



KIDFLUENCERS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF CHILD INFLUENCERS On YouTube and TikTok and their Impact on Children's Audience

MIRIAM MARTÍNEZ ALLUÉ¹, MIGUEL ÁNGEL MARTÍN-CÁRDABA¹

¹ Villanueva University, Spain

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to conduct a theoretical review of the differences in interaction with child and adolescent audiences on TikTok and YouTube. The review highlights the dynamics and viral challenges of TikTok, which encourages creativity and active participation, while YouTube offers a more comprehensive and educational approach. The literature review identifies three areas of interest: content created by minor influencers, communicative factors that explain their persuasiveness, and the vulnerability of minor influencers and their followers. A paucity of research comparing the behaviour of users on both platforms is observed. It is of paramount importance to consider the protection of minors and the need for greater regulation. The importance of ongoing research to adapt to new challenges in the evolving digital landscape is highlighted.

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital age, social networks have transformed the manner in which younger generations interact with information and entertainment. The accessibility of social networks and platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, which represent the new sources of entertainment, socialisation and leisure, has gained relevance, especially among children and adolescents (Martín-Cárdaba et al., 2023).

However, younger audiences present a challenging subject of study, as they require ethical approval and parental consent (Livingstone, 2012), and social networks evolve rapidly, which can make it difficult to monitor and study trends specific to this age group (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Moreover, research methods must be adapted to the cognitive and emotional capacity of young children, which may necessitate the utilisation of more creative and ethically sensitive approaches (Marsh et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, despite the inherent difficulties, the study of the impact of social media use on children (both influencers and followers) is of paramount importance. Previous research has highlighted how early social media use affects children's development (Twenge et al., 2014), thus underscoring the necessity to comprehend the key differences in the way new media platforms impact their experience.

Social networks are platforms that allow individuals to construct a public profile within a networked system that maintains constant attention, thereby facilitating connections with other users (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). In turn, they facilitate a plethora of online interactions and activities, with the potential for both positive and negative consequences, as evidenced by various studies (Primack et al., 2017).

In the context of social networks, the figure of influencers has emerged as one of the most significant and influential characters. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly common for a significant proportion of those who play the role of influencers to be minors. This has implications for communication, commerce and ethics.

In light of the aforementioned considerations, this paper seeks to address a number of pertinent questions that arise in the context of this novel communication landscape, including: What is the nature of these emerging figures, commonly referred to as "kidsfluencers," who are minors engaged in influencer activities? What type of content do they create and publish on two of the main audiovisual platforms, such as YouTube and TikTok? What variables explain their capacity to influence the youngest audiences? What are the principal commercial and communicative instruments they employ? What risks and vulnerabilities do they face?

In order to address these questions, a theoretical review was conducted, which addressed the origins and concepts of social networks, as well as the digital platforms analysed in this study. The two main audiovisual platforms under consideration are YouTube and TikTok. Furthermore, the analysis will contextualise the phenomenon of kids-influencers, as creators of content and as a significant influence on the behaviour and habits of use and media consumption of the new generations.

2. YouTube and TikTok: Differences and Similarities

YouTube is a digital video hosting platform owned by Google that allows its users to upload, share and view videos for free. YouTube was created in 2005 and has since become the world's leading video platform, with over two billion monthly active users and a vast collection of videos covering a wide range of topics, including entertainment, music, education, and research (YouTube, 2024).

In contrast, TikTok is an application designed for use on mobile devices. It allows users to create and share short films (no longer than 60 seconds) using music selected from a vast database. The platform is designed with entertainment as its primary objective, and as a result, it is relatively simple to use. These features have contributed to the app's popularity among children, teenagers, and young adults globally. TikTok is experiencing a period of sustained growth, with the application currently available in 141 countries. According to Herman (2019), the number of individuals utilising TikTok on a monthly basis worldwide is 689 million.

2.1. Audiovisual Differences

Researchers such as Pourazad et al. (2023) have highlighted the fundamental differences between TikTok and YouTube, which are crucial for understanding the interaction with their audiences, particularly children. The format of the short videos on TikTok contrasts with that of YouTube, which

offers a wider range of formats and lengths. Furthermore, the differing privacy and security policies of the two platforms have the potential to influence parental trust.

With regard to format differences, YouTube is renowned for its longer videos, which afford greater depth of content. Research indicates that consumers value the diversity and quality of content on YouTube (De Pelsmacker, 2017). TikTok is characterised by the production of short, creative videos, typically ranging in length from 15 to 60 seconds. Recent research indicates that short video formats are particularly popular among young people (Alalwan et al., 2017).

In terms of the audience and target audience for both platforms, YouTube has a diverse audience and covers a wide range of ages and topics of interest. The platform is popular among all age groups, including children. (Neumann & Herodotou, 2020) The existence of YouTube Kids, a dedicated platform designed for younger children, allows it to provide a safer and more controlled environment than the main YouTube site, offering content appropriate for younger ages.

In contrast, TikTok has rapidly gained popularity among young people, particularly teenagers, with Generation Z being a notable demographic (Alalwan et al., 2017).

Recent research on interaction and participation on YouTube often includes comments, likes and subscriptions to channels. This channel highlights the importance of engagement in building a YouTube community (Lopez-Navarreta et al., 2021). In contrast, TikTok encourages participation through features such as duets, comments and viral challenges. It emphasises its participatory and collaborative nature (Gómez Gómez et al., 2022).

Content creators on YouTube often use more elaborate edits and extended narratives. This highlights the importance of editing in the perceived quality of YouTube videos (Knöfel, 2016). TikTok encourages creativity through quick edits, special effects and music. Research highlights the unique aesthetics and speed of editing in TikTok videos (Kaya, 2021).

2.2. Differences in language and publishing formats

Again, differences in the adaptation of language and modes of publication on each platform are crucial when targeting children's audiences. Research by (Peña-Fernández et al., 2022) highlights how TikTok uses more concise and energetic language, while YouTube favours expanding and deepening topics. These modes of publication influence children's attention and comprehension.

In terms of language, YouTube videos tend to have a more formal and educational tone. Previous research suggests that YouTube content creators often use more descriptive and detailed language to address specific topics (Leon, 2018).

TikTok encourages creativity and self-expression, which is reflected in a more informal and casual language. Research has highlighted the relaxed nature and linguistic diversity in the content of this platform to ensure greater proximity to the audience (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023).

In terms of modes of publication, the structure of videos on YouTube allows for greater depth of content and a variety of formats, such as tutorials, readings and documentaries. Recent research has pointed to the diversity of posting modes on YouTube and how this affects user engagement (Choi & Rifon, 2012).

On Tik Tok, users can post videos using hashtags or keywords to achieve good content consumption. The app is particularly popular among teenagers, who use it to share short videos of dances, skits, reflections and other humorous content. These videos, shot and edited on the TikTok platform, are characterised by their brevity and can include music, filters and effects. Teenagers use their mobile phones and an Internet connection to share their creations, creating trends and challenges that spread quickly. In addition, the duets feature allows users to interact and respond to each other's posts, which contributes to their popularity (Moreno García, 2023).

2.3. Variations in interactivity and engagement

Interaction through comments and the level of engagement are essential aspects of understanding children's participation online. Research by (Valles (2022) shows that on TikTok, comments tend to be shorter and focused on emotional reactions, whereas on YouTube, children engage in longer and more reflective conversations, allowing for meaningful discussions.

He highlights the high capacity of this network to generate engagement: "TikTok has a total interaction rate of 25 million and an average number of interactions per content of 9,667 (Morales, 2021).

In turn, research suggests that YouTube comments can influence perceptions of content and community (Cheng, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, Leskovec, & Bernstein, 2015). On TikTok, such interactions tend to be shorter and quicker, in line with the nature of short videos. This highlights the importance of quick comments and responses in building the TikTok community (Alalwan et al., 2020).

Engagement on YouTube is measured by likes, shares, comments and subscriptions, indicators that can be more comprehensive due to the duration of the content. Research shows that engagement on YouTube is related to the perceived quality and authenticity of the content (Moe & Schweidel, 2012). On the other hand, engagement on TikTok is measured by likes, comments and especially participation in challenges and viral trends. Recent research has highlighted the importance of engagement in building communities on TikTok (Alalwan et al., 2020).

3. Child Influencers

Influencers, in the context of social media, are individuals who have gained a significant audience and persuasive power on digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and others. These individuals use their reach and popularity to share content, promote products or services and influence the opinions, decisions and behaviours of their audience (De Veirman et al., 2019).

Today, the number of influencers who are minors is increasing, raising several questions (ethical, legal, communicative, commercial, etc.) and attracting growing interest among social media researchers (e.g. Leon, 2018; Núñez-Cansado et al., 2021).

At the same time, the phenomenon of kid-fluencers (or child social media influencers) has been the subject of a growing number of recent studies (e.g., Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020; Kołaszewska & Kacprzak, 2022), although the specific scientific literature on this topic remains very limited.

One of the main perspectives in the study of these child influencers has focused on the type of content they tend to share on networks. For example, Tur-Viñes and collaborators (2018) found that most of the content shared by the main child influencers on YouTube focuses on activities such as video games, storytelling or reviews of products and toys, the process of opening products (unboxing), challenges or tasks, and instructions on how to perform tasks on their own without help (tutorials). The digital age has ushered in a new entertainment dynamic for children in which child influencers play a prominent role. These content creators have transformed children's media experience and offer an important variety of choices. They all encourage viewer interaction in a similar way, inviting their followers to subscribe to the channel and share the content they watch via their social networks. They also offer competitions and entice viewers with the promise of prizes and gifts. Similarly, other research (Castillo-Abdul, 2020) has identified gender differences that correspond to traditional stereotypes. Specifically, while male YouTubers focus on video games and sports, female profiles present other types of content more related to lifestyle, recipes and tutorials.

Similarly, on the TikTok platform, the content created by kidsfluencers is mainly focused on video selfies, choreography and content aimed at fun and entertainment (Suárez-Álvarez & García-Jiménez, 2021).

On the other hand, existing research (Tur-Viñes et al., 2018) also finds a consistency in the communication strategies used by kidsfluencers to connect with their followers. Most of them use standard expressions at the beginning and end of their videos, and practically all of them agree on the use of exaggerated and emphatic language, especially when referring to specific brands. Similarly, although the editing is often of modest quality, they tend to use distinctive visual elements that help to identify the channel and establish a unique brand that distinguishes it from others. They also tend to use eye-catching and colourful resources that attract attention.

3.1. Child influencers and digital marketing

Another recurring theme in research on child influencers relates to their effectiveness in communicating commercial messages by brands (Suárez-Álvarez et al., 2021).

Influencer marketing is a form of marketing in which brands establish partnerships with social media influencers to promote their products or services (De Veirman et al., 2017). In addition, influencer

marketing can be seen as a form of virtual word-of-mouth advertising, which is even more effective than traditional marketing activities and generates a higher response rate (Evans et al., 2017).

One of the reasons for the effectiveness of influencers is that they are perceived by their followers as attractive, credible experts (Xiao et al., 2018). Similarly, the popularity of the issuer is another factor that makes the most followed influencers also perceived as more trustworthy (Hill et al., 2017).

Finally, one of the most important factors in predicting the influence of these figures is the parasocial relationship. The parasocial relationship is defined as the emotional connection of intimacy and unidirectional friendship that audiences develop with media figures (celebrities, influencers, etc.) despite the absence of a real two-way relationship (Escalas & Bettman, 2017). In this sense, social networks, which allow a more fluid interaction between followers and influencers, favour to a greater extent an even more significant level of parasocial relationship (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Thus, in the commercial domain, previous research has shown that the higher the parasocial relationship with an influencer, the higher the perceived credibility of the influencer and the greater the ability to incite the purchase of the product recommended by the influencer (Chung & Cho, 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). As a result, parasocial relationships have become a central concept in media psychology research, exploring how audiences form emotional bonds with media figures.

In addition to all these factors, the greater similarity between the follower and the influencer when the latter is also a minor allows for an even stronger connection between them.

As a result of all of the above, brands have focused on children's influencers as preferred vehicles for delivering their promotional messages to younger audiences (Feijoo & Fernández-Gómez, 2021). In this sense, the main promotional strategies adopted by kidsfluencers take the form of recommendations or endorsements (Cárdaba et al., 2023). In turn, the products recommended by these figures belong to categories as diverse as cosmetics, food or toys. To this end, one of the most widely used endorsement techniques is unboxing, a strategy in which the influencer records and shares a video showing the process of unpacking a newly acquired product, commenting on the product's characteristics, quality, functionality and personal experience of opening it (Nicoll & Nansen, 2018; Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Diz, 2016). Influencers' recommendations are so effective because they are not perceived as advertisements, but as sincere opinions or advice from credible and valued people (De Veirman et al., 2019).

3.2. Child influencers and ethical considerations

In addition to the communicative and commercial approach discussed so far, previous literature has also approached the field of child influencers from an ethical perspective. Firstly, much of the relevant work has made an effort to highlight the fact that children are particularly vulnerable, as their knowledge of digital marketing advertising strategies is not yet sufficiently developed (De Jans et al., 2019). Furthermore, most of these recommendations are covert in nature, i.e. they are not accompanied by a warning that the influencer has received a financial incentive to make the recommendation (Nuñez-casado et al., 2021). However, some research argues that even those minors who are aware of the influencer's persuasive intentions still show interest in following their commercial recommendations (Kołaszewska & Kacprzak, 2022).

But it is not only the complexity of the strategies used that is worrying when it comes to dealing with children's audiences. Various studies suggest that children and young people are at a key stage in their cognitive and emotional development, when they are still forming their identity, values and social skills, which makes them more vulnerable to the influence of online content (Rideout et al., 2010). They are particularly vulnerable to certain very restrictive body image models promoted by many influencers (Martín-Cárdaba et al., 2022), as early exposure to certain types of content can influence children's perceptions of self-image and self-esteem (Fardouly et al., 2015). It should also be noted that children may be more likely to imitate behaviours they see online, which increases the importance of positive content and role models (Bandura et al., 1961).

On the other hand, other researchers have focused their studies on the vulnerability of child influencers themselves, highlighting that one of the main dangers is that children are used as mere instruments by adults and companies for their commercial purposes (Pedersen & Aspevig, 2018).

Similarly, another concern raised by researchers relates to the consequences of overexposure experienced by child influencers and the impact this has on their self-image, emotional and mental well-being, and social development (Livingstone and Third 2017).

This highlights the need for specific regulations and standards to protect child influencers and ensure ethical practices (Blanco, & Gutiérrez, 2022), as well as the fundamental responsibility of parents and guardians in the care of minors (Holloway et al., 2013). Therefore, given that the field of child social media influencers is relatively new, ethics and the protection of children's rights must be a key priority in this context.

4. Conclusions

Exploring the differences in interaction with children and young people on TikTok and YouTube reveals a complex picture in which both platforms have significant singularities. TikTok is characterised by its dynamic format and viral challenges that encourage creativity and active participation, while YouTube, with its more comprehensive and educational approach, offers valuable learning opportunities. Taking these particularities into account is essential for understanding and effectively addressing the influence of media on children's development in the digital age.

In turn, the review of previous literature allows us to conclude that there are three main areas of interest with regard to the figure of the minor influencer. First, there is research that focuses on the study of the content created by these figures, as well as their communication strategies and audiovisual practices. Although existing research focuses on the behaviour of kidsfluencers on YouTube and TikTok separately, there is virtually no research that examines the differences in use and behaviour between the two audiovisual platforms. Therefore, it would be advisable for future research to explore how the different characteristics of these platforms lead to different communicative practices.

Secondly, we can find research that focuses on the different communicative factors that explain and underpin the persuasive capacity of child influencers, with the parasocial relationship playing a leading role, as well as the variables that determine their greater or lesser presence.

Thirdly and finally, there is research that explores the different areas of vulnerability faced by child influencers and their followers. In particular, researchers have highlighted the importance of taking into account the vulnerability of children and adolescents who consume content and are not mature enough to distinguish between the persuasive and commercial nature of many of the recommendations made by their favourite influencers. At the same time, it is clear that child influencers can be exploited by adults and companies for commercial purposes and that there is a need for greater legal and ethical regulation of their activities. It is therefore worth remembering that the protection of minors, both followers and influencers, is a shared responsibility between parents, educators and the digital platforms themselves.

Finally, the theoretical review carried out allows us to conclude that the constant changes in the digital landscape and the relevance of the well-being of minors involved in these communication processes highlight the need for continuous research to adapt to new dynamics and emerging challenges.

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