scared. I did not know we were doing that…*
> *S: You guys are going to do great. Hopefully… (The Ninja Fam!,* 2023a*)*

Peyton's facial expression in this video is of shock and concern. It is punctuated by the camera, switching to a black-and-white effect filter, focusing in on her as she communicates her nervousness. It appears that her father specifically chose not to disclose the competition ahead of time to elicit and film her hesitancy. Beyond the element of surprise, the children were required to run the physically exhausting course multiple times. The video continues:

> *Alyson Myler (Mother): Peyton's also in third.*
> *Peyton: Do I have to run again?*
> *Shane: Yeah.*
> *A: Only if you're lucky.*

P: [disappointed face]
S: Peyton's in the top four so that means she gets to run in the finals.
P: Not again!
S: You got this!
Family: [chanting] Peyton! Peyton!
P: [storming off] Stop saying that!
A: Come on Peyton. (The Ninja Fam!, 2023a*)*

Peyton repeatedly insinuates that she is not enjoying her participation. Her tentative facial expressions, her tense body language, and her physical outbursts reiterate this. Every time she completes the course, and her father excitedly tells her she qualifies for the next round, Peyton runs the grueling course again, even competing with adults towards the end. The family cheers her on, but she is visibly overwhelmed and storms off camera. The video is exploitative. First, Peyton's athleticism and exhaustion is exploited for profit. Indeed, Peyton is bullied by her family into continuing the physically and emotionally taxing competition purely for content creation reasons, despite her clear reluctance, echoing abovementioned concerns about consent. Second, the video is sprinkled with promotion of a Ninja Kidz branded fruit snack the family is pitching to competition attendees. "Ashton: You guys did amazing on your competition, so we got fruit snacks and want to see if you guys like them. Alyson: And you guys gotta tell us if they're good. Now available at Walmart, at every Walmart in the country" (The Ninja Fam!, 2023a). Participation in this competition and the children's labor in it is simply another platform for advertising.

The time spent producing content for kidfluencing may also be exploitative. It is filming time, estimated from final video time, that is the best barometer of a child's work commitment. Figure 1 highlights the minutes of footage each subject case produced each month over time. Shooting ratios range between 5:1 (five minutes of shot footage producing one minute of finished footage) and 400:1, depending on the production (Morrow, 2016; Stockman, 2019). Even if we assume kidfluencer content is produced at the lower end of the ratio, as is common for lower-budget productions (Flick, 2019; Stockman, 2019), and account for the fact that children likely need more "takes" than adults, even 100 min of content per month probably requires a child to spend 1000 min, the equivalent of 4.2 h per week, in front of a camera. This does not include all of the travel, preparation, and waiting-around time involved, such as what is incurred by the Ninja Kidz to prepare for, get to, and wait around at the nationwide competitions they participate in on camera.

The amount of content produced varies per channel, but so does the child's role both within individual videos and across the life of the channel. For instance, Ninja Kidz as well as Vlad and Niki feature children in almost the entire length of each video. However, not all the children are on camera for the entire video. Each Ninja Kidz video may feature one to three children, while Vlad and Niki's family, which now has 4 children, typically features one or two. The greatest amount of content is produced by Ryan's World, though Ryan, after 7 years being the central character, now mainly does 1–2 min introductions to videos on the channel—as the channels and their eponymous stars have matured, content production remains high, but those stars who were once the solo focus of the channels have smaller roles. However, these metrics do not include the time spent in related, profit-seeking activities, such as the time Ryan and his sisters have spent filming his first feature-length movie (Youshaei, 2024).

The time commitment required for content production may infringe on a child's right to a full education experience. In the cases studied, most kidfluencer's parents stated that their children's schooling was a top priority. Outside of the COVID-19 lockdown period, most children still attended in-person school. "So Ryan still goes to school, and Kate and Emma too, and they also take extracurricular activities" (Stick with Kaji, 2021). Ryan Kaji's parents highlight that it is important to them that their children not only go to school but are given the time to participate in afterschool activities. Victoria Vashketov says, "During the school year, we need to make sure Vlad and Niki have time to study and not overdo things" (Andaloro, 2022), suggesting that the family paces their content creation around their children's school calendar. Part of the reason why The Bucket List Family chose to end their full-time traveling after three years is to ensure that their children were able to attend school and school-related activities, "Making a permanent home in Hawaii has allowed her [Jessica Gee's] kids to attend school regularly and do activities their parents didn't want them to miss, like sports and dance. Gee says that she'd love to homeschool, but it's 'not for me.'" (Burt, 2024). For the most part, our cases therefore highlight effective decisions and tactics kidfluencer parents can take to preserve as much of childhood normalcy as possible for their children.

On the contrary, the Myler family has opted to homeschool the Ninja Kidz (Ethan Fineshriber, 2019). When twins Peyton and Paxton were of American high school age (approximately 14 years old), the channel created a video of the children trying out traditional school. After the twins' first day, the video closes with a decision:

"Shane (Father): What did you decide—online school or in-person school?
Peyton: My first day of high school was so fun, but—
Ashton: but how are we supposed to fit it in with our crazy schedule and all of our training?
Shane: That's a great question. We value education greatly. That's why you get to do both…

> *Alyson (Mother): You're going to keep your core classes online and you each get to pick a couple of electives to do in person"* (The Ninja Fam!, 2023b)

The twins point out that going to traditional school interferes with their "crazy schedule," *and* their training. Given that they isolate the training, the implication is that their schedule includes commitments to content creation. Choosing to continue with homeschooling prioritizes those commitments over their educational experience, which they enjoyed. Further, the well-timed handoffs between the children's speech suggests that this exchange between the twins and the parents was scripted, calling into question whether the children had the freedom to express their true preferences.

Kidfluencer channels frequently represent activities their child participates in on camera as part of their leisure, muddying the distinction between work and playtime. For instance, almost all of the channels studied recorded and published the kidfluencers' birthday celebrations; The Bucket List Family records the children's exploration of new places; Vlad and Niki posts videos of family vacations; Ninja Kidz parents post their children's dates and dances. In each of these, the events appear manufactured at least to some extent. If recreational or intimate activities become part of their kidfluencing, can they still be called recreation? Which restful activities do the children have that are theirs and not belonging to the audience?

Ultimately, all of the kidfluencer ventures, at their core, need the children's participation in order to be successful. In essence, the children are the brand. Ryan Kaji's family realized this early, per the New York Times profile of the channel:

> *"Shion and Loann noticed that a lot of kid YouTube channels were focused more on the brand of the toy than on the brand of the talent… Shion thought this was backward. Ryan, not the toys, should be the brand. Shion was proposing an interesting evolution: Given Ryan's popularity, why couldn't he create his own brands, his own characters, his own toys? Why help Thomas when you can create your own universe of characters, diversify your content streams, ramp up merchandising and license your content to some of the biggest platforms in the world?" (*Kang, 2022*)*

Kang suggests Shion understood that what attracted child viewers to their channel was not the toys but Ryan himself. Capitalizing on Ryan's appeal by launching multiple product lines of Ryan-branded toys and creating a Ryan-centered cinematic universe are what drove the channel's and the family's ultimate success. Similarly, the most viewed videos on The Bucket List Family's channel are, "5 YR OLD Scuba Dives with GREAT WHITE SHARKS in Mexico!!", "5 YR OLD FREE DIVES THE BLUE HOLE!! /// WEEK 105: Great Blue Hole, Belize", "BABY SWIM LESSONS—The Ultimate Routine to Help Our 2 YR OLD Swim", which all involve the Gee's children and their parenting choice to engage in activities most find risky, rather than their travel. The Bucket List Family create their brand differently than the Kaji family; their children's involvement in the parents' adventures enables Garrett and Jessica Gee to brand themselves as experts in budget travel and parenting. In their YouTube channel description, the couple describes themselves as "Family Travel Journalists.": a label that requires the participation of the "family". Without their children, this brand would not be possible for them to create. The popularity of their channel has enabled Jessica Gee to publish a book in partnership with National Geographic, entitled "Bucket List Family Travel: Share the World with Your Kids on 50 Adventures of a Lifetime." The Gees use their kids and the activities they arrange for them to sell the real product: "superior" parenting advice. In essence, these kidfluencing ventures make the child the product or an indispensable part of the product.

Given that each kidfluencing venture is a privately owned enterprise and the "employees" in question are minors, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the children are being compensated. While the exact earnings of each of the families profiled are unknown, data tracker sites, which use video views and industry standards to estimate earnings, have calculated each of these families making millions per year, as seen in Table A (Supplementary Data). Indeed, in the content it is evident that each of the families have upgraded their quality of life. This is particularly true for the Vashketov family:

> *"A Florida-based Russian family's YouTube channel of their kids playing with lavish toys and globe-trotting to luxury destinations has netted them tens of millions of dollars and bought them a $12.5 million Miami mansion, a Ferrari and a Range Rover… The Vashketova family are often seen on social media travelling to luxury destinations together, as seen here on a ski holiday in Vail. Here the boys can be seen posing with a falcon in the Dubai desert." (*Bhole, 2022*)*

Vlad and Niki's channel has enabled the family to buy a lavish new home, travel to exotic locations, and engage in extravagant activities. Similarly, the Myler family has capitalized on Ninja Kidz by buying a second sizeable home in Puerto Rico (The Ninja Fam!, 2021). The Bucket List Family, shifted from budget accommodations to luxury ones during their travels, and then purchased a Hawaiian beachfront home when it decided to settle down (The Bucket List Family, 2019). While it is evident that the kidfluencer children benefit indirectly from their family's improved financial positions, it is unclear whether the children are compensated

directly, and proportionally, for their contribution to that financial position.

However, several kidfluencers' parents have talked openly about the ways in which they take precautions with their children's time and money. For instance, Ryan's family is intentional and efficient with filming time.

> *"We don't really film with Ryan or Emma and Kate every day. We try to limit the filming time with kids as much as possible. One, because we want them to experience normal childhood as much as possible…. But for us to allow Ryan to have that normal life, we have to make sure everything goes [the] most efficient way when we film and limit each weekly filming time. So we set our weekly filming time to be 3 to 4 hours" (*Stick with Kaji, 2021*).*

One way to preserve a kidfluencer's right to leisure and other childhood experiences is by restricting the amount of time spent contributing to content creation. As Table 2 shows, Ryan's reduced screentime does not hamper Ryan's World from putting forth content. However, it is evident that popularity of the channel has been affected. The channel's number of monthly views—the main driver of content-based revenue—have been declining since 2022 (Dickson, 2024). And while the Kaji's may *say* that they are restricting filming time, Ryan's reduced appearance has led to an increased focused on Ryan's younger sisters, simply transferring the burden from one child to another.

Showing thoughtfulness about their children's financial benefits, Garrett Gee has commented that the Bucket List Family puts money away for their children. Per reporting, he says,

> *"Each of his three kids has their own bank account, with money set aside for them for their work on brand partnerships. He's frank about how he sees content creation: as a 'constant flow of intense work.' He hopes that the money and the platform he's been able to give them will set them up for the future and launch their careers" (*Latifi, 2024*).*

While Garrett has been intentional in setting aside personal bank accounts for each of his children, making sure their work is not in vain, it is impossible to judge the percentage or amount of earnings each child's account receives, how that is decided, and whether it sufficiently compensates them for their work and loss of other rights. Each of the Gee children has a social media account, with thousands of followers, and a brand built around each child, which Garrett sees as an asset to the children's own future social media entrepreneurship endeavors. It is worth noting that in the multi-child families the distribution of labor, the popularity of each child, and the contribution of each child to the channel's success are not equal: as a parent there is drive to treat the kids equally, but as a fiduciary the differential contribution amounts should be compensated accordingly, and if the children are not financially treated as individuals there is risk of exploitation.

Freedom from Harm

Most of the cases studied demonstrate different ways in which Kidfluencing ventures may expose participating children to danger. The harm posed can be physical, such as injuries sustained during content creation, or psychological, or through bullying or harassment that may come after the fact.

Parents of Kidfluencers in our study periodically disregarded their children's health or safety. For example, Ninja Kidz parents Shane & Alyson, on a number of occasions, overlook a child's ill health in favor of having them compete and/or create content. In the aforementioned obstacle course competition video (The Ninja Fam!, 2023a), Peyton struggles, and is continually frustrated at having to participate in yet another round. Her mother explains away Peyton's frustrations by stating on camera that Peyton had a recent illness and, as a result, was now experiencing difficulty breathing. In such circumstances, most parents would likely reconsider allowing their child to participate in physically demanding activities. Yet, the family push Peyton to continue competing. Similarly, prior to Peyton's tonsillectomy (Delu, 2024), the father inquires about the impact of surgery on Peyton's ability to participate in an upcoming competition:

> *"Shane: She has a ninja competition 10 days after the surgery. Do you think there's a chance she might be able to do that?*
> *Doctor: I would say that it's an unnecessary risk simply because you have so many years ahead to participate in all these events. Why risk it even if there's a small chance that something can go wrong? Heal up fully and crush all the rest of the upcoming ninja competitions that you have" (*Delu, 2024*).*

Notably, it was the father asking to compete, not the daughter, and the doctor urging the father to avoid unnecessary risks. Shane Myler's choice of words—whether there was "a chance" she could participate—reflects a priority on competing and content creation rather than a desire to protect his daughter at all costs. Further, post tonsillectomy, when it was painful and challenging for Peyton to speak, her parents either enabled or encouraged her to give video updates multiple times per day, detailing her recovery process (Delu, 2024).

Risky behavior is sensational and makes for exciting video titles. The Bucket List family have certainly courted this trend. Some of their most viewed videos are titled, "5 YR OLD Scuba Dives with GREAT WHITE SHARKS in

Mexico!!" (23 million views), "5 YR OLD FREE DIVES THE BLUE HOLE!!", (10 million views), "Kids Swimming with Sharks!!", (8 million views), "Dad Saves His Little Girl! Surf and Swim Lessons Routine in Hawaii" (3 million views), "SMALL BITE! 5 YR OLD Free Dives with WILD SEA LIONS in AUSTRALIA!" (1.1 million views), and "Little Girl Surfs with Big Shark in Hawaii"[9] (1.3 million views). All of the family's top-viewed videos are of the children engaging in risky water sports or other activities atypical for young children. Further, the video teaser thumbnails, or preview photos, show the children within what appears to be inches from sharks, at the bottom of a deep sea, or other forms of peril. The parents assert that the activities are safe. However, the crafting of video titles and images demonstrates the Gees' knowledge that the risk to their children is what attracts viewers. In a video titled "THE DANGERS OF RAISING BRAVE KIDS", Garrett says, "If you were to look at the list of places that Dorothy has done scuba diving thus far, having not yet been scuba certified—oh my gosh—but this was, for sure, her, like, first legit, lengthy, deep scuba here in Madagascar" (The Bucket List Family, 2023). Garrett says with pride that his 10-year-old daughter dove without scuba certification, yet the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) discourages open water diving before age 15, the earliest a child can be certified.[10].

Beyond risks from content creation, being a kidfluencer exposes a child to potential harassment. In the comments on many videos and social media posts, the kidfluencers are subject to bullying and predators. As Peyton Myler of Ninja Kidz gets older, the number and variety of comments on her videos increase. Common are questionable professions of love, such as, "I have a crush on Peyton and I'm a boy Name is Jacob I'm 13 and I love you" (JRobbi221, 2024) posted through an account that itself is 15 years old. Also common are demands for personal information, such as, "Do you live in America cuz I live in America please say you do just tell me where you live okay Peyton cuz because you are my number one" (user-ik4ji9zv8g, 2024). There is also bullying, ranging from simply "No one likes you" (boudyayman 1563, 2024) to more aggressive, such as "Den why did you kiss him [crying emoji] I'm so mad at you I hate you so much [crying emoji]" (Amour._miah, 2024). Cyber bullying such as this is extremely distressing, causing depression and potentially self-harm (Hamm et al., 2015). Further, there is also a risk of offline harassment if and when admirers or detractors find the kidfluencer's residence. For instance, Vlad and Niki's media attention yielded a story featuring a photograph of the lavish new family home complete with the exact address (Bandell, 2021), easily findable through Google.

Freedom of Expression

Kidfluencers' ability to enforce their freedom of expression is hampered by the fact that children officially and practically cannot manage their own social media channels or accounts. It is therefore a given that parents or production companies are responsible for editing and posting content on the kidfluencer's "behalf". However, there is a difference between performing the technical tasks of channel management while faithfully representing a child's authentic voice versus replacing the child's voice with your own or with your advertisers'. Our analysis revealed several mechanisms by which a child's freedom of expression could be violated through Kidfluencing: the scripting of a child's first-person voice, portraying relevant paid product advertising as a child's organic and authentic endorsement, and associating a child's brand with products the child cannot evaluate.

Kidfluencer channels can script a child's voice in many different ways. The first and most obvious is ghost-writing dialogue for a child to say on camera. Shion and Loann claim to not write for Ryan, "I think the authenticity is number one. We don't have a script so a lot of times, we just get his natural reaction and he's so good at articulating his point of view. When kids watch the video, they don't feel like they're watching a show. They feel like they're on a playdate when they watch the video," (Quan, 2022). Part of the formula behind Ryan's World's success, per the Kajis, is the connection that the audience feels to Ryan from observing his genuine personality on screen. However, there is evidence to suggest that the show has always been scripted. In describing the first Ryan's World video to go viral and launch his online career, New York Times reporter Kang (2022) states in his exposé, "In the video, Loann wakes Ryan up from a pretend nap. He seems genuinely surprised and begins smacking away at the egg with an inflatable toy. Then he begins pulling some clearly used toys out of the egg and feigning great surprise." Kang describes the sequence of events of the video with great mistrust. Given most children's drowsy disposition after being roused from sleep, Ryan's prompt wake-up seems unrealistic. The "used" toys that emerge out of a toy egg Ryan supposedly just cracked open suggests that this is not the first run-through of this sequence. With continued expansion into new product lines and the establishment of a professional production company, scripting understandably becomes a necessity. "'We have about 30 to 40 [full time] employees … video editors, producers, animators, voice actors, on-camera talent, script writers,'" says Shion (Youshaei, 2024). As a kidfluencing venture turns into an empire, improvisation often needs to be replaced by

[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbtK1f9U23w

[10] As per PADI Scuba Diving Certification FAQ, https://www.padi.com/help/scuba-certification-faq

planning. This was especially the case in the creation of the first Ryan's World movie. In an interview, Ryan says,

> *"Even though some of my videos are pretend, they're actually closer to real life. It's usually me, my mom, my dad, and sisters and an iPhone, and we're actually playing or going to different places and only recording once. The movie was so different. The character is based on me, but there was a script, and a huge crew with so many cameras, and lighting, and locations, and working with other creators in new ways. I had to study my lines, and really think about the scene" (*YouTube, 2024*).*

While studying a script is par for the course of making a movie, and likens the kidfluencer to any child star, there is one notable difference. As Ryan himself points out, his channel's videos are "close to" but not actual real life. His namesake movie character is "based" on his real self, not a fictional persona, but the movie version of Ryan is far enough from his natural self to necessitate line memorization and deep thought. As Ryan is the brand, throughout the various Ryan incarnations, the divergence between scripted Ryan from Ryan's own words is a restriction on his freedom of expression.

Another way to replace a child's voice is to speak or post on behalf of a child. Garrett and Jessica employ this tactic with The Buket List children's profiles and social media accounts. The "About" section of the family's homepage has descriptions of every family member, including the children. The section for Dorothy is, "Since day 1 (actually even day 0) my dad has kept a very tedious photo journal of my life. Most of it lives on my Instagram. Someday I'll take it over and disappoint my father when I stop posting pictures of myself and post nothing but pictures of mermaid and all things turquoise!;)" Per the Internet Archive, this part of Dorothy's description has been on the webpage since early 2017, when Dorothy was three years old. It is unlikely that a 3-year-old, if asked to describe herself, would choose a similar self-depiction. There is nothing wrong with a parent writing a "bio" of their child; however, writing in the first person implies self-expression. The Gees have taken this approach with all of the children's social media accounts. In a 2021 video on the Instagram account for Calihan, then aged 3, showing him in underwear, struggling to the point of tears to dress himself. The caption reads, "Tried to get dressed by myself. Never again [frustration emoji]" (Calihan "Cali" Gee, 2021). While viewers understand that it is not Cali that has posted this video, the choice to post it combined with the inauthentic first-person nature of the video caption amplifies concerns of Calihan's consent and privacy.

Kidfluencing can further supplant a child's voice and free expression by misrepresenting advertising as a child's authentic opinion. Ryan earned his fame by giving toy reviews, and it is likely that the reviews were Ryan's authentic opinions at the start. Subsequently, while the family claims to carefully curate which brands they work with (Shabazz, 2019), there is no indication that they focus solely on products that Ryan likes or that he still has the agency to give honest reviews. In fact, as soon as Ryan's World started to gain levels of viewership interesting to advertisers, the selection of toys and other video content became commercially intentional. As previously described, the 2019 Truth in Advertising complaint provided evidence that Ryan's World either did not include any disclosure at all or included disclosures that preschool children could not process. Figure 2b shows an example of a Ryan's World video with a potentially undisclosed paid advertising. In the video, the Kaji's stage a branded toy gun battle to fight over the last bowl of cereal. Each parent is talking about how delicious the cereal is, and taking great pains to make sure the box is facing forward. The family's activities are unnatural and contrived, yet there is no disclosure that the video contains any sponsorship—neither for the cereal nor the toy guns. Truth in Advertising asserts that even when a video does contain a disclosure:

> *The voiceover disclosure is not in Ryan's voice, is stated at the beginning of the video before Ryan's playing begins, is completed in less than two seconds, and is played immediately after a pre-roll advertisement, making it highly unlikely that Ryan's preschool fans will notice the audible disclosure. As for the printed disclosure at the top of the screen, if Ryan's audience could (1) read, and (2) understand what the phrase 'this is an ad for Nickelodeon' means, then such a disclosure might be sufficient (*Truth in Advertising, 2019*)*

The watchdog organization proposes that Ryan's World takes steps to obfuscate advertising and increase the chances that its unsophisticated viewers will interpret product placements in the videos as Ryan's or the family's authentic endorsement. A similar criticism can be made of the Vlad & Niki video shown in Fig. 2a, which contains a small-print, 2-character disclosure and a 2-s voiceover of Victoria, not the children, stating the family was compensated. The complaint details how such channels blur the distinction between a kidfluencer's organic, authentic reviews and those that have been purchased by advertisers. Not only is this obfuscation tactic deceptive to the audience of mainly children, acting out paid advertising prevents the kidfluencer from being able to express their honest opinions about a product.

Taking it one step further, kidfluencers can be incentivized to sell a product they do not fully understand. The Ninja Kidz family uses the children's athletic, healthy image to sell Ninja Kidz branded vitamin supplements. Not only does the channel utilize the children's brand, but there are also numerous clearly scripted videos featuring the children personally persuading their young audience to purchase them:

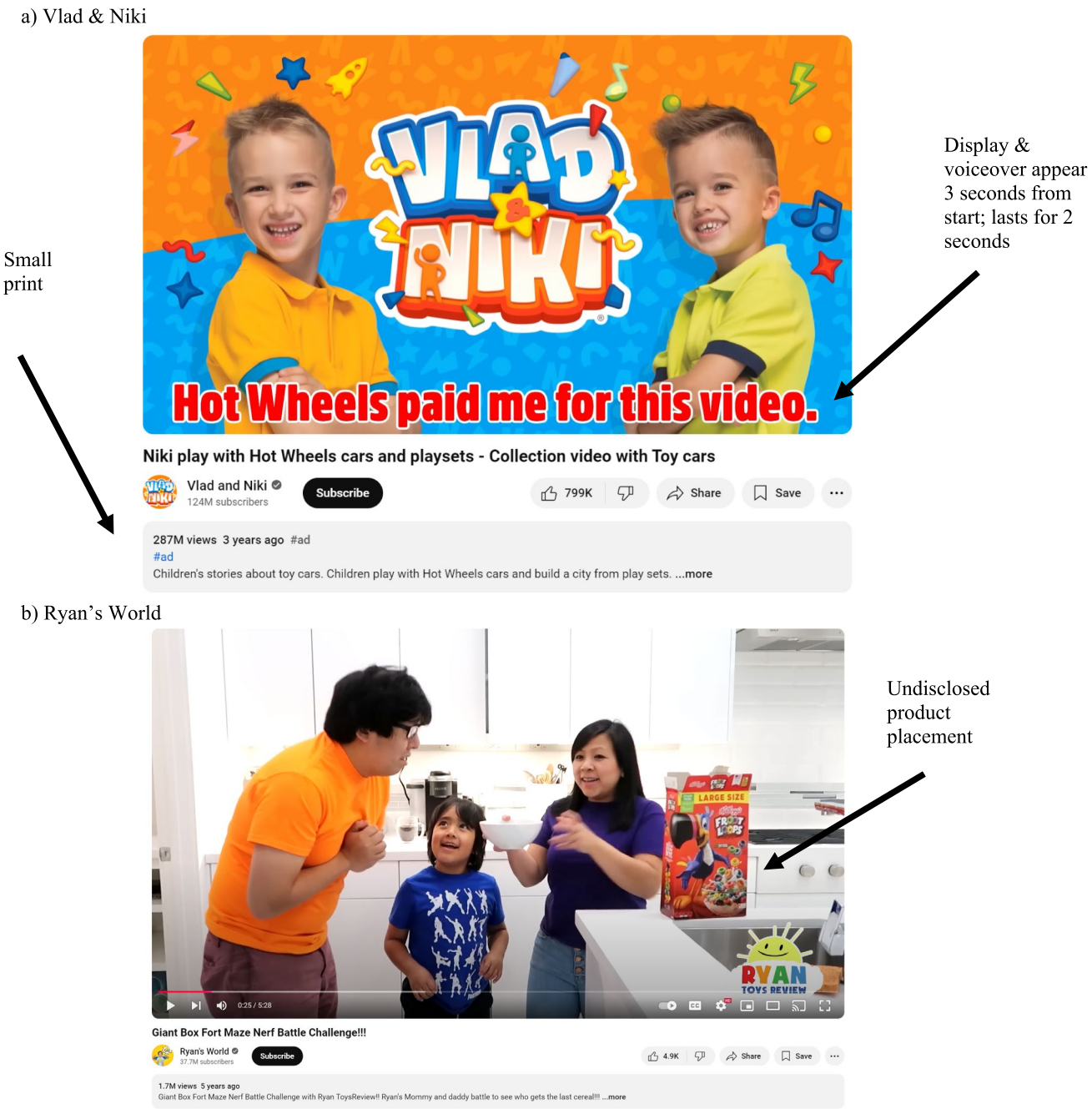


Fig. 2 Confirmed & suspected paid advertising

"Paxton: What's up Ninja Squad? Do you want to be an awesome ninja like us?
Peyton: You've got [to get] top-notch training, exercise, and…
Bryton: healthy vitamins and minerals to help your body grow strong.
Peyton: Our all-new Ninja gummy vitamins will help you do just that.
Paxton: And remember, only take one a day.
Camera man: You guys are doing great. Paxton, it is 'you can eat two a day if you are four or older.' Let's take five". (Ninja Kidz TV, 2023)

The Myler children are promoting the vitamins to children through an implication that taking the vitamins will make the viewer as athletic as the Ninja Kidz. However, dietary supplements are not regulated in the United States and neither the Ninja Kidz nor the vitamin's customers can attest

to the contents, safety, or efficacy of the product being sold. Indeed, the benefit of vitamins for well-nourished children has yet to be established (Bailey et al., 2013). Given the Ninja Kidz are therefore selling an unknown product with unknown value, it can safely be assumed that the advertisement is not of their own creation and is therefore a potential violation of their freedom of expression.

Discussion

The emergence of children in social media as kidfluencers has created a new challenge to child labor ethics not previously considered. That challenge exists because of two unique features of kidfluencing: first, it comes from a place of privilege in that child's play is being monetized as work; second, parents do not just have a conflict of interest, they are the source of the conflict as they employ their own child. In this paper, we consider four cases of kidfluencing to identify the threats to the children's rights enumerated by the United Nations. In doing so, we raise critical theoretical, policy, and practical implications that need to be considered to protect both current and future kidfluencers.

Theoretical Implications

Kidfluencing's unique characteristics give way to two absolutist statements: it is work, and thus child labor, and because this form of work is not representative of the worst forms of child labor, its exposes a wilful blindness gap in theory and practice. The seemingly benign act of filming children engaged in play and monetizing it on YouTube challenges several established perspectives on child labor and consequently allows us to make three important theoretical contributions. First, as a form of work kidfluencing deserves the ethical examination as a labor (and not a parental guidance) activity. The relative newness of the kidfluencing industry along with its apparent synergy of profit and parenting may explain why kidfluencing has limited examination from the perspective of children's labor and rights (Masterson, 2020). Taken together, this novel context creates significant challenges for theory informing the ethics of employment with regards to kidfluencers. This research contributes to conversations about both family entrepreneurship and child labor ethics by firmly demonstrating that kidfluencing does in fact function on the back of child labor (e.g., Carswell, 2003; Song, 1997).

To date, the literature has largely classified child labor within two categories: the egregiously unacceptable, and the acceptable. The former has been heavily codified in the form of laws that largely prohibit both the activity and the product of that activity (i.e., de Guzman Chorny et al., 2019). The latter, however, has to date been largely ignored, subsumed under the banner of parental responsibility, and only investigated in cases of gross negligence (e.g., Durkin, 2019). The ethics of care literature (Held, 2005) demonstrates that there are risks of conflict between the interests of parent and child within parental responsibility. Our development of a unique, context specific, framework for Kidfluencing, has the potential to inform a more general ethics of care point of view on child labor. By taking a more nuanced and informed view of each activity and the related rights risks, the ethical responsibility of the caregiver to minimize or mitigate those risks, becomes clearer. To this end, the absolutist view of all child labor (Hindman & Smith, 1999) as de facto exploitative hinders practical consideration. At the same time, the risk of exploitation from *all* child labor is real. Theory that carves certain labor activities out as benign because they exist within the family, is similarly short-sighted. The context-specific framework we develop for kidfluencing, based in the UN Declaration, can be adapted to other activities, or another adaptive approach can be developed, but as we demonstrate here, universalism is neither relevant or helpful (Browne et al., 2004). To this end, regardless of the approach, theorization that takes a perspective of rights risk aggregation within activities is needed to better inform understanding of the realities of child labor, in a world where anything can be monetized and the line between play and work and education is blurred.

Second, the rights challenged by kidfluencing are not necessarily the same as those challenged by other forms of family business and other forms of child labor (Masterson, 2020). Kidfluencing, with parents being in the position as the minor child's primary employer, creates new ethical questions as they directly place their role as guardian in conflict of interest. As we observe in this paper, the parents are heavily conflicted, they: have to act as parents of young children, are managers of talent, are family guardians, and they are managers of their own careers. For example, Garrett and Jessica Gee were stars of their YouTube channel; Dorothy, Manilla and Calihan (whom they manage and employ) are also stars of the channel, the channel generates substantial revenue for the family entire, and Garrett and Jessica are parents. Those four roles are incompatible. This differs from most family business contexts, in which parents might have implicit influence over their offspring's agency, but said offspring is usually an adult or at least of legal working age and has explicit self-determination. This conflict places extreme burden on the parent as they are in actuality managing multiple interrelated roles. Ethics of care (Held, 2005) literature does specifically address the conflict of interest between parent and child, but Kidfluencing is unique in the amount, nature, and dependency of the conflict. Further, both the delusion and opaqueness of the conflict is unique to Kidfluencing: Shion and Luanne Kaji can convince themselves that every rights infringement they demand of Ryan is

in his best interest, and in fact, they may be right. Ryan Kaji, may well be a multi-millionaire for his entire life because of unboxing videos made before he hit puberty. The framework we employ here adds contrast to the opaqueness and forces a clarity to cost–benefit decisions diminishing the potential for delusion. Where ethics of care (Held, 2005) has largely viewed the risks arising from caregiver and receiver being in conflict, we demonstrate that there are substantial risks inherent in their interests being partially aligned.

Indeed, while threats of harm, economic exploitation, and the child's inability to consent are common to many forms of labor, such threats are expressed differently and more opaquely in kidfluencing due to family dynamics. This research demonstrates how the rights to privacy and freedom of expression are uniquely challenged through kidfluencing. Interestingly, violations of these two rights have the potential for both immediate and long-lasting effects on the kidfluencers, as demonstrated in our case studies. As the videos potentially live forever in internet archives, the child, and what they say and do, will perpetually exist in the public domain. This permanence could cause ongoing damage to the individual as their past actions, which they may not have had any control over at the time, come back to haunt them again and again (Baker & Balanzategui, 2023). Where child stars have dealt with permanence in the past, these were scripted character performances; kidfluencers are instead presenting versions of themselves that will not only exist forever but are also available on demand. The cost of this is currently both large and incalculable, and due to its relative novelty, largely ignored in the literature. By cataloging the risks posed to children's universal rights, per the UNCRC, this research draws attention of ethicists and family entrepreneurship scholars to this large and growing industry.

Third, this research contributes to the policy and governance debates around the relative responsibility of parents, platform owners, and regulators regarding content on social media platforms (Masterson, 2020). Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg famously told the United States Senate in 2018 that Facebook was responsible for the content on its platform (Associated Press, 2018), and yet in their terms of service they clearly state they are not responsible (Facebook, 2024). YouTube, in their terms of service, advise those concerned about the safety of a child "to get in touch with local law enforcement to report the situation immediately," (Google, 2024), absolving the company of responsibility in monitoring and ensuring ethical behavior towards kidfluencers. The reality is platforms also have a conflict of interest: Kidfluencer videos are wildly popular and generate revenue for the platform. If the child does not obviously appear to be at risk and viewers are watching in good conscience, it is in not in the companies' best interests to question how the sausage is made. The platforms are the primary beneficiary of these videos, with YouTube generating $31B in advertising revenue in 2023 (Alphabet, 2024). Indeed, the risks to children through kidfluencing are easy to overlook through willful blindness (Heffernan, 2011) because anyone blowing the whistle would be either limiting their own revenue or access to entertainment. However, it is the platforms who are in the best position to either prevent or police kidfluencing, given that child protection agencies tend to focus on physical risks.

Policy Implications

We touch herein on just one form of kidfluencing: entertainment videos featuring children for the purposes of influencing children. It is the tip of the iceberg, as social media platforms provide unique ways to monetize attention and notoriety, sharing the revenues from advertisers with the content creators who deliver large viewing audiences. Just as doing well financially at the potential expense of the child may lead parents to downplay and ignore risks of kidfluencing, so it is for social media platforms (Wang et al., 2016). Any form of content moderation represents a threat to their business, inevitably reducing consumer engagement with the platform (less content means fewer views). It is therefore unrealistic to expect the platforms to do so unless required to (White & Boatwright, 2020). However, this research provides an actionable list of risk factors and requirements for ethical kidfluencing that such platforms may apply to their governance and moderation processes. Because social media platforms are not incentivized to police kidfluencing, it is a public policy issue as much as it is a corporate governance issue. Indeed, in their annual report, Alphabet, Google's parent company, discusses the effects of government regulations on the management of content. They preface the section with the phrase, "We are subject to a variety of new, existing, and changing laws and regulations worldwide that could harm our business" (Alphabet, 2024, p.16).

It is not in the best interests of any society to endorse the exploitation of a minor's rights for profit. Most developed societies, which is where kidfluencing generally occurs, already have enshrined protections for children. As such, kidfluencing protections would require an expansion or clarification of protections, as opposed to the creation of new policy. As more and more revenue is available for kidfluencing the number of people trying to capitalize will only grow, and the damage to kids will only increase without policy intervention. The intended effect of this paper is to alert policy-makers as to the prevalence of this completely unregulated industry, demonstrate how and the extent to which kidfluencing threatens children's rights (as generally acknowledged by societies), and provide a framework to hold social media platforms accountable.

Practical Implications

For the platforms, policing is better than prevention. Our framework allows platform owners to monitor and proactively act in cases where children play a substantive role in content. We propose the following options, in decreasing severity:

1. Remove all videos prominently featuring children under the age of 12.
2. Demonetize videos including children under 12, removing content creators' ability to profit from children's labor.
3. For the purposes of monetization, all children under 12 must be identified (through a passport or other official ID). Individual children are tightly restricted as to how many minutes they can appear in content on the platform in a given month or year, limiting content creators ability to rely on the "branding" of a child.
4. Parents are required to register their child with the platform, and any revenues are held in trust by the platform (or a third party) until the child reaches the age of majority, when the child would be in a position to negotiate how the funds are to be shared with the parents.
5. Parents are required to affirm their acknowledgment and consent of best practices, as outlined in Table 4. This last step maintains the impetus on the parents, but at least warns them of the risks of Kidfluencing.

In these four cases we were struck by two facts. First, these are seemingly happy families trying to enrich the lives of their families in a way that benefits everyone. Second, despite these good intentions; the risks to the children's rights is clear, prevalent, and persistent. These are not necessarily bad people ignoring the needs of their kids. At worst they are savvy parents, creating generational wealth, and either accepting there may be repercussions or being willfully blind to them. It is worth noting, that most content creators are not earning millions or even enough to support their families. Income is a result of views and engagement (people clicking on ads); to make a reasonable income generally requires at least 100,000 subscribers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). Getting to 100,000 subscribers is no easy feat and represents just 0.3% (321 k of 114 M) of all YouTube channels (Hayes, 2024). As with any entrepreneurial venture, for aspiring Kidfluencer families, pursuing that goal is uncertain at best while risks to the child are known. Our hope is our work encourages all stakeholders in the kidfluencing process to assess the worthwhile nature of such a venture.

Limitations

The findings above are limited by the following two factors: the UNCRC, and the cases we examine. First, the UNCRC is now more than thirty years old. Over that time, the world has changed dramatically, most notably with the advent of communications and technology the rights as currently stated may not be sufficient for the current threats posed by artificial intelligence, platform charged gig labor, exchange tokens (i.e., non-fungible tokens), digital privacy, etc. Indeed, we would recommend that both UNICEF and future researchers take the present research in mind when reconsidering the durability and sufficiency of the Convention in its present form.

Second, we developed the above from four cases. It is possible that more or different cases could expand this framework. Indeed, there were potential risks that occurred in just one case that because they were not found in a second case were not included in the findings. As mentioned above Vlad and Niki was coded for risking "minority culture, language and religion (Article 30)", as their Russian background is genericized; they rarely speak and when they do, it is only in English. While Ryan is of Japanese and Vietnamese dissent, cultural artifacts rarely make it into the channel's content. An argument could be made that Vlad, Niki, and Ryan live in the United States, and their genericization is a product of where they live and not Kidfluencing. This work is designed primarily to identify both the existence and the scope of the threat of Kidfluencing activities to the child performers, which we believe we do. Future work applying this framework (or an expanded version) is necessary to better understand the threats Kidfluencing represents to the performers, the parents, the audience, and society. Indeed, as these are all children, how these activities affect them as adults won't be known for decades.

Conclusion

Kidfluencing is a new business activity that allows parents to monetize the labor of their young children. However, doing so comes at a real risk to violating the fundamental rights of those children. Through our in-depth case analysis we identify six rights at risk: freedom from harm, freedom from economic exploitation, right to privacy, freedom of expression, and right to consent. Two of these (privacy and expression) are disproportionately represented and costly when compared to other child labor activities. Kidfluencing represents a uniquely insidious threat because its seemingly so benign; it is prone to willful blindness from the parents, the platforms, the audience, and society at large: after all, the parents are just making videos of their kids at play… or work.

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