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SLOP FOR KIDS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF AI-GENERATED VIDEOS FOR CHILDREN ON YOUTUBE

André Mintz
Federal University of Minas Gerais

Juno Bozzi
Federal University of Minas Gerais

Introduction

This paper explores AI-generated videos targeting children on YouTube through an exploratory study. Using a digital methods approach (Rogers, 2013), we compiled two datasets covering videos at the intersection of children and AI, with queries in English and in Portuguese. These datasets provide an overview of this phenomenon within the expanding landscape of generative AI across different cultural contexts. From this broad perspective, we manually curated two samples of videos meant for children and that are either explicitly AI-generated or strongly suggestive of being so. Through a closer analysis, this paper examines their key attributes and discusses their implications.

The research aims to deepen our understanding of children's growing exposure to AI generated online content, a phenomenon amplified by the accessibility and ease of use of AI tools for creating text, audio, and visuals. It thus seeks to address the issue of what media discourse has named as slop: low-quality, clickbait-driven content flooding the web (Adami, 2024; Hoffman, 2024). While this affects all audiences, children may be particularly vulnerable, as their viewing habits are still in formation. It has been reported that numerous tutorials on YouTube promote the monetization of low-effort, AI generated children's videos (Knibbs, 2024). Our study corroborates these findings while further examining the types of videos being produced.

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Context

Watching videos is one of the most common online activities for children across different social and geographical contexts. YouTube has long served as the primary platform for accessing such content (Núcleo de Informação e Coordenação do Ponto BR, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2024). Importantly, the platform tailors its interface and policies for this audience through features such as the dedicated YouTube Kids app and other tools designed to filter child-oriented content (Azen & Bezerra, 2022; Burroughs, 2017).

Studies highlight the diversity of children's videos while also revealing a persistent trend of consumerism-driven incentives that are often disguised as storytelling as a way to bypass policy and legal restrictions (Araujo et al., 2017; Künsch & Pereira, 2021). Despite parental concerns, online videos have become integral to contemporary parenting routines—or "mobile parenting" (Burroughs, 2017). YouTube remains a widely used yet often inadequate resource for children's entertainment and education (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Automated or semi-automated video production predates generative AI but is expected to become more widespread. Such automation aligns with an attention-driven media economy, where low-cost, low-effort content generates revenue as long as it captures audience engagement. Generative AI has significantly expanded the automation of content generation, with YouTube itself introducing generative AI tools into its production interfaces, offering features ranging from automated topic suggestions and script generation to full video creation (Creator Insider, 2024). As an emerging phenomenon, AI-generated videos are still underexplored in academic research. The often undisclosed use of AI makes such content difficult to actively identify and study, also contributing to this gap.

Methodology

Our research mapped YouTube videos mentioning both 'AI' and 'children,' (with variations), both in English and in Portuguese, establishing a foundational dataset for refining our research focus. By employing a digital methods approach, we sought to leverage platform materiality to navigate and analyze the online landscape (Rieder & Röhle, 2017). By taking the platform's technicality and affordances as a form of knowledge, we aimed to also understand how platforms themselves shape the topic (Helmond, 2015; Marres & Moats, 2015; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Specifically, we used the YouTube Data API's search function to collect relevant videos (D'Andréa, 2021; Rieder, 2015). Queries targeted videos published between 2022 and 2024.

The English query resulted in 9,277 videos, while the Portuguese query resulted in 7,624 videos. Most were not directly pertinent to our main focus but provided insight

into the broader topic. To map these datasets, we used user-attributed tags to create co-tag graphs, offering a partial yet insightful understanding of major themes.

To refine the dataset, we applied metadata filtering strategies, starting with the 'madeForKids' property and video categories to approximate AI-generated content for kids and reach a manually treatable amount of videos. We also set a minimum view threshold to discard less relevant cases. These strategies reduced the datasets to 382 videos, in the English dataset and 140 in the Portuguese one. Both authors independently reviewed these videos to identify AI-generated content, resolving discrepancies through discussion. This process found 194 AI-generated videos in the English dataset and 34 in the Portuguese dataset, which were subjected to closer analysis.

Main findings and discussion

While our focus was AI-generated videos aimed at children, our analysis also uncovered numerous tutorial-style videos promoting AI-driven content creation, particularly for child audiences. These tutorials adopt a hustler-style tone, emphasizing low-effort, easy-money opportunities. Using co-tag graphs and keyword filtering, we were able identify videos that were likely of this kind: 676 in the English dataset and 585 in the Portuguese dataset. An overview of the most viewed videos revealed that many of them appeared to incorporate generative AI extensively in their production while prioritizing engagement. Portuguese-language videos achieved a higher median of view counts, suggesting a stronger demand for such videos, likely reflecting an existing demand and the appeal of financial success narratives in that context.

Among AI-generated children's videos, levels of AI usage varied. Some were entirely AI-generated, while others integrated AI-generated elements, such as backgrounds in animated videos. Most AI-generated videos were musical, featuring AI-generated visuals with nursery rhymes or lullabies. Others included AI-generated story adaptations, educational content (e.g., alphabet lessons, astronomy topics), and religious videos for Christian and Islamic audiences. A notable category included 'transformation' videos, which used AI to generate photo-like renditions of cartoon characters as children. AI-generated content often closely resembled popular stories, music, or visuals, raising intellectual property concerns while also highlighting issues of genericity and stereotypical imagery (Aiello et al., 2022).

Within our sample, AI-generated videos generally did not reach high view counts. The median view count in both English and Portuguese datasets was around 2,500. Notably, a Portuguese AI-generated nursery rhyme video, "Boi da cara preta," reached 39 million views, becoming the second most viewed video of its channel, 'Sonia Moura Kids.' This raises questions about whether AI-generated visuals contribute to virality, especially since this video is remarkably different in style from

other videos on the channel.

Although descriptive and broad in scope, our study provides an initial overview of an emerging phenomenon. Some identified video types warrant further investigation, particularly in relation to how channels integrate generative AI and how children and parents perceive this content. Importantly, our study also reveals that defining an AI generated video is not straightforward, as these videos exist on a spectrum of AI usage and human control. The subjective nature of our classification method, although limited, seems necessary given the difficulty in automating this task, especially considering the fuzziness of the category itself. As AI tools become more prevalent, these dynamics will likely become increasingly complex. Given these challenges, it may be important to approach definitions performatively, considering the specific concerns each case raises (Latour, 2004; Mol, 1999; Suchman, 2023). This conceptual fluidity presents an important challenge in this field of research.

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