

Child's digital communications: A study of the kidfluencer phenomenon in cyberspace, focusing on the YouTube platform and the unboxing genre

Saeid Reza Ameli^{1*}, Azam Ravadrad², Abdollah Bicharanlou²,
Milad Mousavi Haghshenas²

1. Professor of Communications and Global Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran. (*Corresponding author: ✉ ssameli@ut.ac.ir,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3724-4362>)
2. Department of Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

Article Info	Abstract
<p>Original article</p> <p>Main Object: Media</p> <p>Received: 26 December 2025</p> <p>Revised: 26 January 2026</p> <p>Accepted: 02 February 2026</p> <p>Published online: 14 February 2026</p> <p>Keywords: digital economy, dual-spacization of childhood, kidfluencing, unboxing genre, YouTube platform.</p>	<p>Background: Four of the top ten subscribed YouTube channels feature child-centric content, with three belonging to kidfluencers whose videos are dubbed in fourteen languages. By mid-2025, these four channels collectively garnered 608 million subscribers, demonstrating the phenomenon's significance in the digital sphere.</p> <p>Aims: This article utilizes the Dual-Spacization of the World paradigm and a qualitative approach (combining participatory observation and documentary analysis focused on YouTube and the popular unboxing genre) to describe the kidfluencer phenomenon, its links to digital commerce and economy, and its cultural consequences on child development and socialization.</p> <p>Methodology: The second part offers a local interpretation of this global trend by analyzing thirteen semi-structured interviews with children and adolescents (aged six to fourteen).</p> <p>Findings: The analysis confirmed the interviewees' positive alignment with kidfluencing through four key themes: "Spectacular Consumption and the Spectacularization of Consumption", "Perceiving Kidfluencers as Independent and Validating Them", "Expert Users, Potential Producers" and "Kidfluencing: A Path to Fame, a Shortcut to Wealth".</p> <p>Conclusion: The study's findings recommend that, to maximize opportunities, supportive legislation and regulatory bodies should actively back children's agency and capabilities in digital environments, while simultaneously promoting the development of spatial literacy and enhancement of children's digital literacy through national and global programs and policies.</p>

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1. Introduction

Cyberspace uniquely attracts children and adolescents, its appeal varying across childhood stages. Connecting via games, media, and social networks, children collaborate in self-discovery and exploring the world. They negotiate affiliations, interests, and pursue identity formation. Children use media seeking entertainment, information, social interaction, and unique self-understanding experiences (Bicharanlou, 2012). Daily conversations, often digital, involve engagement with peers and adults, near or far, across diverse platforms. Through these relationships, they negotiate benefit and harm, permissions and prohibitions, punishment and reward, and the social world's meanings and limits. Digital culture is thus both fascinating and frightening; as Clarissa, age 11, noted: "The internet is dangerous, but it's interesting" (quoted in Sampaio et al., 2021: 265).

YouTube aggressively pursues younger audiences by launching the dedicated app YouTube Kids. This move was both a massive economic leap and an attempt to address parental fears about adult content exposure. YouTube uses this app to connect with children, assess preferences, and shape media habits, fostering long-term loyalty. YouTube is widely recognized as a space for "creative expression", where users share content as everyday culture (Burgess & Green, 2013).

Child-oriented videos are among the most viewed digital content. These videos span toy unboxings, game reviews, educational/entertainment content, music, and daily vlogs. The massive viewership has created a significant financial ecosystem, drawing brands and advertisers. For example, toy company Mattel (owner of Barbie and Hot Wheels) recognized YouTube's influence by investing \$10 million in advertising on YouTube Kids (Schrank, 2017). This investment supports the study's observation: four of the ten most-subscribed YouTube channels are child-oriented, three featuring kidfluencers. By mid-2025, these four channels collectively reached 608 million subscribers¹ (Note: this figure does not represent 608 million unique users). This statistic shows children's web presence has moved beyond mere consumption over the last decade. Children now actively participate on social networks, posting edited or spontaneous photos and videos of their daily lives, which sustains peer relationships (Boyd, 2014). European studies confirm that children aged 11–12 are advancing up the "ladder of opportunities" (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008), using messaging and social platforms to expand social and entertainment experiences.

From a sociology of childhood perspective, young people actively shape digital culture. Child-produced content is remarkably popular, especially among peers. Children engage more deeply with media due

1. Considering that some users may simultaneously subscribe to more than one of the four mentioned channels, the stated figure does not represent 608 million unique users or accounts.

to their leisure time and curiosity (Bicharanlou, 2012). This engagement surge, combined with children representing a previously untapped market, prompted platforms to heavily invest in this demographic. Media platforms are now "attention economy" arenas where individuals compete for visibility. Algorithms govern this competition, and children's participation is often a strategic advantage for boosting popularity. As Steve Youngwood, former CEO of the Sesame Workshop Foundation, stated, limiting the audience by excluding children and families restricts the subscriber base (Burroughs & Feller, 2021). Thus, children are special audiences for visual and social media (Bicharanlou, 2012).

The growing intensity of children's digital engagement fostered a new phenomenon: the kidfluencer-children acting as professional content creators. The term combines kid and influencer, referring to young users gaining fame and influence through frequent content creation. Meeting criteria for followers, recognition, and impact categorizes them as influencers. Influencers typically create video content, general or specialized, often showcasing their lifestyles to grow audiences. They are integral to marketing strategies, collaborating with companies; here, influencers become commodities themselves, not just product promoters. Kidfluencers, a subset, are children who attract large audiences by producing age-appropriate content. They appear regularly on platforms, becoming online child stars through appealing traits. For young children, parents or guardians usually manage the technical aspects and channel ownership. For older children and teenagers, parental roles range from supervision to collaboration, but detachment is improbable due to the financial and contractual nature of the work.

Large corporations, which long viewed children as consumers, now recognize them as valuable producers due to social media and kidfluencers' rising influence. Strong commercial ties have driven the explosive growth of kidfluencing, now widely seen as a legitimate profession. Agren (2021) notes some children call content creation their dream job, fully understanding they must "look good", "be visible", "work hard" and "follow filming techniques", openly referring to themselves as commercial products.

Given this global phenomenon's scope, critical examination is vital. This article explores kidfluencers in digital spaces, critically analyzing the surge of child-oriented content. The popularity and financial circulation around child-produced content prompted platforms like YouTube to create dedicated young audience sections and cultivate kid influencers as long-term strategies. Within this expanding digital economy, genres like toy unboxing, game reviews, food testing, and family vlogs are central to content production. This research aims to understand kidfluencing, focusing on toy unboxing, mapping its structure, links to the digital economy, and prominent global figures. It

also seeks children's and adolescents' perspectives for a localized understanding of the global trend.

2. Significance of the study

The expansion and visualization of social platforms raise concerns about child exploitation and child labor regulation violations in digital spaces. These issues are acute for active content creators like kidfluencers (YouTubers, Twitch creators, etc.). Despite their fame, kidfluencers' actual working conditions and contractual terms remain obscure. Contracts with agencies or clients are often confidential, concealed to avoid cultural backlash and scrutiny (Abidin, 2021). A more fundamental concern stems from the blurring line between children's everyday digital activities and their transformation into a labor force, raising serious questions about the commodification of children's digital participation (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). Focusing on child producers often sidelines how other child users are influenced and potentially harmed. The proliferation of commercial influencers reinforces consumerism's dominance in the cultural sphere.

In consumer societies, commodification covers nearly all social realms, and individuals primarily connect through their role as consumers. Bauman (2007) argues consumption invests in social membership, making participation necessary for most social groups. Children are socialized within a consumer society, yet their roles in consumer culture remain insufficiently analyzed in theoretical frameworks. The centrality of commercial elements and consumption in children's virtual and physical lives risks social exclusion for children from lower socioeconomic strata. Ravadrad (2005) notes that the unequal social structure of physical space is reproduced in virtual environments. Bauman (2007) terms those whose position is determined by consumption levels, not employment, "flawed consumers". Profit-driven, advertisement-based mechanisms, particularly on YouTube, intensify these dynamics. In 2019, YouTube and Google were fined \$170 million for violating the U.S. Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA)¹, the largest fine of its kind at the time. The Federal Trade Commission ruled YouTube collected children's data without parental consent and displayed targeted ads during "child-directed videos". YouTube was forced to implement major policy changes, including removing targeted ads from YouTube Kids and all "made for kids" videos, and mandating that creators designate child-intended content². Despite this, YouTube still allows non-targeted ads under guidelines within child-oriented categories.

Thus, the following axes are visible and hidden facets of the kidfluencer phenomenon, emphasizing the necessity of studying its

1. <https://is.gd/BW2AjU>

2. <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/9528076?hl=en&sjid=2239413471844755998-EU>

dimensions:

- The introduction of children into economic activities;
- Exploiting children's information and violating privacy for commercial objectives;
- Promoting consumerism and commerce-centricity through genres like unboxing;
- Including various related and unrelated advertisements (intra-content and extra-content) in child-favored channels;
- The commodification of childhood by showcasing affluent children's lifestyles in vlogs.

Due to the academic article's limitations, not all axes can be addressed. However, recognition and comprehension of the phenomenon are the first steps. This research maps the space by introducing popular global kidfluencers, investigating the link to digital commerce, and explaining cultural consequences. To gain a local understanding of global trends, it analyzes the views of interviewed children and adolescents.

3. Literature review

Influencers on YouTube are a growing research area. A rapid-growth body of literature focuses specifically on children creating commercial content. Many studies highlight the rise of toy unboxing videos as a popular genre targeting child users (Burroughs & Feller, 2021). These videos are published on child-owned channels, featuring children alone or with family, but production direction is managed by parents, commercial companies, or celebrity management agencies. Walczer (2021) states that unboxing videos operate under specific rules where meaning is shaped by a three-element network: content producers, users/consumers, and the digital platform (medium for exchange), all guided by algorithms.

Nicholl and Nansen (2018), analyzing one hundred toy unboxing videos in "Mimetic Production in YouTube Toy Unboxing Videos", studied video quality levels from elementary to professional. Findings show newcomer channels imitate professional techniques and vice versa. Nicoll and Nansen note unboxing videos are inherently social and participatory, actively engaging users. Children watching these videos comment and use platform interactive tools to express interest or disinterest, signifying their active role in shaping their own tastes.

Craig and Cunningham (2017) found that creating unboxing videos constitutes a form of work governed by social media policies and the digital economy. Child users' time, attention, and data are commodified and sold by popular channel owners to advertising agencies and toy companies. Transactions involve money, free products, and diverse services.

Marsh (2016) used an ethnographic approach, following a four-year-

old boy. Marsh documented the widespread unboxing phenomenon, finding the child enjoyed watching the videos but lacked interest in purchasing the products. This led to the argument that the child acted as a Cyberflaneur, a user idling online without a specific goal.

David Buckingham (2011) interviewed twenty-four US-based toy unboxing content producers across age groups, representing content from sixty-five YouTube channels. The research identified diverse personalities, expertise, and techniques used by these channels to construct online identity and content.

4. Dual-spacization of kidfluencers

The theoretical lens of this study for understanding and explaining the phenomena under investigation is the Paradigm of the Dual-Spacization of the World (Ameli, 2003a; 2003b). According to this paradigm, one of the most significant aspects of development in the contemporary era is the expansion of *social space*, which has materialized through the Dual-Spacization of the world. As a result of this expansion, a new dimension has been added to the physical space referred to as *cyberspace* or *the second space* (Ameli, 2011a). In the eighteenth century, with the rise of modernity, *space* became a crucial concept for defining generational characteristics and boundaries. However, in the present era, the boundaries that once distinctly separated adults and children have been challenged, reconsidered, and redefined under the influence of widespread information and communication technologies centered around the internet, and the blurring of binary concepts such as “private” and “public”, “inside” and “outside the home”, or “real” and “virtual”. Today, physical and virtual spaces function like *conjoined twins* interacting with one another to sustain social life. The emergence of the internet has created a *parallel current* alongside the physical world. This parallel current cyberspace does not represent something imaginary, utopian, or metaphorical; rather, it constitutes a real and tangible space. Understanding the transformations of the world and its natural and ideological processes, therefore, requires serious attention to these two intertwined and parallel spaces. In other words, the paradigm of the Dual-Spacization of the World emphasizes that understanding individual and social realities through *single-space paradigms* is no longer feasible. Attempting to comprehend physical space without understanding virtual space (and vice versa) inevitably leads to interpretive error (Ameli, 2007; 2011b).

Attention to the Dual-Spacization of the contemporary world gives rise to new epistemological systems and different modes of social action. This means that theory is not merely an abstract conceptualization but both a reflection of current realities and a generator of new individual and social realities. Accordingly, the paradigm of Dual-Spacization possesses the features and capacities of a comprehensive theory eschewing determinism and linear

evolutionary perspectives, while emphasizing the *trans-geographical* nature of socio-cultural life. Ameli (2009) identifies five fundamental physical–virtual combinations that have emerged in this Dual-Spacized world and profoundly shaped contemporary life: physical–virtual communication, physical–virtual time, physical–virtual labor, physical–virtual culture, and physical–virtual social attachment. These combinations signify that the rise of cyberspace has influenced numerous global processes, perspectives, and capacities. Cyberspace often runs parallel to, and sometimes dominates the physical world, becoming a concrete and experienced reality. The two spaces maintain a *geometric reflective relationship*, characterized by continuous exchanges between them. The physical space is defined by its geographical boundaries, its political organization under nation-states, its natural–industrial structure, and its tangible qualities. In contrast, the *second space* cyberspace, is identified by its trans-spatiality, timelessness, pure industrialism, postnational and transgovernmental features, networked nature, and transformed postmodern epistemology, offering simultaneous accessibility. These two spaces have now become so interdependent that the removal of one would entail the collapse of the other (Ameli, 2011a). Ravadrad (2005) also refers to this as a *unified space*, reflecting the interconnectedness and interdependence of these two realms. This entanglement fosters both interaction and tension; the two spaces sometimes reinforce one another and at other times compete, replacing certain functions of one with those of the other (Ameli, 2011a). This transformation of communicative space has introduced new interactive experiences into human life, reflecting the plurality of social relations within cyberspace.

As Ameli (2011b) explains, although the Dual-Spacization of the World has eliminated the tyranny of time and place, replacing *the space of places* with *the space of flows*, every moment of human existence in this new realm now constitutes a form of *labor*. In such a world, one of the natural consequences of which is the expansion of the digital economy, human society has turned into a community of *full-time, unpaid workers* who, even during leisure or casual internet browsing, generate value and contribute to capital accumulation on a scale far exceeding that of physical labor. This is precisely the focal point linking the paradigm of the Dual-Spacization of the World to the present study. Within this framework, the phenomenon of kidfluencing can be both explored and interpreted.

The ideas of Buckingham (2008), published four years after the introduction of the Dual-Spacization paradigm and specifically focused on children, can also be understood within this framework. According to Buckingham, fundamental features of the internet, such as *timelessness* and *placelessness*, have undermined the established normative spatial separations between “home” and “street”, or “private” and “public”. Under the emerging *digital culture of*

childhood, these boundaries have lost much of their significance. Now, *dual-spatial children* can transcend material, private, local, regional, and even national borders from within their homes, entering public spaces and adult domains, engaging globally, and disrupting generational and intergenerational hierarchies, including traditional power balances between parents and children.

Similarly, Deuze (2012) argues that contemporary society has shifted from *living with media* to *living in media*. Media, and the personalities associated with it, have become companions and even friends of children (Bicharanlou, 2012). The blending of the second space with all layers of personal and social existence, the networking of communication, the ubiquity of digital platforms, and the visualization of society have together led to the explosive penetration of digital manifestations, especially media platforms, into all domains of daily life, particularly those of children and adolescents (Burroughs & Feller, 2021).

Carrington (2017), fourteen years after Ameli, confirms this reality in his research, noting that the boundaries between the first and second spaces are dissolving, and metaphors such as “online” and “offline” may no longer hold conceptual validity. Children’s agency across these spaces now forms a unified continuum. The dominance of digital games over physical play, the hybridization of play across both spaces, and the merging of entertainment with education and labor all exemplify this interconnection. Beyond play, there is also a direct relationship between children’s interests, roles, cognitive orientations, and their online practices. Therefore, the study of children’s digital communication and its related phenomena cannot be effectively conducted from a single-space perspective. The Dual-Spacization paradigm thus serves as a comprehensive theoretical lens for understanding phenomena such as kidfluencing and its cultural and economic dimensions.

5. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach suitable for exploring meanings, experiences, and perceptions. Qualitative inquiry seeks a deeper understanding of phenomena within social contexts. Creswell (2014) notes that qualitative research aims to understand how individuals perceive human or social problems within interpretive, context-specific frameworks. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) emphasize that findings emerge through interpretive, non-statistical methods based on rich, descriptive data. The initial stage, which described the kidfluencer phenomenon, analyzed its economic/cultural aspects, and identified prominent global cases, using *documentary research* and *participant observation*. Kawulich (as cited in Ameli, 2013) describes participant observation as one of the oldest qualitative methods, used for over a century across social groups to collect data via direct involvement (Cooper, 2004). The researcher immerses themselves to observe behaviors, events, and dynamics, collecting unstructured data.

Participant observation incorporates other qualitative techniques (McCall and Simmons, cited in Ameli, 2013). It helps researchers understand participants' social, cultural, and economic contexts, norms, and interpersonal relations (Mack et al., as cited in Ameli, 2013). DeWalt and DeWalt (2002, cited in Ameli, 2013) state that its goal is a comprehensive, accurate, and objective understanding. The method addresses descriptive questions, enhances data interpretation (Bernard, 1998, as cited in Ameli, 2013), and strengthens credibility through contextual insight. Validity is further improved with interviews and document analysis. Following Spradley's classification (as cited in Ameli, 2013), the relevant level here is *limited participation*, the researcher is present, engages minimally, but prioritizes observation. Accordingly, the researcher joined influential kidfluencer channels on YouTube, observing videos, activities, performance, monetization, on-camera behavior, audience reactions, and company interactions. This provided a relatively comprehensive description of the phenomenon and its related dimensions.

The next phase involved semi-structured interviews with children and adolescents to gain a localized understanding of global currents related to kidfluencing. Exploring children's views is essential for understanding their cognitive beliefs and digital engagement. Ethical issues in research involving children are of central importance. Typically, parents grant permission for their children's participation, but in this study, particular care was taken to ensure that both parents and children provided informed consent after being fully briefed on the study's aims and process, and this consent was obtained verbally from both parents and children prior to the start of all interview-related procedures. In all thirteen interviews, participants and their families were assured that personally identifiable information (such as last names) would remain confidential. Only first names, ages, and school grades would appear in the report. To enhance privacy, children were also given the option to choose pseudonyms, which several participants opted to use. Written informed consent was obtained from the legal guardians of the interviewees for the publication of this limited amount of information. This study also obtained its ethical approval certificate from the Research Ethics Committees of the Faculty of Psychology and Education, and the related information and details are provided at the end of the article. The following table presents the interviewees' basic information, including (real or pseudonymous) names, ages, and school grades.

Data analysis used Thematic Analysis based on the flexible, six-phase model of Braun and Clarke (2006), allowing for descriptive and interpretive insights. The interview responses were primarily documented through note-taking and, where recorded, transcribed in writing, followed by necessary revisions. Ultimately, the transcripts of the final two interviews did not introduce new points outside the scope

of the previous responses. Upon completion of the interviews, a table was designed for each question to organize the responses, allowing for repeated review and the process of initial coding according to the six-step model of Braun and Clarke. Initial coding provided the groundwork for grouping convergent codes. The goal of this stage was to categorize the collected data into several distinct areas, under which the interviewees' perspectives and answers could be placed, thereby simplifying the process of searching for themes. Finally, by positioning the responses within the relevant thematic areas, and following processes of segregation, aggregation, and other necessary refinements, four overarching themes were extracted, which have been detailed and reported in the findings section.

Table 1. Names and details of interviewees in alphabetical order

No.	Name	Age (Year)	Grade
1	Amir Mahdi	13	8th grader
2	Aria	10	4th grader
3	Ava	14	8th grader
4	Danial	12	6th grader
5	Ghazal	7	1st grader
6	Kiyarad	6	Preschool
7	Mahan	8	3rd grader
8	Mahya	14	8th grader
9	Maryam	14	9th grader
10	Melina	11	5th grader
11	Sadra	14	9th grader
12	Setayesh	13	7th grader
13	Shayan	12	6th grader

Source: Authors

6. Findings

The research findings are presented in three sections, aligning with the objectives. The first describes the unboxing genre and its economic aspects on YouTube. The second delineates the global position of kidfluencers, identifying prominent figures, content strategies, and interactions with commercial/ media companies. The third section covers interview findings from children and adolescents, providing local, explanatory themes regarding this global trend. Findings in the first two sections rely on documentary studies and participatory observation; the third section uses interview texts.

6.1. The unboxing content genre (Specific to children)

The unboxing genre involves videos where individuals (or just hands) open, try out, and discuss child-related items like toys, favorite foods (chocolates, surprise eggs), and game consoles (Burroughs & Feller,

2021). Some videos show children searching for shelf space for new products. Most unboxing videos lack serious critique; children or adults enthusiastically play with or introduce the products. This genre bolsters consumer capitalism by idealizing such families, creating opportunities for fame-making agency investment, and advertising contracts, which provide kidfluencer families with sustainable income. Since income often correlates directly with activity volume, children in this field risk exploitation and physical/ psychological pressure from parents (Nottingham, 2019). Often, the entire family is involved in production (Burroughs & Feller, 2021). This trend presents families constantly interacting with products received through "digital labor", promoting consumerism.

Unboxing videos accelerate the link between production and consumption. The industry views these children as conduits for conditioning consumer tastes from birth. Essentially, unboxing videos act as advertising, stimulating purchases even when unnecessary (Burroughs & Feller, 2021). Toy companies and kidfluencers use reciprocal, targeted advertising strategies. Kidfluencers, directed by parents, publish content unboxing or advertising toys, either naturally playing with them in vlogs or explicitly reviewing them. Companies, in turn, donate products, pay contract fees, and promote kidfluencers as brand ambassadors. This promotion includes naming products after them, printing their image on packaging, inviting them to media-covered events (like store openings or conventions), and republishing their content on corporate channels (ibid). Major conglomerates, Walmart, Staples, and Mattel (owner of Barbie), focus marketing on famous children on YouTube and Instagram. Other toy companies also launch advertising campaigns centered around kidfluencers.

6.2. YouTube: The hosting platform for kidfluencers

YouTube is the leading global platform for child-centric content and kidfluencer activities. In June 2025, YouTube recorded over 2.7 billion active monthly users¹, encompassing one-third of the global population and half of the world's internet users. Over 500 hours of content are uploaded every minute². This vast reach and content diversity created a colossal digital commercial market with over \$50 billion turnover in 2024³.

Videos and channels for children and adolescents are among the most popular content. Notable unboxing channels include Vlad and Niki, featuring two Russian-American brothers. In 2025, with over 145 million subscribers and 112 billion views, it ranked seventh globally in views and fifth by subscriber count. Launched by their parents in 2018, the channel quickly grew, featuring toy play, comedic adventures, and

1. <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/youtube-statistics/>

2. <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/youtube-statistics/>

3. <https://is.gd/jodqLq>

educational stories, often with music and animation. It is dubbed into German, French, Arabic, Italian, Polish, English, Russian, Turkish, Vietnamese, Hindi, Indonesian, Spanish, and Thai. In 2024, the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) investigated the channel for inadequate advertisement disclosure, leading to warnings. The investigation focused on the unclear boundary between entertainment and toy advertising, revealing efforts to conceal the commercial nature¹. The channel description states:

“Vlad and Niki” is a global phenomenon in children's content on YouTube. With twenty-one sub-channels and translations into eighteen languages, the channel averages five billion views per month. The proprietary rights of 'Vlad and Niki' belong to FZC Media Content Group, LLC, which is managed by Sergey Vashketov and Victoria Vashketov, the parents of these two global stars².

Another popular toy unboxing channel is Kids Diana Show, featuring Eva Diana Kidisyuk (born 2014, Ukraine) and her brother, Roma (born 2012). Managed by her parents, Volodymyr and Olena Kidisyuk, the content includes unboxing, family vlogs, and educational entertainment. Diana first appeared in 2015 when her mother launched a channel to share videos. Two years later, due to unexpected external popularity, her parents quit their jobs to manage the channel full-time. The family moved from Ukraine to Florida and then to the United Arab Emirates. In 2020, Diana's parents signed with PocketWatch, a known kidfluencer collaborator. Kids Diana Show is dubbed into Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Indonesian, Russian, Spanish, German, Portuguese, and Arabic. In 2025, with 136 million subscribers and over 118 billion views³, it ranked sixth among top YouTube channels.

"Like Nastya" belongs to Anastasia Yuryevna Radzinskaya (Russian-American YouTuber, born 2014). Her content includes unboxing, children's songs, educational entertainment, vlogs, and role-playing. Many similar channels diversify content to attract subscribers and mitigate critical views of commercial content. Radzinskaya's parents contracted with the multi-channel network Yoola for content services and financial returns. Forbes reported Radzinskaya had one of the fastest growth rates globally in 2019, becoming the third highest-paid YouTuber with an estimated annual income of \$18 million. In 2025, Like Nastya secured eighth place globally with over 130 million subscribers and 116 billion views. The channel description reads:

Where Nastya and her parents play, learn, sing, discover, and share their life experiences.

1. <https://bbbprograms.org/media/newsroom/decisions/vlad-and-niki>

2. <https://www.youtube.com/c/VladandNiki>

3. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCk8GzjMOrta8yxDcKfy1JYw>

The most prominent kidfluencer in the unboxing genre is Ryan Kaji of the Ryan's World channel (formerly Ryan ToysReview), a teenager born in Texas in 2011 to Japanese and Vietnamese parents. Ryan ToysReview topped the Forbes list of highest-paid YouTubers in 2018. That year, with 26 billion views and 17 million subscribers, Ryan's channel earned over \$22 million, the highest YouTube income at the time (Berg, 2018). Since its 2015 launch until mid-2025, Ryan gained over 40 million followers and 62 billion views with videos featuring enthusiastic unboxing and play, often testing food products alongside his guiding parents.

Though Ryan's World has lost its top position, its pioneer status remains important. Ryan's statistics over the last decade have defined the kidfluencing/ toy unboxing phenomenon. His pioneering role led to diverse cooperation models between commercial and media companies. Ryan has signed over forty international contracts for image use, launched his own toy line, and secured a television show (Shamsian, 2019).

Reports estimate the channel, focused on toy introductions, unboxing, and vlogs, earns over \$35 million annually (PayWizard¹ and BrandVizion²). This income comes from media contracts, YouTube ads, brand collaborations, and product sales. While few child influencers reach this revenue level, such examples attract many families seeking sustainable income through their children. Ryan's World allows subscribers to witness frequent new toy unboxing and family play. Though the family donates surplus toys, their actions foster extravagant desires in followers.

Shahghasemi (2020) notes that celebrities advertise products they wouldn't use, and if they engage in humanitarian work, it primarily serves their fame. User criticisms on Common Sense Media, from parents and others, focus mainly on child exploitation. Feedback included terms like "money-making machine for a plastic-worshipping child", "worthless content", "promotion of consumerism", and "spoiled". One user called it "insidious deception". Despite critics, Ryan's influence, aided by his childlike simplicity, extends beyond YouTube.

In summer 2018, Walmart launched a toy line centered on Ryan's World (Burroughs & Feller, 2021). The video showing Ryan's first visit to a Walmart to see the new toys achieved over 31 million views by mid-2025. This video, set in a gendered space featuring dinosaurs, trucks, guns, and surprise eggs, was designed to capture young boys' attention, with Ryan's image on all boxes. Sales began through an exclusive contract across 2,500 Walmart branches. This is significant as Walmart holds over twenty percent of the total US toy retail market share.

1. <https://paywizard.org>

2. <https://www.brandvm.com/insights>

In the current era of "Dual-Spacized Commerce", retailers increasingly collaborate with social media influencers. However, Ryan's achievement surpasses typical contracts: he is the first child star to successfully launch a toy line under his own brand. Ryan's extensive projects were not executed alone; they are supported by a modern digital marketing company with deep children's media experience, significant capital, and market expertise.

PocketWatch, founded in March 2017 in Culver City, California, is one such specialized, reputable company. In 2025, it reported forty full-time employees whose main role is to "think and act like children". The company collaborates with leading YouTube kidfluencers, including Ryan's World (over 40 million subscribers), Captain Sparklez (over 11 million subscribers), HobbyFamilyTV (over 5 million subscribers), and siblings JillianTube HD and EvanTube HD (totaling over 8.5 million subscribers¹). PocketWatch claims to be the flagship of children's entertainment, providing facilities, designing strategies, and supporting these groups. The management includes seasoned industry leaders: Chris M. Williams (former CEO of Disney Online Originals), Albie Hecht (former head of film/entertainment at Nickelodeon), and Jon Moonves (prominent Hollywood contract negotiator). PocketWatch hires selectively; nearly two-thirds of staff previously worked at "Studio Maker" and "Disney". This human resource strategy applies expertise to create, guide, and develop emerging child-centric content opportunities. PocketWatch also signed a \$15 million cooperation agreement in 2018 with traditional media giant Viacom (now Paramount Global). This partnership aimed to link traditional and new media, centered on original content where children are both producers and consumers. Planned collaborations included publishing a printed book featuring Ryan Kaji and other child stars with the slogan "Watch this book"². They also unveiled a joint plan with Paramount to produce a feature film about unboxing toys (Spangler, 2018).

6.3. Kidfluencing through the eyes of dual-spatial children: Local perspectives on a global phenomenon

As stated, this research aimed to describe the kidfluencing space, explain its economic/ cultural aspects via the unboxing genre, introduce key global figures, and then analyze children's views through semi-structured interviews. This provided an insider, localized understanding from the target audience's perspective. After transcription and the six-step Clark model analysis, four main themes emerged.

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1. The mentioned statistics pertain to the first half of 2025.
 2. The connection between traditional and new media is also evident in other emerging and widespread phenomena in cyberspace. For instance, Shahghasemi (2024), in his study of the Korean group BTS, reports that thirty-six books about BTS have been published in English worldwide, none of which is critical.

6.3.1. Spectacular consumption and consumption becoming spectacle

This first theme provides groundwork for popular social platforms and kidfluencing. It reflects the dominance of visual media and culture, showing children's inclination toward video-centric platforms over text. This suggests some children prefer watching over reading or listening. Many digital videos include same-language subtitles due to this preference. Disabled groups, like the deaf, are often a secondary target of this action. Users often watch without audio, grasping content solely via subtitles. Users dislike extensive texts, footnotes, or long descriptions. Content creators thus often use video formats or graphical styles even for text. This explains the popularity of content like unboxing videos, live streams, and family vlogs, videos reflecting spectacular consumption and demonstrating consumption becoming spectacle. A noteworthy observation: when children were asked their favorite apps or which apps they opened first, not a single text-based, mixed application, or game was mentioned (though this might be expected for younger ages). Samples of responses include:

Setayesh, 13 (7th grade): "Snapchat and YouTube."

Mahan, 8 (3rd grade): "TikTok; although I visit Insta and YouTube a lot too, I open TikTok first."

Shayan, 12 (6th grade): "TikTok."

Ghazal, 7 (1st grade): "First Pinterest, then YouTube; I really like both of them."

Mahya, 14 (8th grade): "Instagram and YouTube."

Melina, 11 (5th grade): "Sometimes I open Insta first, sometimes YouTube; it depends on the moment."

Maryam, 14 (9th grade): "First YouTube [...moments of pause...]; just YouTube."

6.3.2. Validation and perceived independence of kidfluencers

This second theme emerged from the interviewees' consensus in validating and welcoming kidfluencer activity.

Setayesh, 13 (7th grade), when asked if she followed peers with known accounts, responded: "Yes, on Instagram, I follow a girl my age who has tons of followers. They mostly gain followers by dancing."

Asked about her view on such children, Setayesh said: "I approve; dancing isn't a bad thing."

Danial, 12 (6th grade): "Yes, I know a few of them. One of them introduces interesting toy gadgets, like some toy cars and helicopters that connect to Wi-Fi and can be controlled with a phone. Overall, I like their work and I follow them."

Arya, 10 (4th grade): "Yes, I follow a few famous YouTube kids, their videos. Usually, if I want to buy a toy, I first go to see if they've posted a video about it or not."

Regarding his view, Arya said: "If they earn income, I agree with it."

Maryam, 14 (9th grade): "There's a girl my age who posts videos of her daily life, shows her shopping, talks about them, and asks for others' opinions. Some days, she posts videos of her family. She buys a very cute item almost every few days—simple but very beautiful things like hair clips, bracelets, pencil cases, pins for her bag, small decorative items for her room, and bookshelf."

Kiarad, 6 (preschool): "I watch a channel on YouTube where a boy a little older than me teaches PS soccer techniques. There's another channel where a boy introduces games and advertises PlayStation and Xbox accessories."

Maryam also stated her view: "If it's for earning an income, I think it's good, and I approve. I always admire YouTubers who create content for their future and gradually reach monetization."

These responses show no hostility toward child virtual stars, despite kidfluencers having relative advantages (fame, popularity) over their peers. Their superior status did not result in unpleasant views; rather, it was met with validation and admiration. Kidfluencers' methods, content, and follower strategies received no critical feedback. Crucially, the children did not challenge the profit-seeking/commercial approaches; in some cases, commercial income was stated as a condition for approval. This helps explain the tens of millions of subscribers to kidfluencers like Vlad and Niki, Diana, Nastya, and Ryan. A group of children validates and admires peers earning income this way, viewing it as appropriate. Furthermore, some children perceive kidfluencers as independent. They see them as creative children operating using standard social media patterns, relying on their own taste and ingenuity. When kidfluencers appear alone, some peers may not recognize that a family or media group directs the production.

Also, hidden from peers is the reality that, due to legal issues, the financial benefits often cannot fundamentally belong to the children themselves. Ultimately, children hold positive perceptions of their famous digital counterparts, follow them, praise them, and deem income generation a necessary condition. This mindset makes kidfluencing a dream, leading to the next theme.

6.3.3. Expert users, potential producers

This third theme confirms that all interviewed children were active, engaged users familiar with social platform interactions.

Mahya, 14 (8th grade), discussed engagement: "I usually leave comments on the videos I watch, and then I check to see if anyone has reacted to my comment."

Sadra, 14 (9th grade), stated: "Some channels don't deserve to be a member of because they only post good and interesting content sometimes. I don't subscribe to them, but I search for them once in a while to see what's new and what they've posted."

Amirmahdi, 13 (8th grade): "I'm a member of several YouTube channels that post news about mobile phones and new technologies. Many people come into the comments and say wrong things and give wrong opinions about comparisons; they want to say what they have is better, for example, those who are Samsung fans or those who are Apple fans. Sometimes, when I have the patience, I go and read the comments and post replies to such opinions so that others don't get misled by reading them. Of course, when I look at some, I see that others have already come and explained."

Ava, 14 (8th grade): "Some people just randomly like whatever they see on YouTube. They're quick to like everything in general. But I'm not like that. I like a video that has truly interesting content and that I enjoy. Because those likes count as points for the owner of that channel."

Such responses indicate that the interviewed children possess a solid understanding of the structure of their preferred platform, YouTube in the cases above, and its interactive mechanisms, and that they engage with it in an active and intentional manner. Active engagement includes channel membership, commenting, context-specific use of interactive tools, selective consumption, and critical engagement with content or comments. This shows the active and, often, "expert" nature of the users.

The other facet is the potential production ability of many interviewees (with the caveat that qualitative findings are not generalizable). Almost all interviewees mentioned at least one content production and uploading experience. Some experienced this through educational/ extracurricular activities (art, sports), while others engaged in ideation or modeling to produce and upload video content.

Arya, 10 (4th grade), when asked whether he had ever publicly shared any video content he had created: "Yes, there are some school assignments and class tasks that we have to record in a video and put in the class group. But I also put a few of those that looked good on YouTube so more people could see them."

Ghazal, 7 (1st grade): "My painting teacher taught me to put my paintings on Pinterest; I get ideas from Pinterest and I also created a board for my own paintings on Pinterest. Every time I have work that I think is good, I add it to my board."

Shayan, 12 (6th grade): "Yes, I participated in a book reading competition where we had to film ourselves, and I also put that video on my Instagram page, which is public."

Melina, 11 (5th grade): "I make art crafts. I take pictures of all of them when they're finished. But for the construction stages of some of them that I think are harder and more interesting, I also film and then speed up the video and put it on my channel. Of course, for some, I can't keep the phone steady, so my mom helps me with filming."

Ava, 14 (8th grade): "I don't have my own YouTube channel, and my Instagram page isn't public, but since I go to music class and have to film my practices and send them to my teacher, my teacher posts some of these practices on their own page and channel and writes my name on top."

As these responses indicate, a significant group of interviewees, in addition to being active and engaged users, are also potential content creators who have, in some cases, realized their abilities through small-scale experiences. This potential means that becoming a famous content creator is not viewed as inaccessible. Given the perceived advantages, attaining kidfluencer status is consistently a goal, plan, or dream. This leads to the final theme.

6.3.4. Kidfluencing: A pathway to fame, a shortcut to wealth

This phrase, Kidfluencing: A Pathway to Fame, a Shortcut to Wealth, is the fourth pervasive theme identified. Contrary to suggestions that children's world is distant from fame and wealth, the statements revealed deep connections between these concepts and children's minds. This characteristic was evident across the entire age spectrum (six to fourteen), expressed with similar meanings.

Setayesh, 13 (7th grade), asked if she wished for a high-follower account: "Yes, I would love to gain followers by dancing and become rich and famous but my mom doesn't allow it and says we are not like them, it's not proper."

Maryam, 14 (9th grade): "Yes, I wanted to create content on YouTube with the intention of earning an income. I would like my followers to mostly be my age."

Mahan, 8 (3rd grade): "Yes, that way I would earn a lot of money; I'd prefer to do it through Rubika instead of YouTube, which is easier to connect to and faster. I wanted everyone to be my follower."

When Mahan was asked who he preferred his followers to be, he replied: "It doesn't matter." This suggests that the criterion is the realization of the goal (numerous followers and abundant income); the means are irrelevant. Although children's agency is often directed by parents or companies, this mindset is clearer on kidfluencer channels that attract followers by promoting consumerism, displaying disturbing content, urging rule-breaking behavior in games, promoting non-childlike conduct, or advertising overconsumption of foods. Ultimately, the affluent lifestyles of kidfluencers— the daily free toys, new consoles, expensive accessories, unique gadgets, and free receipt of expensive foods— set within a seemingly happy, supportive family context, provides sufficient reason for many followers to validate and admire these children. A significant portion of the audience harbors the wish to become a kidfluencer themselves.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

This research centered on children born into a digitally saturated world. These children grew up with interactive media and personalized content, possessing different skills from previous generations, but also facing risks from big data, algorithmic targeting, hidden advertising, and childhood commercialization. While child development is constant, the environment changes continually. Children's culture changes in, with, and through digital media. The emergence of kidfluencing is a major change, making it the focus of this research. The statistics in the findings clearly show the status and importance of kidfluencing and the necessity for academic research. The diversity of its manifestations and volume of its economy suggest that merely studying children's consumption of the internet is inadequate. Attention must shift to their production, engagement, and activity in digital spaces. Other issues complicate existing concerns: platform algorithms (primarily YouTube's) suggesting videos, displaying platform-based ads, explicit/implicit in-content advertising, and exposure to age-inappropriate content. YouTube is key to children's culture, identity, media preferences, and lifestyle due to its vast content and enormous data collection. Big Data mechanisms have transformed children's media culture, driven by data-driven businesses and digital platforms.

These social platform-driven changes lead to the commercialization of children's culture. Media platforms can encourage specific tendencies and patterns in children, rewarding behavior that leads to norm formation and internalization. A significant part of socialization for this generation of "two-space" children has shifted digitally, leading to their increasing (voluntary and involuntary) participation in the attention economy. The explosive rise of unboxing videos exemplifies this economy, which is a pivotal connection to consumerism.

Analysis of relations between unboxed goods, creators, users, and YouTube shows a complex, emotion-based network. This network directs users' attention and guides behavior toward platform consumption, the genre, and related products. The use of intimate connections fundamentally changed children's consumption culture. Critically, this powerful content flow utilizes child stars' fame and traditional media capacity to dominate the culture economy in the children's sector, coinciding with the collapse of education/entertainment boundaries. The book slogan "Watch this Book" embodies the neoliberal logic of YouTube, enticing consumption rather than reading or questioning. The global spread of child-centric content has tangibly realized YouTube's empowerment discourse, that anyone can build, create, share, and become a "star". However, children like "Ryan" are integrated into a system prescribing continuous, capitalism-based consumption. The generation watching these patterns mentally believes satisfaction is found in continuous consumption, and any child can become like Ryan Kaji through play and consumption.

The interviewed children's views support this perspective. Their validation and admiration of kidfluencers and their perceived independence indicate that the phenomenon and its messages have achieved their goals within this research's scope. The non-critical, aspirational view of kidfluencing as a shortcut to fame and wealth further confirms interviewees' alignment with this trend. Children unanimously wished to be kidfluencers and explicitly stated that the goal is abundant income. This descriptive research sought to illustrate kidfluencing and its economic/ cultural aspects within an article's limitations. Providing solutions and recommendations requires a separate study. What the current format necessitates is a brief mention of selected recommendations from documentary studies.

The first recommendation is applying the rule of law to kidfluencing activities and regulating content production in both global platform codes and local government laws. The phenomenon's novelty and legal gaps create an unregulated domain ripe for exploitation. Digital media (YouTube, Instagram, Twitch) must be legally obligated to observe frameworks for child care and privacy protection. Laws must constrain stakeholders (parents, platforms, advertisers, companies) to prioritize children's rights. Governments must accept kidfluencing as a growing trend and draft new bills for kidfluencer legal protection and abuse prevention. These bills should propose comprehensive guidelines, restrictions, protections, and legal safeguards for actively involved children (whether supported by family or agencies) to be adopted after legislative evaluations.

Specialists are continually concerned about profit-driven algorithms, adverse effects of inappropriate content, childhood commodification, consumption validation, and platform dysfunctions in child development. Parents try to navigate this pluralistic space, where boundaries between play, work, and physical/ virtual spaces blur. Parents act as users, observers, and content supervisors/producers, sometimes simultaneously. These concerns intensify rapidly in a dense, algorithmic space complicated by porous content boundaries. Technology always presents both opportunities and harms (from the nuclear industry to the internet). Threats have rarely halted development. Screen technologies, despite initial concerns, expanded and became platforms for learning, discovery, communication, and production, though concerns now have deeper dimensions. Even with the complexities described, children can become architects of their digital world, supported by adults. The security of this digital structure depends first on supporting children's abilities and family supervision via protective laws and regulatory bodies. The other condition is developing spatial literacy and digital literacy/skill in children. This indicator helps children gain technical and problem-solving skills, allowing them to organize interactions between the intertwined spaces and become active, ethical, and critical virtual participants.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

This study received its ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committees of the Faculty of Psychology and Education.

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<https://ethics.research.ac.ir/ProposalCertificateEn.php?id=829186&Print=true&NoPrintHeader=true&NoPrintFooter=true&NoPrintPageBorder=true&LetterPrint=true>

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