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Play Is a Child's Work (on Instagram)

A Case Study of the Use of Children as Paid Social Media Influencers to Market Toys

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Articles

Introduction

Where children's television once ruled supreme as a vehicle for sales of kids' brands, the marketing of children's toys now often hinges on having the right social media influencer, many of them children themselves (Verdon). As Forbes reported in 2021, the pandemic saw an increase in children spending more time online, many following their favourite influencers on YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. The importance of tapping into partnering with the right influencer grew, as did sales in toys for children isolated at home. We detail, through a case study approach and visual narrative analysis of two Australian influencer siblings' Instagram

accounts, the nature of toy marketing to children in 2023. Findings point to the continued gendered nature of toys and the concurrent promotion of aspirational adult 'toys' (for example, cars, high-end cosmetics) and leisure pursuits that blur the line between what we considered to be children's playthings and adult objects of desire.

To Market, to Market

Toys are a huge business worldwide. In 2021, the global toys market was projected to grow from \$141.08 billion to \$230.64 billion by 2028. During COVID-19, toy sales increased (Fortune Business Insights). The rise of the Internet alongside media and digital technologies has given toy marketers new opportunities to reach children directly, as well as producing new forms of digitally enabled play, with marketers potentially having access to children 24/7, way beyond the previous limits of children's programming on television (Hains and Jennings). Children's digital content has also extended to digital games alongside digital devices and Internet-connected toys. Children's personal tablet ownership rose from less than 1 per cent in 2011 to 42 per cent in 2017 (Rideout), and continues to grow.

Children's value for brands and marketers has increased over time (Cunningham). The nexus between physical toys and the entertainment industry has grown stronger, first with the Disney company and then with the stand-out success of the *Star Wars* franchise (now owned by Disney) from the late 1970s (Hains and Jennings). The concept of transmedia storytelling and selling, with toys as the vehicle for children to play out the stories they saw on television, in comics, books, movies, and online, proved to be a lucrative one for the entertainment company franchises and the toy manufacturers (Bainbridge). All major toy brands now recognise the power of linking toy brands and entertaining transmedia children's texts, including online content, with Disney, LEGO and Barbie being obvious examples.

Gender and Toys: Boys and Girls Come Out to Play

Alongside the growth of the children's market, the gendering of children's toys has also continued and increased, with concerns that traditional gender roles are still strongly promoted via children's toys (Fine and Rush). Research shows that girls' toys are socialising them for caring roles, shopping, and concern with beauty, while toys aimed at boys (including transportation and construction toys, action figures, and weapons) may promote physicality, aggression, construction, and action (Fine and Rush). As Blakemore and Center (632) suggested, then, if children learn from toy-play "by playing with strongly stereotyped toys, girls can be expected to learn that appearance and attractiveness are central to their worth, and that nurturance and domestic skills are important to be developed. Boys can be expected to learn that aggression, violence, and competition are fun, and that their toys are exciting and risky". Recently there has been some pushback by consumers, and some toy brands have responded, with LEGO committing to less gendered toy marketing (Russell).

YouTube: The World's Most Popular Babysitter?

One business executive has described YouTube as the most popular babysitter in the world (*Capitalism.com*). The use of children as influencers on YouTube to market toys through toy review videos is now a common practice (Feller and Burroughs; De Veirman et al.). These 'reviews' are not critical in the traditional sense of reviews in an institutional or legacy media

context. Instead, the genre is a mash-up, which blurs the lines between three major genres: review, branded content, and entertainment (Jaakkola). Concerns have been raised about advertising disguised as entertainment for children, and calls have been made for nuanced regulatory approaches (Craig and Cunningham). The most popular toy review channels have millions of subscribers, and their hosts constitute some of YouTube's top earners (Hunting). Toy review videos have become an important force in children's media – in terms of economics, culture, and for brands (Hunting). Concurrently, surprise toys have risen as a popular type of toy, thanks in part to the popularity of the unboxing toy review genre (Nicoll and Nansen). *Ryan's World* is probably the best-known in this genre, with conservative estimates putting 10-year-old Ryan Kanji's family earnings at \$25 million annually (Kang). *Ryan's World*, formerly *Ryan's Toy Review*, now has 10 YouTube channels and the star has his own show on *Nic Junior* as well as across other media, including books and video games (*Capitalism.com*). Marsh, through her case study of one child, showed the way children interact with online content, including unboxing videos, as 'cyberflaneurs'.

YouTube is the medium of choice for most children (now more so than television; Auxier et al.). However, Instagram is also a site where a significant number of children and teens spend time. Australian data from the e-Safety Commission in 2018 showed that while YouTube was the most popular platform, with 80 per cent of children 8-12 and 86 per cent of teens using the site, 24 per cent of children used Instagram, and 70 per cent of teens 13-17 (e-Safety Commissioner). Given the rise in social media, phone, and tablet use in the last five years, including among younger children, these statistics are now likely to be higher. A report from US-based *Business Insider* in 2021 stated that 40 per cent of children under 13 already use Instagram (Canales). This is despite the platform ostensibly only being for people aged 13 and over. Ofcom (the UK's regulator for communications services) has discussed the rise of 'Tik-Tots' – young children defying age restrictions to be on social media – and the increase of young people consuming rather than sharing on social media (Ofcom).

Insta-Kidfluencers on the Rise

Marketers are now tapping into the selling power of children as social media influencers (or kidfluencers) to promote children's toys, and in some cases, parents are happy to act as their children's agents and managers for these pint-size prosumers. Abidin ("Micromicrocelebrity") was the first to discuss what she termed 'micro-microcelebrities', children of social media influencers (usually mothers) who have become, through their parents' mediation, paid social media influencers themselves, often through Instagram. As Abidin noted: "their digital presence is deliberately commercial, framed and staged by Influencer mothers in order to maximize their advertorial potential, and are often postured to market even non-baby/parenting products such as fast food and vehicles". Since that time, and with children now a growing audience on Instagram, some micro-microcelebrities have begun to promote toys alongside other brands which appeal to both children and adults. While initially these human 'brand extensions' of their mothers (Archer) appealed to adults, their sponsored content has evolved as they have aged, and their audience has grown and broadened to include children.

Given the rise of Instagram as a site for the marketing of toys to children, through children themselves as social media influencers, and the lack of academic research on this phenomenon, our research looks at a case study of prominent child social media influencers on Instagram in Australia, who are managed by their mother, and who regularly promote toys. Within the case study, visual narrative analysis is used, to analyse the Instagram accounts of two high-profile

child social media influencers, eleven-year-old Australian Pixie Curtis and her eight-year-old brother, Hunter Curtis, both of whom are managed by their entrepreneur and 'PR queen' mother, Roxy Jacenko. We analysed the posts from each child from March to July 2022 inclusive. Posts were recorded in a spreadsheet, with the content described, hashtags or handles recorded, and any brand or toy mentions noted. We used related media reports to supplement the analysis. We have considered ethical implications of our research and have made the decision to identify both children, as their accounts are public, with large follower numbers, promote commercial interests, and have the blue Instagram 'tick' that identifies their accounts as verified and 'celebrity' or brand accounts, and the children are regularly featured in mainstream media. The children's mother, Jacenko, often discusses the children on television and has discussed using Pixie's parties as events to gain publicity for the toy business. We have followed the lead of Abidin and Leaver, considered experts in the field, who have identified children and families in ethnographic research when the children or families have large numbers of followers (see Abidin, "#Familygoals"; Leaver and Abidin). We do acknowledge that other researchers have chosen not to identify influencer children (e.g., Ågren) with smaller numbers of followers. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What are the toys featured on the two social media influencer children's sites?

RQ2: Are the toys traditionally gendered and if so, what are the main gender-based toys?

RQ3: Do the children promote products that are traditionally aimed at adults? If so, how are these 'toys' presented, and what are they?

Analysis

The two child influencers and toy promoters, sister and brother Pixie (11) and Hunter (8) Curtis, are the children of celebrity, entrepreneur and public relations 'maven', Roxy Jacenko. Jacenko's first business was a public relations firm, *Sweaty Betty*, one she ran successfully but has recently closed to focus on her influencer talent agency business, the Ministry of Talent, and the two businesses related to her children, *Pixie's Pix* (an online toy store named after her daughter) and *Pixie's Bows*, a line of fashion bows aimed at girls (Madigan). Pixie Curtis grew up with her own Instagram account, with her first Instagram post on 18 June 2013, before turning two, and featuring a promotion of an online subscription service for toys, with the hashtag #babblebox. At time of writing, Pixie has 120,000 Instagram followers; her 'bio' describes her account as 'shopping and retail' and as managed by Jacenko. Pixie is also described as the 'founder of Pixie's Pix Toy Store'. Her brother Hunter's account began on 6 May 2015, with the first post to celebrate his first birthday. Hunter's page has 20,000 followers with his profile stating that it is managed by his mother and her talent and influencer agency.

RQ1: What are the toys featured on the two children's Instagram sites?

The two children feature toy promotions regularly, mostly from Pixie's online toy shop, with the site tagged @pixiespixonline. These toys are often demonstrated by Pixie and Hunter in short video format, following the now-established genre of the toy unboxing or toy review.

Toys that are shown on Pixie's site (tagged to her toy store) include air-clay (clay designed to be used to create clay sculptures); a Scruff-a-Luv soft toy that mimics a rescue pet that needs to be bathed in water, dried, and groomed to become a 'lovable' soft toy pet; toy slime; kinetic sand;

Hatchimals (flying fairy/pixie dolls that come out of plastic eggs); LOL OMG dolls and Mermaze (both with accentuated female/made up features). LOL OMG (short for Outrageous Millennial Girls) are described as "fierce, fashionable, fabulous" and their name taps into common language used to communicate while texting. Mermaze are also fashion and hair styling dolls, with a mermaid's tail that changes colour in water.

While predominantly promoting toys on *Pixie's Pix*, Pixie posts promotions of other items on her Website aimed at children. This includes practical items such as lunch boxes, but also beauty products including a skin care headband and scented body scrubs.

Toys shown on Hunter's Instagram site are often promotions of his sister's toy store offerings, but generally fall into the traditional 'boys' toys' categories. The posts that tag the *Pixie's Pix* store feature photos or video demonstrations by Hunter of toys, including trucks, slime, 'Splat balls' (squish balls), Pokémon cards, Zuru toys' 'Smashers' (dinosaur eggs that are smashed to reveal a dinosaur toy), a Bubblegum simulator for Roblox (a social media platform and game), Needoh Stickums, water bombs, and Hot Wheels.

RQ2: Are the toys traditionally gendered and if so, what are the main gender-based toys?

Although both children promote gender-neutral sensory toys such as slime and splat balls, they do promote strongly gendered toys from *Pixie's Pix*. Hunter also promotes gendered toys that are not tagged to *Pixie's Pix*, including *Jurassic World* dinosaur toys (tying into the film release). One post by Hunter features a (paid) cross-promotion of PlayStation 5 themed Donut King donuts (with a competition to win a PlayStation 5 by buying the donuts). In contrast, Pixie posts a paid promotion of a high-tea event to promote My Little Ponies.

Hunter's posts of toys and leisure items that do not tag Pixie's toyshop include him on a go-kart, buying rugby gear, and with an 'airtasker' (paid assistant) helping him sort his Nerf gun collection. There are posts of both children playing and doing 'regular' children's activities, including sport (Pixie plays netball, Hunter rugby), with their dog, ice-skating, and swimming (albeit often at expensive resorts), while Hunter and Pixie both wear, unbox, and tag some high-end children's clothes brands such as Balmain and promote department store Myer.

RQ3: Do the children promote products that are traditionally aimed at adults? If so, how are these 'toys' presented, and what are they?

The Cambridge dictionary provides the following two definitions of toys, with one showing that 'toys' may also be considered as objects of pleasure for adults. A toy is "an object for children to play with" while it can also be "an object that is used by an adult for pleasure rather than for serious use". The very meaning of the word toys shows the crossover between the adult and children's world. The more 'adult' products promoted by Pixie are highly gendered, with expensive bags, clothes, make-up, and skin care regularly featured on her account. These are arguably toys but also teen or adult objects of aspiration, with Pixie's collection of handbags featured and the brand tagged. The bag collection includes brightly coloured bags by Australian designer Poppy Lissiman. Other female-focussed brands include a hairdryer brand, with photos and videos posted of Pixie 'playing' at dressing up and 'getting ready', using skincare, make-up, and hair products. These toys cater to age demographics older than Pixie. Hunter is pictured in

posts on a jet-ski, and in others with a mobile and tablet, or washing a Tesla car and with a helicopter. The gendered tropes of girls being concerned with their appearance, and boys interested in vehicles, action, and competitive (video) games appear to be borne out in the posts from the two children.

Discussion and Conclusion

As an entrepreneur, Jacenko has capitalised on her daughter's and son's personal brands that she has co-created by launching and promoting a toyshop named after her daughter, following the success of her children's promotion of toys for other companies and Pixie's successful hairbow line. The toy shop arose out of Pixie promoting sales of fidget spinners during the pandemic lockdowns where toy sales rose sharply across the world. The children are also now on TikTok, and while they have a toy review channel on YouTube it has not been posted on for three years. Therefore, it is safe to assume that Instagram is one of the main channels for the children to promote the toyshop.

In an online newspaper article describing the success of Pixie's toyshop and the purchase of an expensive Mercedes car, Jacenko said that the children work hard, and the car was their "reward" (Scanlan). "The help both her brother and her [Pixie] give me on the buying (every night we work on new style selections and argue over it), the packing, the restocking, goes well beyond their years", Jacenko is quoted as saying. "We've made a pact, we must keep going, work harder. Next, it's a Rolls Royce."

Analysis of the children's Instagram pages shows highly gendered promotion of toys. The children also promote a variety of high-end, aspirational tween, teen, and adult 'toys', including clothes, make-up, and skincare (Pixie) and expensive cars (Hunter and Pixie). Gender stereotyping has been found in adult influencer content (see, for example, Jorge et al.) and researchers have also pointed to sexualisation of young girl influencers on Instagram (Llovet et al.). Our research potentially echoes these findings. Posts from the children regularly include aspirational commodities that blur the lines between adult and child items of desire.

Concerns have been raised in other academic articles (and in government reports) regarding the possible exploitation of children's labour by parents and marketers to promote brands, including toys, on social media (see, for example, Ågren; De Veirman et al.; [House of Commons](#); Masterson). The French government is believed to be the only government to have moved to regulate regarding the labour of children as social media influencers, and the same government at time of writing was debating laws to enshrine children's right to privacy on social media, to stop the practice of 'sharenting' or parents sharing their children's images and other content on social media without their children's consent (Rieffel). Mainstream media including [Teen Vogue](#) (Fortesa), and some influencers themselves, have also started to raise issues relevant to 'kidfluencers'. In the state of Utah, USA, the government has introduced laws to stop children under 18 having access to social media without parents' consent, although some view this as potentially having some negative impacts ([Singer](#)). The ethics and impact of toy advertorials on children by social media influencers, with little or no disclosure of the posts being advertisements, have also been discussed elsewhere (see, for example, House of Commons; Jaakkola), with Rahali and Livingstone offering suggestions aimed key stakeholders. It has been found that beyond the marketing of toys and adult 'luxuries' to kids, other products that potentially harm children (for example, junk food and e-cigarettes) are also commonly seen in sponsored content on Instagram and YouTube aimed at children (Fleming-Milici, Phaneuf, and

Harris; Smith et al.). Indeed, it could be argued that e-cigarettes have been positioned as playthings and are appealing to children.

While we may bemoan the loss of innocence of children, with the children in this analysis posed by their entrepreneurial mother as purveyors of material goods including toys, it is useful to remember that perhaps it has always been a conundrum, given the purpose of toy marketing is to make commercial sales. Children's toys have always reflected and shaped society's culture, often with surprisingly sinister and adult overtones, including the origins of Barbie as a male 'sex' toy (Bainbridge) and the blatant promotion of guns and other weapons to boys (for example the famous Mattel 'burp' gun of the 50s and 60s), through advertising and sponsorship of television (Hains and Jennings). Recently, fashion house Balenciaga promoted its range of adult bags using children as models via Instagram – the bags are teddy bears dressed in bondage outfits and the marketing stunt caused considerable backlash, with the sexually dressed bears and use of children raising outrage (Deguara). Were these teddy bags framed as children's toys for adults or adult toys for children? The line was blurred. This research has limitations as it is focussed on a case study in one country (but with global reach through Instagram). However, the current analysis is believed to be one of the first to focus on children's promotion of toys through Instagram, by two children's influencers, a relatively new marketing approach aimed at children. As the article was being finalised, the children's mother announced that as Pixie was transitioning into high school and wanted to focus on her studies rather than running a business, the toy business would conclude but *Pixie's Bows* would continue (Madigan).

In the UK, recent research by Livingstone et al. for the Digital Futures Commission potentially offers a way forward related to this phenomenon, when viewed alongside the analysis of our case study. Their final report (following research with children) suggests a Playful by Design Tool that would be useful for designers and brands, but also children, parents, regulators, and other stakeholders. Principles such as adopting ethical commercial models, being age-appropriate and ensuring safety, make sense when applied to kidfluencers and those that stand to benefit from their playbour. It appears that governments, society, some academics, and the media are starting to question the current generally unrestricted frameworks related to social media in general (see, for example, the ACCC's ongoing enquiry) and toy and other marketing by kids to kids on social media specifically (House of Commons). We argue that more frameworks, and potentially laws, are required in this mostly unregulated space. Through our case study we have highlighted key areas of concern on one of the world's most popular platforms for children and teens, including privacy issues, commodification, and gendered and 'stealth' marketing of toys through 'advertorials'. We also acknowledge that children do gain playful and social benefits and entertainment from seeing influencers online. Given that it has been shown that gendered marketing of toys (and increased focus on appearance for girls through Instagram) could be potentially harmful to children's self-esteem, and with related concerns on the continued commodification of childhood, further research is also needed to discover the responses and views of children to these advertorials masquerading as cute content.

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