Childhood for Sale: Unraveling the Commodification of Children in the Realm of Mengwa-Child Influencers

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Abstract: The Internet's quick development has given people access to a wider audience. Anyone can use this platform to create their own content as a self-media creator. In November 2021, the General Office of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism issued the "Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of Minors in the Online Cultural Market," strictly prohibiting the use of "Child Influencers" for profit. Based on this phenomenon, this article focuses on a group of child influencers to explore the impact of children's commercialization on their physical and mental health. Therefore, the psychology of the child can answer this question. Observe their physical and mental health problems in the self-media environment, and understand the new changes of children in the network society. The results found that child influencers who have been exposed to social media for a long time are more likely to have value deviations, anxiety, an obsession with virtual identities, and a tendency to become adults.

Keywords: child influencers, commoditization of children, mental health, social media, parents and children

1. Introduction

The rapid development of the Internet has provided people with a broader platform. Under this platform, anyone can become a self-media creator and produce their own content. In recent years, a growing trend of Mengwa - child influencers have emerged on social media in China. This phenomenon involves filming videos that showcase children on the Internet, transforming them into Internet influencers who frequently engage in commercial collaborations to monetize their online following.

A news article has ignited a fervent debate in China. It involves parents creating an account to live stream their 3-year-old daughter Paiqi eating, aiming to attract attention. With her parents' feeding, Peiqi gained weight rapidly, reaching 70 pounds at a tender age. This essay aims to delve into the commercialization of children, examine the physical and mental issues they face in the Internet era, comprehend the evolving dynamics of children's online society, and explore strategies for enhancing community, family, and platform management to safeguard children's physical and mental well-being.

2.   The Reasons Behind the Commercialization of Mengwa – Child Influencers

Nowadays, technological advancements have provided convenient shooting and sharing modes, making dissemination and "fame" no longer unattainable. In China, the popularity of some Mengwa - child influencers have been sparked by the low threshold, low cost, and rapid monetization of self-media, arousing the envy of many children. Some children even believe that being a Mengwa - child influencer is better than going to school. Furthermore, a 2019 survey conducted by the Harris Poll and Lego among three thousand 8 to 12-year-olds in the US, UK, and China revealed that nearly 30 percent of them aspired to become YouTubers when they grew up, surpassing other popular professions such as astronauts or musicians.

Parents play a vital role in a child's development, and their behavior can directly impact their child's cognitive development. They hold a significant position in their children's overall development and education, as they are responsible for their physical and intellectual growth until they become independent and prepared to face the challenges of society [1]. However, some parents are driven by the interest in promoting their children as commodities. This not only poses potential harm to their children's physical and psychological well-being but also encourages other parents to adopt similar irresponsible behavior, exacerbating the issue of children's commercialization. The accounts of these Mengwa - child influencers were not created by the children themselves, with no explicit intention of becoming influencers. However, in the social media environment, once they gained popularity, significant efforts were made by the parents to build an appealing profile. In conclusion, parents often emerge as the initiators and controllers of their children's social media activities [2].

3.   The Problems Arising from the Self-media Environment for Mengwa - Child Influencers

3.1. The Impact of Values

Being on social media for a long time will make Mengwa - child influencers affected by specific commercialization and marketization, which may cause these children to pay too much attention to products and brands, with material consumption becoming their preferred direction of growth and their standard for assessing value. Moreover, brokers and partners of Mengwa - child influencers, driven by the pursuit of business opportunities and profits, often emphasize material rewards and incentives when promoting products or services. This further reinforces the children's desire for material possessions.

Due to their young age and limited life experiences, children are not yet capable of making objective moral judgments regarding certain internet content. As a result, they may struggle with value selection, cultural identity, and other aspects. The fragmented nature of online platforms, coupled with ambiguous boundaries, exposes children who lack the discernment to the risk of deviating from a healthy path and blindly pursuing economic materialism and the worship of money. All these distorted values can undermine and misguide the development of children's still-developing value system.

3.2. Anxiety Caused by Negative Information

According to Festinger, social media users tend to engage in self-evaluation by comparing themselves with others on various aspects such as beauty, popularity, social status, wealth, and more [3]. These social comparisons can be classified into two types: upward comparison and downward comparison [4]. Upward comparison often leads to decreased self-esteem and higher levels of depressive symptoms, while downward comparison is associated with increased self-esteem and lower levels of anxiety [5].

Children are in a critical stage of physical and mental development, and they may lack sufficient self-control and emotional regulation abilities. Research conducted by Martiz indicates that children with Internet addiction often experience feelings of loneliness and depression [6]. As Mengwa - child influencers are exposed to the adult world, they are often subject to scrutiny from adult perspectives. Compared to adults, children are more vulnerable to negative comments, which can significantly impact their self-esteem, self-confidence and lead to self-doubt, depression, negative emotions, and behaviors. In severe cases, some children may even engage in self-mutilation or contemplate suicide.

3.3. Adult Imitation of Children

Mengwa-child influencers gain attention and admiration by imitating adult behaviors and expressions. The "Consumer's Doppelganger Effect" theory, presented by Ruvio et al., suggests that consumers tend to imitate their role models when they aspire to resemble them [7, 8]. However, these imitative behaviors may result in the loss of the exploratory and developmental characteristics that should be inherent in childhood.

Using the TikTok platform as an example, when certain novel video content becomes popular, there tends to be a flood of similar content. Some Mengwa - child influencers may imitate these trends in order to attract more attention and gain more commercial value. However, this process of replicating short videos often leads to the premature adultification of childhood. Furthermore, the push mechanism of online short videos increases the likelihood of children being exposed to adult-oriented content when engaging in adult imitation.

3.4. Addicted to a Virtual Identity

The use of social media platforms enables users to develop multiple digital identities, allowing them to highlight or downplay certain aspects of themselves. This ability to curate their online self-presentations can increase teenagers' interest in spending time on social media [9].

Virtual identity can emerge as a result of dissatisfaction with one's real identity, often stemming from an identity crisis where individuals experience a loss of integrity [10]. The internet-facilitated virtual identity of Mengwa - child influencers can captivate children, leading them to indulge in entertainment and pursuit. Some children may even believe that adopting the identity of an internet influencer can bring them significant attention and financial gains, prompting them to drop out of school and pursue a career as an influencer. This premature departure from education and the natural world can have long-term consequences.

Moreover, social media easily captures the attention of children, fostering dependency and addiction. As a result, they may not have enough time to develop their interests and explore social skills, leading to a sense of social disconnection.

4. Measures to Address the Commercialization of Mengwa - Child Influencers

4.1. Government

The government should take necessary measures to safeguard the rights and interests of children. An example of such action is the implementation of the "Qinglang • special rectification of the summer network environment for minors" initiated by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), aimed at creating a healthier internet ecosystem in China. This initiative includes strict regulations prohibiting minors under the age of 16 from appearing on camera and broadcasting live. Furthermore, efforts are made to investigate and punish the practice of hyping Mengwa - child influencers while also prohibiting the inducement of minors to provide monetary rewards. Additionally, measures are taken to prevent the exhibition of wealth, the worship of money, extravagance, and hedonism, which

could lead children down an undesirable path. These steps aim to ensure a positive and safe online environment for children.

4.2. Family

Parents play a pivotal role in the overall development and education of their children. To safeguard children from the negative impacts of commercialization, parents need to approach their children's talents and potential in a rational manner, avoiding excessive displays of their lives and growth on social media. It is essential for parents to prioritize their role as guardians and ensure they do not expose their children to hidden dangers that could impact their future.

Furthermore, parents should create a nurturing environment for their children, actively guiding their behavior and shaping their values. It is their responsibility to teach their children right from wrong and instill a strong moral compass. By consciously guiding their children's actions and imparting valuable lessons, parents can help establish a solid foundation for their children's development.

4.3. Platform

Firstly, it is crucial for the platform to implement stringent content and image review processes for Mengwa accounts, strictly prohibiting the release of any content that may be harmful to children's interests and images. This ensures that the platform maintains a safe and child-friendly environment.

Secondly, the platform should enhance the oversight and management of advertising and promotional activities to prevent any negative impact on children. By strengthening the auditing process and enforcing strict guidelines, the platform can ensure that business cooperation does not have adverse effects on children.

Additionally, the platform should establish an effective anti-addiction system to prevent excessive addiction to the online world. By implementing measures such as time limits, parental controls, and notifications, the platform can promote a healthy balance between online and offline activities for children.

Lastly, it is essential for the platform to enhance the legal awareness and social responsibility of its employees. This can be achieved through comprehensive training programs and increased awareness of child protection. By fostering a culture of child safety and responsibility within the organization, the platform can consistently provide a safe, healthy, and beneficial environment for children.

5. Conclusion

Upon analyzing this phenomenon, it becomes evident that videos from many Mengwa - child influencers' accounts no longer serve the purpose of documenting a better life. Instead, driven by their environment and interests, children are prematurely exposed to the public as commodities, consumed through the pursuit of "likes." Furthermore, as children immerse themselves in the online experience, they are confronted with distorted aesthetics and vague moral values, potentially leading to cognitive crises. Thus, it is crucial to strengthen child protection efforts from various entities, such as governments, families, and communities, to create a safe online environment that promotes the holistic and healthy development of children.

However, this study does have certain limitations. Firstly, it does not provide a specific analysis of Mengwa - child influencers created under different family backgrounds and across various social media platforms. Secondly, it fails to consider whether children voluntarily choose to become Mengwa - child influencers. Lastly, it does not differentiate between male and female Mengwa - child influencers for comparison. Therefore, it would be beneficial to explore the different types of male

children's involvement compared to the various categories of female children's participation. This could help ascertain whether the phenomenon of children's commercialization presents distinct differences in physical and mental health issues between male and female Mengwa - child influencers.

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