Social media, kidinfluencers and the changing discourse on childhood

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The proliferation of children becoming famous through social media channels such as YouTube/Kids, Instagram and TikTok bring up important and difficult questions about the wellbeing of children, their relationship with public facing media and the boundaries of parent-child relationships.

Nearly 1 in 3 preteens list influencer as a career goal, perhaps unsurprising as child influencers can earn six figure incomes and appear to enjoy lives of unimaginable fun and privilege.

For example Ryan Koji, star of Ryan's World on YouTube has nearly 40 million subscribers and earns an estimated $30 million per year for producing content including toy reviews, prank videos and science experiments. Or Mila and Emma, the 'sassiest twins on the internet' who regularly share their 5 year old wisdom with 1.33 million subscribers on topics such as boyfriends, make up and going to the gym.

However, health experts have warned of the profound risk of harm that social media presents to children, especially girls, due to the promotion of idealised, unattainable versions of beauty, constant comparison to peers and the focus on external signifiers of self-worth. Unwelcome predatory followers are also a growing issue, with Meta recently disclosing that 500,000 child Instagram accounts had 'inappropriate' interactions every day,

As an expert on the cost of fame to adults who were former child stars in the more traditional mediums of cinema, TV and pop music my concerns for these child influencers is also on the potential long term impact of such early fame and public exposure.

Former child stars of stage and screen have often expressed sadness and anger about their atypical childhoods and the disruption to 'normal' parent-child relationships that

their childhood fame involved. Parents as managers is rarely a comfortable set up. As children are not allowed to have their own Instagram account or create a YouTube channel until they are thirteen it seems inevitable that contemporary child stars of social media are being enabled and facilitated by their parents who presumably also benefit from the financial aspects of their child's microcelebrity status.

Where does that leave the normalised social, cultural and legal boundaries around childhood that have protected children since Victorian times? These include the discourses that identify children as innocent and requiring adult protection, the laws around child labour and education, and the traditional caring and emotional relations between children and their parents whereby the child is financially dependent until they are eighteen. Transgressing these social boundaries, which have been constructed to maintain childhood as a protected space in which children can grow up shielded from the concerns and responsibilities of adulthood, is dangerous. When children have direct access to the world via public facing media they are vulnerable not only to inappropriate attention from strangers, but also to exploitation by the adults who are meant to be looking after them.

Can children really understand the long-term consequences of early fame? Former child stars of the 1980s such as Macaulay Culkin and Drew Barrymore have expressed regret at being child stars and missing out on a 'normal' childhood. Many other child stars have experienced drug and alcohol addiction, broken marriages, mental health issues, even time in jail as they have struggled to cope with the impact of having reached the peak of their career as a child, frequently feeling like a failure as a teen and adult. Many talk about the shame when people say to them: 'Didn't you used to be…?'

It's hard to know how this will play out for today's crop of child influencers and social media stars. Maybe they are more resilient than former generations, more media savvy? Maybe the money they make now will insulate them from difficult times ahead when they may lose their followers if their face no longer fits, or they run out of ideas for content. One thing is for sure, you can't go on being a cute kid forever, and if that is your pull and purpose online, it has a sell by date.

Emotional fallout aside, in terms of legislation to protect kidinfluencers there is a huge gap in current regulations in the UK. The House of Commons culture, media and sport committee published a report in 2022 recommending that the government 'urgently' addresses gaps in UK child labour and performance regulations that are leaving child influencers unprotected. They recommended that new legislation should include provisions on working hours and conditions and protecting a child's earnings, stating:

'We are deeply concerned that a lack of action in the booming influencer market will lead to even more children in the industry being exploited.'

So far, no moves towards actioning such legislation have been made.

The ways in which child stars are created and treated in a society has always been a tellability index that shows us what is valued about children in the wider culture. It is chilling to reflect on what the unchallenged rise of the image perfect, lucrative kidinfluencer may be telling us about our current ideals of childhood. Social media allows children to be valued on looks, charm and financial viability and if it continues unregulated, a generation may well be growing up with the message that this is all that matters.