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THE PLACE OF A CHILD ON PLATFORMS: RESPONSIBILITIES, OBLIGATIONS, AND EXPECTATIONS

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Within our 'platform society,' children and childhood have become entangled with the logics of platformisation, datafication and monetisation. By platformisation, Poell et al. (2019, p. 6) refer to the "reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations" around the ecosystem of platforms. This process involves the creation, gathering, and aggregation of data, referred to as 'datafication,' which is then capitalized on through specific business models and governance frameworks (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). It is within this framework that children, like their adult counterparts, engage in sharing and consuming entertainment and information on platforms as well as participate in the burgeoning marketplace of selling, buying and monetising 'influence.' The identity and age of the child reposition our understanding of these practices on platforms along with their underlying logics of datafication and monetisation, ushering in additional concerns about how to regulate the relationship between platforms and end-users.

In this panel, we centre the child within the platform ecosystem, exploring their involvement in the dynamics of platformisation, datafication and monetisation. Several papers use the phenomenon of kidfluencers and child influencers as a departure point, building on scholarly interest in the integration of children into parents' influencer content (Abidin, 2015) and their active role as creators within the influencer economy (Craig & Cunningham, 2017; Nicoll & Nansen, 2018). Panellists carve out a trajectory that examines how the place of children on platforms is influenced by commodification and monetisation practices, necessitating a nuanced analysis across time, platforms, geographies, and cultures.

Another central thread across the panel, consistent with current debates, concerns the integration of children and child influencers on platforms within regulatory frameworks. In keeping with a platform governance approach (Gorwa, 2019), this encompasses the range of regulations by platforms and different legal regimes that govern child labour, children and advertising, and platform liability. As explored in our panel, platforms and jurisdictions vary in their regulatory approaches, shaped by

conceptualisations of risks, challenges, and the opportunities platforms present to children. Papers critically analyse the complex constellation of interests, exploring the reconfiguration of childhood and parenting via data surveillance, and the exploitation of child rights by tech companies for data commodification and profit.

Our panel brings together PhD, early-career and senior scholars to grapple with the place of the 'child' as object, subject and user on platforms, seeking to enrich ongoing research about agency, platform governance, regulatory and surveillance practices. Through the papers, we consider a range of critical issues, including monetisation and datafication, platform dynamics, legal regimes, children's rights and the impact of commercialisation on children, and reflect on how different actors in the platform ecosystem negotiate and articulate responsibilities, obligations, and expectations for the place of children on platforms.

The first paper focuses on how children and childhood are exposed, mobilised and commodified in influencer content on TikTok. Drawing on ethnographic observations of kidfluencers across cultural contexts, the paper elucidates tensions in practices of visibility and monetisation, interpreted from a legal perspective through recent EU regulations. The paper suggests that when children are becoming a medium for monetisation it poses a 'systemic risk' for which platforms may be liable, prompting discussions on regulatory oversight.

The second paper extends the discussion of children's participation in the influencer industry by tracing the evolving landscape. Utilizing a longitudinal ethnography (2008-2024) across multiple regions and involving 500 interviews with industry professionals, alongside digital and traditional observations, the paper presents a taxonomy of child influencers, delineating eight distinct trajectories. This thorough exploration emphasizes the nuanced roles children play in the influencer ecosystem, stressing the importance of responsible governance in protecting their interests.

The third paper examines the influence of kidfluencers on kids in the context of promoting healthy consumption behaviours on YouTube. Anchored in consumer socialization theory, the study investigates the impact of message framing on children's dental care behaviours and beliefs through experiments with children from Belgium and the USA. The findings spotlight kidfluencers' impact on young viewers' brand preferences, highlighting ethical issues with their commercial content.

The fourth paper delves into the datafication and platformisation of childhood and parenting through digital dashboards. Reflecting on the 'Arkangel' episode from Black Mirror, the paper critically examines narratives surrounding digital dashboards—dynamic visualisations summarising complex data on children's health, location, and well-being. The paper provokes a reflection on how parenting becomes entangled with intimacy, surveillance and the logic of datafication.

The fifth paper centres on children's rights in the platform ecosystem. Informed by a child rights framework, it traces the utilisation of the 'best interests of the child' principle within legislation, policy, and digital service providers, critically reflecting on its potential misuse. The paper underscores tensions between safeguarding children's rights and tech companies' actions, which often limit child agency, prioritise data commodification, and evade regulatory measures.

Collectively, these papers illuminate how the place of children online is contested, as they become embroiled in practices of monetisation, visibility, and datafication across platforms and infrastructures. Our panellists draw from their empirical and theoretical work to challenge these practices, emphasising their implications for platform governance and addressing how regulations can serve children's best interests.

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CHILDREN AS COMMODITIES: ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OF CHILD INFLUENCER MONETISATION ON TIKTOK

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Introduction

The term 'kidfluencer' underscores children's distinct role in the influencer sector, yet despite attention from media and academia, platforms like TikTok overlook 'kidfluencers' in their monetisation strategies. The platform's policies limit monetisation options like creator funds, TikTok Creator Marketplace, and receiving gifts during LIVE streams to adult accounts only. However, we argue that TikTok's policies fail to account for the nuances of 'kidfluencers' in monetised content, treating them as a concealed user category due to unaddressed monetisation practices for children. Our paper explores how children and childhood are exposed, mobilised and commodified in influencer content on TikTok, focusing on 'kidfluencers' with cultural nuances and practices across various geographical contexts. We employ ethnographic and legal analyses to scrutinize practices against current regulations.

Theoretical background

As bloggers and influencers integrate their children into the content they produce and share on platforms, they shape the child's digital identity and engage in the commercialisation of their online presence. This phenomenon is explored in research through the 'micromicrocelebrity' framework (Abidin, 2015) and 'sharenting' concept (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017), highlighting how parents oversee and manage their children's online presence. Parents have been observed monetising content featuring their children (Fineman, 2022), giving rise to what we identify as transactional tensions, necessitating unpacking of the balance between recognizing children's agency and ensuring their protection in monetised content, with a focus on their involvement as labour.

In influencer and creator studies, the concept of labour focuses on working conditions, with "aspirational labour" capturing entrepreneurial content creation enacted with hopes of future economic benefits (Duffy, 2015). The labour of influencers takes on additional implications when it comes to kidfluencers and the examination of working conditions and compensation must also be situated in legal discussions of child labour (Masterson, 2020). Geider (2021) advocates for the implementation of legal safeguards for kidfluencers, highlighting the complex landscape of platform regulations concerning children's decision-making capacities in the digital age. This covers variations in child monetization regulations across jurisdictions due to cultural and legal differences (Mol and Goanta, 2023), aligning

with our focus on the complex interactions of kidfluencers, their parents, and the regulatory environment.

Methods

We use a dual approach, combining ethnographic observations and content analysis, to examine children's involvement in TikTok influencer monetisation practices, focusing on “kidfluencers” from Israel, New Zealand, and the USA within regulatory contexts. Our data selection adheres to an ethnographic content analysis framework, focusing on captions, tagging, feature usage, memetic elements, and children's presence. We adapt to the platform-specific affordances, allowing our analysis units to naturally emerge, asking: (1) What practices of content monetisation are visible within 'kidfluencer' content on TikTok? (2) How are children's participatory actions manifest and framed within 'kidfluencer' profiles? (3) How can the inclusion of children in influencer content be positioned within regulatory frameworks? To protect children's privacy, we use pseudonyms for them and first names for parents.

Analysis

Brands as kids' props

Our first classification captures brands' roles as accessories in videos featuring children and their interactions with brands. The visible presence of brands represents a 'successful' exchange of childhood for income as videos integrate explicit disclosures of content monetisation, using TikTok's paid partnership tag or #ad. This category delineates into two manifestations where children act as conveyors of monetised messages - *Kids as Props for Branded Content* in which a tangible child-brand connection is fostered and *'Kids playing with brands'*, in which children actively interact with the brand. To exemplify the latter, the presence of Brit's three children in disclosed branded content for fruit-flavoured treats with collectable toys lends authenticity to her ongoing partnership with the brand. In one video, her children engage in childhood 'play' by building a fort, which transitions into playful interactions with the branded product. Such sponsorship potentially alludes to an orientation of childhood towards capitalist promotion in which 'play' is structured by contractual obligations with brands, raising questions of whether the fun fort-building activity was staged as a site for promotion.

Transactional childhood

The second category involves observing parents and/or children navigating diverse childhood and growing-up scenarios intertwined with varying degrees of brand presence and monetisation. While specific brands are woven into the fabric of childhood experiences, unlike the previous category, the absence of complete disclosures generates transactional tensions. For instance, 6-year-old Arianna independently recreates the popular 'latte' makeup look, without any noticeable assistance from her mother. Presented with the 'cuteness' appeal of a child (Maddox, 2021), she meticulously displays each product to the camera, continuously narrating her actions. While Arianna makes visible some brands, the lack of disclosure generates ambiguity concerning the promotional nature of this video. Her closing inquiry, 'What do you think?' also contributes to the transactional tensions between childhood and commerce, employing a self-optimization tactic that invites interactivity and comments, thereby boosting her personal brand.

Aspirational child-fication

This category addresses the self-branding practices deployed by children and parents to develop and maintain their 'relatable' portrayals of the 'right' types of childhood. While content production does not overtly feature brand integration, the aspiration towards monetisation is achieved through efforts to establish a brand presence and gain visibility. This category comprises two iterations of aspirational child-ification: *religious aspirational labour* and *platform aspirational labour*. To exemplify the former, Sher, owner of a gym chain brand, uploads videos featuring her child engaging in traditional religious ceremonies. Her 5-year-old, affectionately known by her followers as the 'king of Shabbat,' enlightens viewers about Shabbat prayers. As Sher whimsically deems him her 'personal rabbi', she skillfully employs aspirational labour through her child's participation, resonating with her traditional audience. By sharing her religious practices online, like lighting Shabbat candles, Sher upholds her traditional persona and aligns her brand with her community's values, seamlessly blending religious commitment with her business strategy.

Regulative parenthood

Our final category considers how kidfluencer activities rely on parents' disciplinary approaches. Instances reveal a proactive inclination to surpass platform stipulations, driven by a determination to safeguard their children. This category also addresses the complexities of consent in content production, illuminating *consensual cues* demonstrated by children's voluntary engagement under parental guidance. For instance, Mama Seebz's 16-year-old son, Lucas, does not appear in sponsored content, unlike his older sister, who also partners with brands. By delineating content with the child as a co-star, enhancing brand value, from her promotional posts, Mama Seebz adopts a regulatory stance as part of her parenting approach.

Legal Reflections

Our ethnographic study has sought to demonstrate the range of monetisation and visibility practices in which children are exposed, mobilised, and commodified in parents' content on TikTok. Central to this, we argue, is the platform's intermediation and amplification of parents' kidfluencer content, which, as our analysis shows, seeks to strategically capitalise on. Thus, we conclude by shifting focus to the legal safeguards designed to protect children's interests on platforms. In the EU, a recent regulation (DSA) updated platform liability and imposed transparency requirements to tackle 'illegal content.' Meaning, any European laws governing children's social media activities may render content that violates these rules illegal, potentially introducing new regulatory mechanisms for kidfluencer practices in the EU. Another concept introduced by the DSA in Article 34 is 'systemic risks' that stem from the "design, functioning and use of (platform) services, as well as from potential misuses." The DSA requires very large online platforms to understand systemically where kidfluencer practices may have negative impacts. Indeed, our study reveals that children serve as a medium for monetisation through the interplay of their agency, parental involvement, and commercial interests, highlighting the need for regulatory scrutiny of both parents and the platform's roles in this dynamic.

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A TAXONOMY OF CHILDREN AND SOCIAL MEDIA VISIBILITY

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This paper presents a longitudinal ethnography of the Influencer industry, focusing especially on children and the origins and genres of their entanglements with social media visibility. It has been widely reported that an increasing number of children aspire to become Influencers (e.g., Suci, 2022), with businesses quickly cashing in to provide incubator camps (e.g., Lorenz, 2023). Many young Influencers begin their careers as under-18 children and minors, and have quickly grown to have immense sway over the Gen Z cohort (Duck, 2022). Young Influencers have promoted civic messages about political advocacy (Shaw, 2011), LGBTQIA+ community building (Abidin, 2019), and climate change (Bogle, 2019). Children emerged in the Influencer industry with mummy/parenting bloggers who feature their children in online diaries and progressed as/to advice columnists providing paid reviews (Abidin, 2011). As Influencers from lifestyle genres aged, many pivoted to the parenting genre where their children anchored sponsored contents, beginning as early as sonograms (Abidin, 2015). Some children become overnight celebrities through viral memes (Abidin, 2022) and parlay their fame into Influencer careers (Abidin, 2018). Family Influencers incorporate children and their routines in monetised contents (Abidin, 2017), and children are themselves content creators in child unboxing videos (Craig & Cunningham 2017), in reading recommendations (Dezuanni et al. 2022), and as aspiring idol artists (Lee & Abidin, 2023).

Methodology

Given the rapid diversification of child Influencers across a sprawling array of platforms, this paper seeks to present a historical taxonomy of child Influencers focusing on their pathways from social media visibility to fame and monetisation. The ethnographic insights are drawn from traditional and digital participant observation rooted in the anthropological tradition, supported by personal interviews with over 500 backend (para-)professionals (e.g., parent managers, guardians, brokers, managers), and supplemented with document analysis of agency handbooks and brand PR collateral. Fieldwork spans 2008–2024 across Southeast Asia, East Asia, Oceania, and the Nordic regions.

Visibility, Celebrity, Influencer

At the most basic level, internet celebrities are generally media formats - anything that can be conveyed digitally - that attain prominence and popularity native to the internet (Abidin, 2018). In other words, the 'origin story' of their fame is based online. Internet celebrities can be people who (unwittingly) lend their face to be the next meme, people who experience virality overnight (for good or bad reasons), or people who intentionally court fame then try to monetise it (successfully or not). It is most useful to define internet celebrities by their ability to hold high visibility. In a very saturated network of platforms and trends that are continuously vying for our attention, internet celebrities are able to cut through the noise and static of our already-saturated digital landscape, and navigate platform algorithms and filters to

reach an already- saturated online audience. This is a form of 'visibility labour' that can involve significant planning and work (Abidin, 2016).

However, the nature and morality of this visibility is flexible - this high visibility can be attributed to fame or infamy, positive or negative attention, talent and skill or otherwise, and can be either sustained or transient, intentional or by happenstance, monetised or not. It is at this juncture that an elite class of internet celebrities emerge, based on a combination of attributes about their visibility. Enter the 'Influencer', a professional internet celebrity, who intentionally pursues online fame as a career or sustainable monetising opportunity, by curating visibility that is generally founded on positive attention, and some form of talent and skill to keep audiences hooked.

A taxonomy

This work details eight case studies to flesh out the distinct but connected pathways from social media visibility, to commercialism, to professionalisation as a child Influencer. A summary is as follows:

Mummy bloggers: Earliest origins in late-2000s to early-2010s, where babies and very young children became narrated in public (archived and/or now defunct) blog platforms like LiveJournal, Xanga, Blogger, Wordpress, and similar. Considers the beginnings of partnerships with brands and clients for endorsements and collaborations, and tensions across personal ethos, shared community norms, and feminist labours.

Micro-microcelebrity: Children of micro-celebrities who attain online fame through proximate micro-celebrification and repeated exposure to the public, with a special focus on Instagram strategies like pregnancy announcements, pre-birth social media handle reservations, brand tie-ups from conception to birth, birth announcements, and similar. Considers how pre-birth imageries of the child and the branding of early childhood are stepping stones to the emergence of the child as an independent, recognisable persona online.

Family Influencers: Families who have turned themselves into social media content creators using highly parasocial filming strategies, with a special focus on YouTube and reality TV families who accumulate fame for being extraordinary, exotic, and/or eccentric. Considers how authenticity is strategised and performed as an anticipatory mitigation of accusations against the parents.

Child Influencers: A cross-pollinated genre of Influencer cultures where children are main actors across content genres that especially target minor audiences, including dance & entertainment, toy unboxing and reviews, reading recommendations, and similar. Considers what the tensions between the terms 'Influencer' and 'creator' signal in terms of platform, parental, and policy responsibilities.

KidTok: Children who accumulate online fame on TikTok, including 'Gen Z parents' and viral teen pregnancies, 'TikTok prodigies' whose performance talents attract viral reactions that enhance celebrity aspirations, 'TikTok famous babies' whose of meme and roleplay fame, and 'pandemic babies' from a sprawling network of

sharenting during COVID-19. Considers how visibility and fame are attached and detached to children in the lifecycle of virality.

Meme celebrities: Often younger children whose image is taken out of context, and whose likeness becomes a shorthand to express a specific emotion or situation in internet discourse, recently popular beyond macros to include messaging stickers. Considers the consequences of merchandising meme cultures, where third parties profit off the image of these children.

Viral stars: Children who become trending and wildly popular among global audiences within a very short span of time, stemming from iconic moments that are performed and/or amplified on television talkshow circuits, where acts of emotional vulnerability or childhood innocence are on perpetual replay. Considers the traditional entertainment industry's track record for (mis)using and discarding these children for viewership.

Variety stars & social experiments: Children who unwittingly become variety stars through reality TV programmes and social experiment channels, with a special focus on the especially established market in the Korean entertainment industry, including parenting shows, novel daycare experiments, and hidden camera YouTube channels. Considers the implications of enduring digital footprints and afterlives of childhood visibility fame as these children age into teenhood.

Governance by law vs. Governance by the grassroots

In closing, the paper will underscore the utility of the taxonomy for locating, shaping, and challenging governance by law; and soliciting, guiding, and scaffolding governance by the grassroots. In the recent 'Benchmarking Influencer Regulations in the Asia Pacific Region' (Abidin & Hong-Phuc, 2023), a stocktake of the current governance of the child Influencer industry was undertaken to consider how existing laws can apply specifically to children entangled with social media commerce, and review the development of newer laws that regulate the child Influencer industry specifically. The importance of definitions, origin stories, and scale of commerce were found to be especially important for determining the jurisdiction of governance by law. In response, this longitudinal ethnography will offer closing insights on how governance by the grassroots has been maintained and flourishing over a decade through a patchwork of backend industry staff, guardians and kin, and networks of followers and internet sleuths.

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LITTLE STARS, BIG TROUBLES? TESTING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AN INFLUENCER SHARENTING INTERVENTION TO PROMOTE MINDFUL SHARENTING BEHAVIORS

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Introduction

Social media influencers increasingly monetize the portrayal of their underaged child(ren) on social media (Ågren, 2022; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Van den Abeele et al., 2023). The children contribute to the digital capital of parent influencers as they make the sharing of parenting experiences more authentic and trustworthy (Ågren, 2022). Sharing intimate details of one's private life is crucial for a successful influencer status (Abidin, 2015). Parent influencers therefore heavily post images and stories videos of their adorable children, a practice known as 'influencer sharenting', using their own influencer profiles or creating separate profiles for their family or children, a practice known as 'influencer sharenting' (Abidin, 2015; Saragoza, 2019; Van den Abeele et al., 2024). However, this practice of sharing personal or sensitive information of children on the internet can have negative side-effects, such as privacy violations and criminal use of the shared content (Ong et al., 2022). The monetization of sharenting through the portrayal of children in sponsored content additionally raises concerns regarding child labor and the commercial exploitation of the child, and is increasingly being criticized (Saragoza, 2019; Van Der Hof et al., 2020).

Interventions that raise awareness on the hazards of sharenting behaviors and motivate parents to adopt mindful sharenting tactics are scarce (Williams-Ceci et al., 2021) and academic research that specifically focuses on influencer sharenting interventions are to the best of our knowledge non-existent. The main objective of the current study therefore is to develop and evaluate an intervention specifically designed to address the influencer sharenting behaviors of influencer parents. To achieve this goal, we undertook three important steps: (1) identifying beneficial mindful sharenting practices and barriers to their adoption within an influencer context, (2) developing the intervention, and (3) testing its effectiveness.

Method

A mixed methods approach was adopted to obtain the above-mentioned goals. First, to design an intervention grounded in credible information, we relied on problem-centered expert interviews with professionals in parenting and social media. Thirteen interviews with a total of 15 experts (two duo-interviews took place) were interviewed between September-October 2021 and each interview had a duration of 30 to 60 minutes. These interviews helped us identify mindful sharenting behaviors that can be applied by influencers to better protect their children from potential harm. Additionally, through these interviews, we were able to pinpoint the different barriers that are currently hindering influencers from adopting those practices.

Further, we used a co-creation approach with social media influencers to develop the content for this intervention. Second, using the information gathered in the initial step, the intervention was created. This intervention (in the form of a website) aims to inform parent influencers about the hazards of influencer sharenting, offer tips on mindful sharenting practices, and refer to support organizations when they encounter problems related to their influencer sharenting behaviors.

Third, the intervention was tested on its effectiveness in raising privacy concerns and encouraging mindful sharenting behaviors using a pretest-posttest design. In particular, a pre- and post-intervention survey was conducted among 59 parent influencers. Before launching the intervention, parent influencers were contacted to complete a baseline survey measuring their influencer sharenting behaviors. A few weeks after the completion of this pre-intervention survey, the parent influencers who completed the baseline survey were instructed to visit the influencer sharenting website in the upcoming week and complete the post intervention survey.

Findings

The in-depth interviews identified four major risks (i.e. digital ID construction, child labor, privacy loss and mental wellbeing) to be related to influencer sharenting. The results revealed that most the risks associated with regular sharenting, get amplified in the context of influencer marketing, due to the great reach and anonymity of the public. The magnitude and anonymity of the third parties to whom influencers grant co-ownership of their children's private information particularly facilitate misuse. Additionally, the monetary gains associated with influencer sharenting introduce a new risk dimension of economic exploitation, which is not applicable to regular sharenting situations. Nevertheless, our study suggests that these risks could be mitigated by adopting nine specific privacy management strategies that are easy to reconcile with influencers' goals and careers. The co-creation sessions resulted in clear pathways to encourage these nine privacy management strategies among parent influencers, which were all implemented within a web-based intervention.

The pre-post intervention testing study demonstrated that the intervention website was positively perceived by the influencers in terms of overall attitudes, visual design, ease of use, and ease of understanding. Respondents had an overall low resistance towards the intervention message, with a below-average score for both affective resistance ($M = 2.25$) as well as cognitive resistance ($M = 2.25$). More

specifically, our data suggests that respondents were not likely to refute the information on the website, nor to react in an angry way towards it. Our data further revealed that respondents were highly likely to recommend the website to other parents ($M = 4.22$). In terms of parents' actual referral behavior, descriptive analyses revealed that 27% of the parents already suggested the website to another person.

Results show that the intervention did significantly affect parents' tendency to adopt various stricter privacy management strategies in the future. For example, regarding posting frequency of commercial posts ($W = .89$, $p < .001$), the analysis showed that the intent to portray the child in commercial posts at T1 ($M = 1.72$) was lower compared to T0 ($M = 2.04$; $Z = 356$, $p < .05$). Besides, at baseline, the respondents indicated that their child was involved in the creation of one commercial post for about 39.9 minutes on average. At T1, however, this time decreased to 26.3 minutes. In conclusion, participants who were more positive towards the website, were more likely to report a change in their sharenting behaviors. On the other hand, parents who felt highly supported by their environment in sharing their child's information were less likely to report any behavioral change. This underscores the power of social norms regarding sharenting and highlights the necessity for future interventions to continue informing various crucial stakeholders besides the parents themselves, such as policymakers, brands, and platforms, about this topic.

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PLATFORMED PARENTING: DATAFICATION, DEVICES AND DASHBOARDS

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Introduction

Platforms, apps and digital devices have reconfigured numerous everyday experiences into ones that generate, transmit, and share data at a large scale; in many situations, this data is compared to existing data patterns, producing dashboards and indicators of health, achievement and normality. Parenting can involve many highly anxious experiences, amplified even more so for brand new parents. In the months surrounding a newborn entering the world, parents and carers have an increasingly large array of devices and apps available to them, each promising to ease some of their anxieties by providing newly visualised indicators of infant health, development and wellbeing. Wearables might track everything from heartrate to breathing, apps might provide an array of soothing sounds or initial words customised to specific developmental milestones or personal inputs, and in exchange for children's data, parents are almost always provided reassuring dashboards, progress measurements and indicators showing their child is recognisably 'well'. Green indicator lights tracking 'your child's progress' are always available, no matter where parents are.

This paper focuses on the function of digital dashboards to map some of the ways in which infancy and childhood are being digitally reconfigured, mapping both the new opportunities and reassurances which are available to parents, but also the underlying extractive logic of platformisation and datafication driving most consumer apps and devices. To map present and future concerns, this paper utilises the 2017 'Arkangel' episode of the dystopian near-future *Black Mirror* series to extrapolate the present and future impact of such visualisation and information extraction on both children as they grow, and their relationship with parents.

From Datafication to Dashboards

Datafication, the increasing presence of digital processes which generate, measure, share, aggregate, visualise, interpret and monetise data, is a largely inescapable part of the logic and fabric of everyday life in the twenty-first century (Burgess et al., 2022). The generation of data, or dataveillance, differs from past models of surveillance since these were almost always purposeful - only capturing a record for a purpose clearly defined in advance, be that a health record or a wire tap on a phone. In contrast, dataveillance "entails the continuous tracking of (meta)data for unstated preset purposes" (van Dijck, 2014, p. 205); the capturing of data justifies itself, on the presumption it will be of some value in the future.

As Mascheroni and Siibak (2021) convincingly argue, these logics have enveloped the practices and imaginaries of childhood, too, leading to many new opportunities but also significant issues around privacy and the commercialisation of children's data. Indeed, intimate surveillance - the "purposeful and routinely well-intentioned surveillance of young people by parents, guardians, friends, and so forth" (Leaver, 2015, p. 153) - drives the uptake of many infant and child apps and platforms used

by parents and carers. Infant wearables are explicitly promoted with the idea that their dashboards provide parents with ‘peace of mind’ (see Figure 1; Leaver, 2017). Parenting apps and their dashboards are framed by providers as essential care work, subtly suggesting non-use is akin to negligence, weaponizing parental guilt as part of the logic of datafication (Mauk, 2023).

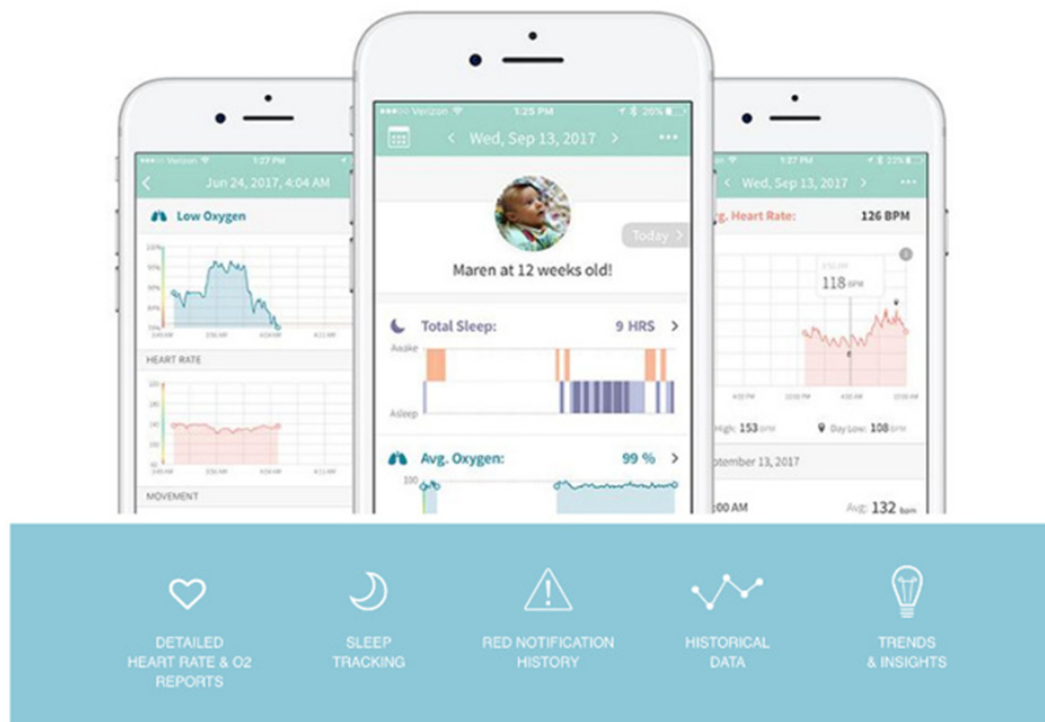


Figure 1. The Owlet infant wearable ‘Connected Care’ Dashboard. (Owlet Promotional Image)

While data has an almost mythical status in the platform economy, generally data does not tell stories by itself. Within many platforms and apps, the visualisation of that data takes place in the form of a dashboard. While the history of summarising complex data through visualisations predates the digital age entirely (Rettberg, 2020), the emergence of dynamic, updating visualisations available via smart devices means these visualisations are a much larger part of contemporary lives in the digital era (Engebretsen & Kennedy, 2020). As Tkacz (2022, p. 6) argues, “dashboards and dashboard-like interfaces are everywhere, used all the time, by scientists, civil servants, economists, managers, factory workers; and pretty much by anyone who has a phone, tablet or personal computer”. Importantly dashboards do not just represent or narrate, they configure experiences, they encourage specific “ways of thinking, alongside ways of relating to time, space and other people and things ... [they] always already partake in and contribute to certain ways of living” (Tkacz, 2022, p. 24). Dashboards don’t just reflect lived experience, including parenthood: they shape it.

‘Arkangel’: The Near Future of Parenting Dashboards

As not all the implications of the ubiquity of digital dashboards in childhood are evident yet, the 2017 ‘Arkangel’ episode of the Netflix series *Black Mirror* usefully provides a way of extrapolating some of the more prominent potential effects (presented alongside examples of existing apps in the full paper). ‘Arkangel’, written

by Charlie Brooker and directed by Jodie Foster, focuses on Marie (Rosemarie DeWitt) and her daughter Sara (Brenna Harding). After an incident where Sara goes missing briefly as a young child, Sara purchases an Arkangel implant which tracks Sara's location, wellbeing and allows her mother to view the world through Sara's eyes via a tablet-like device. The visualisations of the Arkangel interface and dashboards are consistent with contemporary app and platform design, easily summarising Sara's location, health, emotional state, and a number of other things for her mother via the bespoke tablet device (see examples at Figure 2).



Figure 2. Location and health indicators dashboard in 'Arkangel' (*Black Mirror*, 2017).

The Arkangel implant allows Sara and her mum to engage in some creative forms of play, and prevents Sara witnessing some challenging situations. However, the episode tends to emphasise the idea that dashboards displace important forms of learning, including learning from mistakes. As Sara gets older, the Arkangel is seen as stunting her growth, with Marie struggling to let go of the reassurances of its dashboard, but eventually agreeing to do so. It's only later when Sara is a teen that Marie turns to the seductive reassurance of the dashboard when Sara is late home; Marie tracks Sara's location, and invades her privacy by 'seeing' what Sara is doing, leading to a breakdown in trust between mother and daughter. After a dramatic climax in which Sara attacks her mother, Marie is seen clutching the now broken Arkangel tablet, traumatised at now being completely unable to find, or track, her daughter. The episode presents a fairly unambiguous critique of the way dashboards

have configured Marie's parenting and ultimately damaged her relationship with her daughter.

Conclusion: Dashboarding Childhood

Dashboards format, configure, summarise and narrate data, experience and ways of being in particular ways that are driven by platform logics. They narrate and tell stories that focus on and include some information and deliberately and necessarily exclude far more. 'Arkangel' positions parenting dashboards as part of a dystopian future, but the episode's biggest challenge is this version of *Black Mirror* feels more like the present than the future. Dashboards are premised on, and promote, the logic of datafication; more data means more complex dashboards. For parents, carers, and children, dashboards are a larger part of their lives, whether in terms of health, physical activity, location tracking, education or a host of other fields. Dashboards are also seductive inasmuch as they often present clear, uncomplicated snapshots, often reduced to three colour indicators, with green equated with good parenting. Dashboards are thus a larger and larger part of the experience of parenting the digital child. Dashboards are the narrators of datafication, and are increasingly an unavoidable window through which parents view their children.

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CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON HOW DIGITAL PROVIDERS RESPECT “THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD”

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Introduction

“The best interests of the child” (article 3(1) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)) states that “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.” With children’s best interests increasingly being referred to explicitly in legislation and policy making relating to the digital environment, the concept is at times misunderstood or even misused. In some contexts, it is used as a substitute for the full range of children’s rights or to legitimate a “one-size-fits-all” approach, notwithstanding children’s diverse circumstances, or to suggest that a single right, such as the right to access information, trumps other rights. Taking a child rights approach, this paper reviews the uses and misuses of the best interests of the child in digital contexts before recommending how the concept should be appropriately applied in accordance with international law.

Theoretical background

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s General Comment No. 25 interprets children’s rights specifically in relation to the digital environment:

“The digital environment was not originally designed for children, yet it plays a significant role in children’s lives. States parties should ensure that, in all actions regarding the provision, regulation, design, management and use of the digital environment, the best interests of every child is a primary consideration.”

The best interests principle is applicable to policymaking for all decisions that concern or impact children, including business and legislative ones. This includes policies on digital services, data protection and privacy, information security, AI,

audiovisual media as well as digital services deployed by public services, e-commerce, education, justice, health and in other areas of public and private life. It is especially important when tensions arise among children's rights, for example to agency (including participation and access to information), protection (from harm and exploitation) and privacy, and when their rights are at risk in a commercial and data-driven digital world. In effect, the concept of best interests is a means of ensuring that, especially on those occasions when rights are in tension, all children's rights in the UNCRC are realised.

Method

Informed by a child rights framework, this paper draws on legal and policy desk research to trace references to the best interests of the child within emerging legislation and policy shaping the digital environment across countries and continents. We also examine the ways in which companies are beginning to refer to best interests by reviewing their policies and legal actions. Finally, we draw on a consultation conducted in the UK in 2022 with 143 children aged between 7 and 14 about their rights and best interests in the digital environment.

Findings

The application of best interests to the digital environment varies by country, in part due to its role in a country's legal system. Best interests is present in the Irish Fundamentals, the African Union child protection policy and in Sweden and Scotland, where the UNCRC has been incorporated into law; in those cases it impacts on all laws and regulations that pertain to children. Notably, in the Global South, South Africa, Brazil, and Kenya explicitly include the best interests of the child in their constitutions. Also relevant are the UK's Age Appropriate Design Code and the Australian Online Safety Act 2021 where best interests is a standard for platforms to comply with. Recently, the European Digital Services Act (Regulation (EU) 2022/2065, DSA) requires businesses to put the children's best interests at the heart of their provision:

"Providers of very large online platforms and of very large online search engines should take into account the best interests of minors in taking measures such as adapting the design of their service and their online interface, especially when their services are aimed at minors or predominantly used by them." (Para. 89)

However, even if the 'best interests of the child' is mentioned (such as in Kenya), children's rights are often upheld via singular measures of 'parental consent.' Considering the diversity of childhood contexts, this may not mean that children's best interests are considered in practice and could even worsen situations by giving parents undue control over children's access to the digital world. Furthermore, some technology companies have started using best interests in their policies and product development in problematic ways.

For example, Meta's Trust, Transparency and Control (TTC) Labs developed Meta's Best Interests of the Child Framework as a standard for their product developers. However, the way Meta refers to 'best interests of the child' in different documents

suggests some confusion about the principle. For example, in their 2022 Annual Human Rights Report, they imply that it means protecting children and giving them tools. Although they suggest that primary consideration is given to children's best interests over Meta's commercial interests, the examples given are setting teen accounts to private by default, adding a take a break tool and restricting adults from messaging teens - arguably, safety measures rather than limits on the monetisation of children's data.

Yet more worryingly, children's rights in general, and the best interests of the child in particular, are being weaponized by Tech lobbyists and trade associations such as the Chamber of Progress, whose corporate partners include Amazon, Apple, Google, and Snap, and NetChoice, which represents some of the biggest tech companies in the world. For example, in suing the state of California for its Californian Age-Appropriate Design Code Act, NetChoice claimed that "best interests of the child" can be a subjective and vague term that could cause companies to "guess" their meanings, apparently sidelining the considerable jurisprudence regarding the best interests of the child and halting regulation designed to protect children's privacy online. Whatever the merits of the Act, such a use of the concept of best interests is misappropriation.

Takeaways

Determination of the best interests of the child is a tool prescribed in the UNCRC to ensure that decision-making complies with standards set for children under international human rights law. It invokes an authoritative and transparent procedure which, in putting the child's interests at the centre of concern as a 'primary consideration,' allows for accountable decision making.

Governments and their delegated authorities such as regulators, but not commercial companies, should establish what is in the best interests of children through a consultative process informed by independent expertise in order to realise children's rights in full.

Where the commercial interests of digital service providers appear to run counter to the best interests of children, digital policy and legislation are increasingly clear that the latter should be prioritised. Sufficient rights-based arguments would have to be advanced by the provider to overcome the best interests of children.

Weaponizing children's best interest to undermine the application of data privacy or child protection laws contravenes the UNCRC and signals the need for mandatory standards and processes to ensure that children's needs are a primary consideration in relation to the digital environment.

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