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Children's 'playbour' as influencers on social media: an investigation into the legal and ethical issues surrounding kidfluencers

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ABSTRACT

The legal and ethical concerns around children performing as social media influencers (SMIs) on various social media platforms have been in the spotlight, with the recent world-first decision by the Australian Government to ban social media for those under 16. Social media influence is big business across the globe, with organisations investing in working with influencers to promote their brands and/or ideas. Some children now 'work', often managed by their parents, to produce posts that promote brands and ideas on behalf of organisations – not only to other children but also to adults. This paper presents findings of two case studies of SMI children. Through content analysis of their Instagram posts, we explore key legal and ethical concerns related to children working as social media influencers.

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Introduction

The use of children to promote goods and services via television, movies and in print has been a popular technique with a long history (O'Connor, 2011). More recently, Social Media Influencer (SMI) children, or 'kidfluencers', have become participants in influencer marketing, garnering large audiences of children and adults (Abidin, 2015a; Van den Abeele, Hudders, & Vanwesenbeeck, 2024). The phenomenon of kidfluencer communication has raised human rights issues and legal and ethical concerns, as children are 'employed', through their parents, rather than in a standard workplace with clear guidelines about a child's participation as a talent (McGinnis, 2022). We define kidfluencers as children who work within and outside their home, usually managed by their parents, and employed by organisations to promote brands and services through social media posts showing images of the children and their activities. While the children's posts may feature branded content that appeals to children, their work may promote brands aimed at adults.

In this article, we explore the issues related to children's human and legal rights, relevant to children working as social media influencers. We use a cross-cultural, case

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study approach with a focus on the analysis of Instagram posts and media stories of two prominent SMI children who are based in Australia and the Philippines. The case studies are longitudinal, as both children have been ‘raised’ on Instagram, with their first images appearing in toddlerhood up to their ages in 2024 of 13 and 9, respectively. Examining prominent kidfluencers in two different cultural settings is used to uncover similarities and differences, if any, in the modes and practices of promotional communication techniques used and the human and legal rights that may be affected.

In 2024, the global influencer market was estimated to reach a record of 24 billion U.S. dollars, and it has tripled since 2019 (Statista, 2024). Children as social media influencers can command large followings with some ‘successful’ children generating up to \$26 million a year (Cordeiro, 2021). Social media influencers are defined as ‘a subset of digital content creators defined by their significant online following, distinctive brand persona, and patterned relationships with commercial sponsors’ (Duffy, 2021, p. 1). It is now recognised that many SMIs expect payment in different forms to promote products, brands, organisations, services, or ideas (Borchers & Enke, 2021). However, while children working as SMIs has grown in past years, mainstream media has started to report some of the key concerns relevant to the industry. For example, the publicly funded Australian broadcaster, the ABC, detailed the possible exploitation of children working as kidfluencers, including sexual exploitation, in an episode of its major current affairs programme, *Four Corners*, in May 2024, titled *Kidfluencers*. The recently released (2025) series by Netflix entitled ‘Bad Influence: The Dark Side of Kidfluencing’ similarly depicts concerning issues. Despite some of the negative publicity, a top career choice for children is ‘YouTuber’ (Dzhanova, 2019).

SMIs are human brands; consumers who interact with SMIs form attachments, or emotionally intense relationships (Kim & Kim, 2022). Mothers who became ‘mum/mom bloggers’ are seen as some of the original pioneers of social media influence and have now become known as ‘mumfluencers’ (Holiday, Densley, & Norman, 2021), or momfluencers to use the American spelling. Some mothers with a large social media following started to use their children as ‘brand extensions’, a phenomenon where celebrity/microcelebrity influencer parents turn their children into personal ‘brand extensions’ of themselves, leveraging the cuteness, appeal, and newsworthy impact of their own children to earn money and/or achieve fame (Archer, 2019). Other parents focus their efforts on creating family social media accounts that generate revenue, with all family members having a role in the social media posts, while others position their child or children as the main ‘stars’ of the social media accounts (Abidin, 2015a, 2017). Far from being the ‘everyday, ordinary Internet users’ initially described in Abidin’s early definition (2015b), some child social media stars are now being presented as beyond ‘ordinary’, with lavish lifestyles or unattainable attributes presented as aspirational for the consuming public (Hudders & Lou, 2023).

In this article, publicly available Instagram posts, promotional material, and mainstream media articles are explored for two SMI children from Australia and the Philippines to determine apparent ethical and legal issues relevant to kidfluencers. These Instagram and brand sensations are Australian Pixie Curtis and Scarlet Snow Belo from the Philippines. Scarlet Snow Belo is the daughter of Filipina dermatologist and TV personality, Dr Victoria Belo. Dr Belo is the founder, CEO, and medical director of the Belo Medical Group, a leading medical aesthetic and dermatological clinic in the Philippines. Belo launched

'Belo Baby', the skin care range of the mother brand to cater to children's dermatological needs. Scarlet Snow is the main ambassador of the brand extension. Scarlet Snow's online persona is used to promote her parents' business interests (Aguilar, 2018). Pixie Curtis, the child of Australian PR 'maven', Roxy Jacenko, and an SMI child, was the main brand ambassador of Pixie Bows and Pixies' Pix. Pixie, up until the age of 11 promoted her branded content and her own businesses (run by her mother, Roxy) through social media channels, including Instagram (Núñez-Torrón Stock & Rennolds, 2022). Both Pixie and Scarlet have the blue Instagram tick on their Instagram pages. The blue tick is a verification check for accounts representing well-known brands and influencers where there is a high likelihood of the account being impersonated (Stefanski, 2022). Both have a large online follower base with Pixie at 198,000 and Scarlet at 5 million in 2024.

We focus on the legal and ethical issues related to children at a time when the Australian¹ Government has passed legislation to ban social media for children under 16 (Ritchie, 2024). As Livingstone and Third (2017, p. 662) posit: 'the child – as a cypher for our cultural anxieties and a focus of investment for our future desires – represents an important figure through which to (re)think the digital and human rights, one in which there is almost too much at stake'. An investigation into the intersection of legal and ethical implications related to the media use of children to promote brands is warranted. Accordingly, this article aims to explore connections/disconnections, gaps, points of continuity/discontinuity, junctures/disjunctures, agreement/disagreement, flows and blocks, tactics of resolution in the relationship between the disciplines of (social) media and the law, with children and their legal and human rights as our focus.

Literature review

The literature review proceeds as follows. First, we review the literature on mothers as social media influencers and their use of their children as 'brand extensions'. We next discuss the theoretical concept of 'playbour' and its relevance to the child influencer phenomenon. We conclude this section by outlining the laws related to children's work in specific jurisdictions and from a UN human rights perspective.

Mothers and children as influencers

Children and babies have been used in advertising across different media – often to appeal to adults rather than other children (Ågren, 2022). However, brands 'employing' children (through their parents) as SMIs are relatively new, often following the rise of the children's parents as influencers (Abidin, 2015a, 2017).

The paradox of children's 'playbour' on social media

While research into children as SMIs is nascent, it is gathering pace, with researchers from disciplines including law, marketing, advertising, media, communication, cultural studies and sociology starting to focus on the perspectives of participants – SMI children and their parents – and other stakeholders, including legislators and the children who are viewing the kidfluencers' content. Rotimi et al.'s conceptual article (2024) discussed the paradoxical practices and ideological conflicts inherent in the

kidfluencer industry focused on child toy unboxers. The researchers, who did a comprehensive literature review of research to date, suggested there were three main paradoxes inherent in what they term the ‘child unboxing industry’. The paradoxes they discern are: the labour and play (or ‘playbour’) paradox (children are involved in both labour and play as kidfluencers); the autonomy and control paradox, which means parents as managers (and – we would argue – brands as ‘employers’) must control the content to make it commercially viable and children are often not the ones who direct what is to be included or how it appears; the privacy and online success paradox, meaning children’s privacy is often forgone for commercial success.

Hudders and Beuckels (2024) argued the rising legal and ethical concerns around children as SMIs are driven by ‘moral panics’ and suggest a more nuanced approach that includes all actors in the industry. However, Shomai, Unwin, and Sealey (2024), who interviewed former child influencers (now adults) suggested that based on the interviewees’ recollections, regulation should be introduced, as the interviewees discussed significant negative effects of their work. Van den Abeele, Hudders, and Vanwesenbeeck (2024) interviews with SMI children and their manager parents also raised specific concerns regarding the lack of laws relevant to this burgeoning ‘profession’ and the tensions for parents and children with the parents playing dual roles of managers and mothers (‘momagers’).

The law related to children and social media use

When social media was introduced, it was largely unregulated, and the ramifications for children were not considered. Facebook opened its membership to anyone (ostensibly) over the age of 13 in 2006, the iPhone was introduced in 2007/2008, and iPads in 2010. Children’s Christmas wish lists soon grew to encompass smart, internet connected, mobile devices (Pisani, 2011). While it seems obvious to state, due to its very nature, social media is unfettered, global, crossing time zones and (most) borders, i.e. ‘free’ to anyone with an internet connection and therefore difficult to regulate. China was one of the first (and few) countries to regulate social media, barring American companies from operating within it. In November 2024, Australia’s Government introduced laws to ban children under 16 from social media, although just how this ban will be enforced and what platforms may be exempt, remain questions to be resolved (Given, 2024).

The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted in 1989 (UNICEF, 2024) and it was only in 2021 that the UN issued the ‘General Comment on Children’s Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment’ (United Nations, 2021). The General Comment was issued following consultation with children. It applied the initial CRC to the digital world, with headings relevant to the ‘kidfluencer industry’ that include children’s rights and the business sector; commercial advertising and marketing; the right to privacy; family environment; right to culture, leisure and play; and protection from economic, sexual and other forms of exploitation. While many aspects of the general comment could be applied to kidfluencers, the following excerpt provides a general guidance for organisations and governments:

Businesses should respect children's rights and prevent and remedy abuses of their rights in relation to the digital environment. State parties have the obligation to ensure that businesses meet these responsibilities. (United Nations, 2021, p. 6)

Specific laws related to the kidfluencer industry have been introduced in only a few regions in the world. In the U.S., the Coogan Act (named after child star Jackie Coogan) was signed into law in 1939 to regulate child labour in the entertainment industry, but no equivalent laws have been enacted for child social media stars in most jurisdictions in the world (Cordeiro, 2021). In Europe, France has been one of the few early adopters related to children and social media and initiated laws applying to children as social media influencers, 'kidfluencers', in 2020 (BBC, 2020). States in the US, including California and Illinois, have also introduced laws that seek to protect 'kidfluencers' from potential exploitation by their parents (Latifi, 2024; Walker, 2024). The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's March 2023 interim report for the Digital Platforms Services Inquiry acknowledged key issues relevant to kidfluencers, including privacy concerns and possible labour exploitation issues (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission [ACCC], 2023).

Following a review of the literature, the following research questions were developed:

- How are Pixie Curtis and Scarlet Snow Belo portrayed through their Instagram accounts and in mainstream media, and what do these portrayals reveal about the cultural and legal contexts of Australia and the Philippines?
- What are the main ethical and legal issues found in SMI children's posts for brands?

Methodology

In this article, we focus on two case studies of SMI children, Pixie Curtis (aged 13 in 2024), and Scarlet Snow Belo (aged 9 in 2024), who are (or were) SMIs in Australia and the Philippines, respectively. We have chosen these children as their parents are also SMIs and business owners who have used their children to promote the parents' business interests since the children were toddlers. When the research began, both children's Instagram accounts were active, with regular posts. Both children have worked with major brands through sponsored content on their Instagram pages. Both children are also public figures, along with their parents, with prominent coverage in the mainstream media of their lives and their parents' lives. Therefore, the children are relevant case studies of influencer children who have grown up 'on Instagram' and began their 'careers' as babies/toddlers, with Pixie's first post on 18 June 2013, before she turned two, and Scarlet's first post on 15 May 2016, also before she turned two. Therefore, they could not possibly have been personally posting the content that was created in their baby, toddler, and pre-primary years, contrary to how their social media accounts were curated to appear as primarily theirs.

The purpose of case study research is usually systematic and holistic to provide a full and rich account of a network of relationships between a host of events and factors (Gummesson, 2003). For this paper, the case studies use publicly available online media stories about the children, with a detailed analysis of the Instagram posts of both children from March to June 2022, inclusive and then from July to the

end of November 2024. Analysis of this data is done with reference to visual narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008; Rose, 2001) following Tiidenberg and Whelan (2017) approach. Initially, the content was thematically analysed to gather prevalent themes that are communicated through the Instagram posts of Pixie and Scarlet. This was followed by a visual narrative analysis of specific posts to explain the layered and intertextual aspects of meaning making. Analysing posts between 2022 and 2024 allowed the researchers to view the development of the children's work and see if both the content and tone of the posts had changed as the children aged. The research also has spanned several years with the authors researching and following the children's posts since 2019, meaning the research meets the call of Van den Abeele, Hudders, and Vanwesenbeeck (2024) to conduct longitudinal work.

For the 2022 posts, 4 months of posts (1 March to 30 June) were copied and pasted for each child influencer into a spreadsheet where specific details were recorded such as hashtags used, tags of other people or brands mentioned in the posts, semiotic composition of the photos, videos, or texts shared, and the emerging visual themes (e.g. religion, sports, junk food eating, etc.). Four months allowed for enough posts to capture the main themes and brands featured. We felt that saturation of themes was reached after 4 months of data were analysed. For the 2024 posts, 5 months of posts (25 June to 30 November) were similarly collated and analysed. In 2024, the posts were less frequent, particularly for Pixie, hence an extra month was added for analysis. Each post was also checked for disclosure of sponsorship or payment from a brand. Themes were explored as the posts were examined. Analysing posts with a two-year gap allowed us to see differences in posting not only as the children grew but as more public awareness of children as social media influencers developed (for example, the Australian ABC Kidfluencers story aired in 2024) Basic quantitative analysis complements the thematic analysis conducted. Further, media coverage of the children was reviewed, using Google search of their names under the 'news' section of Google.

While the analysis of Instagram is important, given its popularity as a social media site, it is also problematic given the issues with downloading data, ethical privacy concerns, and the challenges of investigating a mainly visual medium (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Ethical advice was formally sought through the lead author's institution before analysis and write up were conducted. Ethical issues were also considered by the authors, particularly revealing the children's identities. As both children are considered public figures, given their large followings on social media, the blue tick for their accounts and their accounts being public, and the regular and extensive media coverage of their lives (often featured with their parents), it was decided, following a formal ethical review checklist that indicated the study was exempt from ethical review, that it was appropriate to allow their identities to be known and/or identified in this paper.

Background on the influencers and their home country contexts

Prior to discussing findings, we give a brief discussion of the context of both influencers' countries and the laws and guidelines relevant to influencer marketing. We then review Australia's and the Philippines' economy and laws relevant to the cases.

Australia, where Pixie Curtis lives, is an internationally competitive, advanced market economy with a relatively small population of almost 27 million (CIA, 2022a). Australia's

internet usage and social media usage are high, with 82.7% of the population regularly using social media in 2022 (Kemp, 2022). In November 2024, the Australian Government introduced world-first laws that would effectively ban (most) social media for children under the age of 16 (Given, 2024). The legislation was passed swiftly with bipartisan support, but its impact is not yet clear as the laws come into effect in December 2025. The actual platforms that will be banned are still under consideration, with the potential for YouTube Kids and messaging services to be exempt. Instagram is likely to be banned, but Instagram Teens is a question mark. However, as kidfluencer social media accounts are usually managed by their parents, it is unlikely they will need to be closed. There have also been some updates to laws and guidelines relevant to influencers that were introduced in 2022. The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) has made it unlawful from July 2022 for influencers to use testimonials to promote health-related products in Australia (TGA Advertising Guide 2022). The Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) also issued a media release in 2022 clarifying rules around influencers promoting financial products (ASIC, 2022). Other guidelines for influencers by organisations such as the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) and the Australian Influencers Marketing Council (AiMCO) are an attempt at self-regulation by the industry (AANA, 2021).

The Philippines, where Scarlet Snow Belo resides, is a developing nation with wealth concentrated in the hands of the rich. Poverty afflicts more than a fifth of the total population but is as high as 75% in some areas of the southern Philippines (CIA, 2022b). The Philippines has no official governance guidelines that apply to digital and social media practices. The country has one of the highest social media penetration rates globally. As of January 2022, out of the total country population of 111.8 million, 76.01 million Filipinos were social media users (Meltwater Report, 2022). Further, a total of 51.4% of social media users in the Philippines follow internet celebrities, double the global average rate at 22.6% (Meltwater Report, 2022). Despite the increasing online presence of Filipinos, there are no official regulations governing digital platforms and the influencer marketing ecosystems in the country (Demarchi, 2023).

Findings

The two SMI children, Pixie Curtis and Scarlet Snow Belo, have a large number of followers relative to their home country's population and both displayed a significant number of brand mentions in the posts. The findings section proceeds as follows: the main elements of each child's current Instagram site are presented, followed by quantitative analysis of brands and their own family business mentions, and finally thematic analysis of the posts is discussed.

Pixie Curtis's 'retirement' from social media was announced in late 2022, citing her need to focus more on her schoolwork. More recently, Pixie's mother, Roxy Jacenko, commenting on Australia's planned social media ban for children under 16, has said that she now regrets placing her daughter in the social media spotlight and that she supports the social media ban aimed at children (McGuire, 2024). Despite this, Pixie Curtis's Instagram site, last accessed by the authors in December 2024, showed the teen had 198,000 followers and 5,651 posts and was public. Her bio in 2024 said the account was managed by her mother, Roxy Jacenko, with Jacenko's account tagged, but had no other

information, whereas the 2022 bio described her interests as ‘shopping & retail’ and it also clearly showed Pixie’s two businesses at the time, Pixie’s Bows and Pixie’s Pix (an online toyshop). Saved stories at the top of her account in 2022 were Pixie’s 2022, travel, parties, school, shoots. In 2024, Pixie’s bio photo is one with her father. In 2022, Pixie’s bio photo was a ‘power pose’ with her in a green tracksuit, seated and with her feet on a desk. While she appears to be holding a fidget spinner toy, the shot is reminiscent of a ‘boss pose’ of someone holding a cigar.

Scarlet’s Instagram site, last accessed by the authors in December 2024, showed that the child had 5 million followers and 1,805 posts to that date. The account was managed by her parents, medical entrepreneurs Hayden Kho and Victoria Belo, with their personal Instagram accounts tagged in Scarlet’s account. Her bio said ‘*👧 I’m 9yo and I like making people happy*’ and describes her interests as 🧑‍🌾 Peoples and Pets ❤️. Scarlet’s bio and profile photo had not changed in 2 years, other than updating her age. In 2022, Scarlet had three saved Instagram stories on her profile page that showed her Europe trip in 2021 and trips to Kenya and Bohol, a resort island province in the Philippines. Scarlet’s bio photo was of her looking to the side, in a pink dress and matching hair bow. This bio photo is from Mega Magazine’s 30th anniversary cover featuring Scarlet holding a large flower. Mega Magazine is a women’s fashion magazine that is widely circulated in the Philippines.

Social media posts: authentic or promotional?

Pixie’s Instagram account from March to June 2022, inclusive, contained 66 (49.3%) brand mentions and 29 (21.6%) mentions of her own toy store, Pixies Pix, out of 134 posts. The brands mentioned were usually tagged with the brand or place’s handle rather than using hashtags. Declared paid collaborations included those with retailer Myer, Honest Gum (a chewing gum) and Life of Colours (felt-tip pens/drawing supplies). However, many posts did not declare a paid partnership. Like printed magazines, there was a combination of editorial (material with no brand mentions) and advertorial/advertising (material with brand mentions).

Pixie’s Instagram account had only 12 posts from 30 June 2024, to 4 December 2024 – a marked difference to the 66 posts in the 2022 four-month period. There were only four brand mentions, and it was not clear if these were sponsored posts or gifted products. The brands mentioned were Benefit Australia (an adult cosmetics brand), Seed Heritage (a clothing brand); Krocbling (a brand that makes ‘bling’ accessories for Croc shoes) and Findlay the Label (a make-up bag brand). The other posts were related to luxurious travel, with scenes from Paris, Italy and Greece, including those showing her on a yacht.

Scarlet’s Instagram brand practices in 2022 resembled the trend showed by Pixie Curtis’ Instagram endorsements from the same time. The total number of Scarlet’s 66 posts from March to June 2022 contained 16 (40%) brand mentions (some mentioned more than once). Her Instagram posts included repeated mentions of brands such as Jollibee, a home-grown fast-food chain brand in the Philippines that is now a top multinational chain with 1,500 outlets worldwide, Red Ribbon Cakes (a cakes/pastries chain), and Swatch (a watch brand), among others. Five per cent of Scarlet’s posts mentioned Belo Beauty, her mother’s dermatological and aesthetic clinic. Scarlet’s posts did not declare brand

sponsorship agreements with posts that included brand mentions appearing as undisclosed advertorial.

Scarlet's Instagram had 24 posts from 30 June to 4 December 2024, with mentions of six brands: Despicable Me, Swatch, Airwheel (luggage), Puma Philippines, Rightstart, and Harry Potter Studios. The parents' business, Belo Beauty, also featured in posts, with Scarlet collaborating with her parents in joint posts in some cases, including a post of her packing luxury gifts for friends prior to Christmas. Luxury travel was a theme of both children's pages, with Scarlet sharing posts with her parents of a trip to the Maldives in July 2024.

The following themes were uncovered through the analysis of the 2022 posts: the children were portrayed living luxury, lavish lifestyles, contrasting with some posts positioning them as 'girls next door' with everyday children's activities such as swimming and playing with their pets; branded opportunities were considerable in the girls' posts and many were not declared as paid; both posted brands on Instagram that not only catered to children but also to adults; both children were portrayed in some posts as 'working' or play-working; finally, both children used uniquely local cultural aspects to appeal to local followers and arguably to gain trust.

The 2024 posts showed an evolution relative to the girls' ages. Scarlet (then 9) was described by her mother as a 'tween' and was filmed enjoying an Olivia Rodrigo concert (8 October 2024) and, in another post, dressed in Christian Dior and wearing Puma shoes (17 September). Pixie's (at age 13) few posts from 2024 mostly focused on luxury travel and luxury goods.

Lavish luxe lifestyles or just everyday girls next door?

The children were often portrayed as highly affluent with the lifestyles that could best be described as 'aspirational'. Both children were pictured/videoed in posts where they wore expensive designer clothes, accessories, and jewellery and these posts also often tagged the brands featured. Posts were also featured of them attending 'launches' of movies, gala nights sponsored by fashion magazines, or other events that are usually mostly attended by adults, or staying in glamorous venues such as luxury hotels and resorts.

For example, Pixie's post from 24 March 2022, featured her in an Italian designer-label Fendi dress, titled 'Family Dinner Ready'. In a post from 27 May 2022, Scarlet, pictured eating ice-cream, was wearing Italian designer label Moschino. Both outfits have the brand name emblazoned across the girls' chests. Scarlet also appeared with her mother in a post from 24 May featuring a magazine cover that depicted them both wearing the top-end jewellery brand, Bulgari. The caption tagged the magazine and Bulgari:

Thank you @lifestyle_asia for letting mommy @victoria_belo and I play with snakes - oh I mean @bulgari's 🐍 collection! It was soo much fun, hope you have other animals next time 🐍.

The magazine cover, in an almost ironic pairing, combines a religious element with the promotion of the expensive snake jewellery from Bulgari with a photo of Mother and Daughter and the caption: 'How Vicki Belo is raising Scarlet to be God fearing . . . Plus the Belos shine in Bulgari's new Serpent collection'. Philippines is known to be

a predominantly Roman Catholic country, with the church often regarded as a moral compass of the society.

Pixie's luxury lifestyle was also reported on in mainstream media, with a news article from 2021 announcing that Pixie's mother had bought Pixie a \$270,000 Mercedes Benz, even though the child was nine and unable to drive. The article featured an Instagram video post from Pixie that showcases the interior of the car.

Other posts from 2022 were of the 'everyday' kid variety, with both children seen swimming and doing other exercise, and pictured with friends. Scarlet was also pictured reading, drawing, attending church on Sundays, and promoting healthy financial practices such as saving money at an early age. However, especially in the case of Scarlet, posts of the 'everyday' kind were often embedded with non-declared sponsorship agreements with brands of various products and services.

Branded opportunities

Both children have had brand partnerships, with some of Pixie's partnerships disclosed explicitly, whereas, for Scarlet there was no disclosure of any payment from brands in any of her posts despite brands being regularly tagged and featured in the photo/video content and captions. The 'clue' to a paid relationship for Scarlet with at least two brands is the prominence of these locally famous brands recurring in her Instagram posts. In the period March to June 2022, two major 'junk' food brands appeared regularly – international fast-food chain, Jollibee (the brand originated in the Philippines), and cake retailer Red Ribbon Bakeshop. These brands featured in any celebratory milestone posted on Scarlet's Instagram account, including her birthday, her parents' birthdays, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and Easter. Notably, these brands were not featured in 2024 posts analysed.

For example, Scarlet's birthday celebration posted on 5 March 2022, featured a photo of multiple fast-food offerings and the caption:

I'm celebrating my 7th birthday today (a late celebration) and of course my handa [party food] is everyone's favorite @jollibee Chickenjoy and Burger Yums! #JollibeeBirthdays.

A second birthday post from 6 March 2022, had multiple pictures and videos of cake and a selection of fast food that appear staged, with other 'more natural' photos of the party and friends, and a caption:

I had a simple swim party with friends yesterday, and it was made extra special by the yummy @redribbonbakeshop cakes, the delightful @jollibee kiddie meals, and the Pokémon friends from @madisoneventsinc who joined us. I think this is the best formula for a super fun and enjoyable birthday party. Happy 7th birthday to me! 🎂🍷🎮

On 28 June, Scarlet's post about Jollibee included the price and delivery options of Jollibee kiddie meals. Yet, the post was not declared as a sponsored advertisement:

You'll be excited to know what's inside the Jolly Kiddie Meal box this month. It's Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman together with their cute pets Ace, Krypto and PB! Joker is not included because we don't celebrate people who likes doing bad things to others. Bring joy at home and ask your mommy and daddy to order the 6-pc Chickenjoy Bucket so you can play with the whole DC League of Super-Pets set! Get them via dine in, take out, drive-thru, or



delivery through the Jollibee App, JollibeeDelivery.com, #87000, or on GrabFood & foodpanda. #Jollibee

The same sophisticated composition of an Instagram caption can be seen on Scarlet's multiple posts about the cake shop, Red Ribbon Bakeshop, on 18 June and 30 June as shown below. The authors note that the tone of the message and the purchasing details included clearly show brand endorsements but remain undeclared as such. It is also questionable if the caption was written by a seven-year-old child.

"It's Father's Day tomorrow. Do you have a surprise for him already? Here's an idea: @redribbonbakeshop's famous Triple Chocolate Roll, their yummy Chocolate Mousse, or BOTH! It's their special day. Let's make it memorable with #RedRibbon. #FathersDay

P.S. These cakes are about P300 only. Isn't that great?!"

Pixie's explicit brand partnership posts from 2022 with Australian department store Myer were captioned 'paid partnership', and posts occurred at key celebratory/commercial calendar moments, including Easter and Mother's Day. However, it is not clear in posts that featured many other brands whether money had changed hands or just free product was involved. The brands that featured without any disclosure of payment in 2022 included Crown (the chain of hotels and casinos in Australia), fast-food chain Karen's Diners, luxury pyjama brand Peter Alexander, and beauty brands such as MCOBeauty and Mermade Hair. It does appear that some posts featured free product sent as promotional items by brands. Giving 'free' product to influencers is a common marketing or public relations practice, with the marketers aiming to get a positive endorsement for their brands (Statista, 2023).

For example, streaming service Nickelodeon was tagged in a video unboxing of a gift with the caption, '*Okay this is actually epic! There was a ring light, a go-pro and a wireless microphone and speaker! Literally the ultimate content creator kit! Can't wait to use it this weekend - thank you so much @nickelodeon_au WOW  *'

There are posts uploaded as Instagram reels that showed Scarlet engaged in outreach and/or volunteer programmes such as visiting patients in hospitals and bringing along gifts. The latter, however, are revealed as products sponsored by the brands that Scarlet frequently posted about herself on her Instagram account. Scarlet promoted positive activities, including sports, outdoor activities, music, arts, giving, sharing, and healthy financial practices such as saving money at an early age. However, the posts embedded non-declared sponsorship agreements. The construction of post captions was also inauthentic in a way that it did not match the language proficiency of a seven-year-old.

Working it for the gram

In 2022, both children explicitly posted content that is 'work' related and promotional either of their own enterprises (managed by their parents) or their parents' enterprises. Pixie Curtis began her foray into retail in her toddler years (managed by her mother) with Pixie's Bows, and these gained international success. In her 2022 posts, her online toy retail outlet, Pixie's Pix Online, was featured regularly. Pixie's Instagram 2022 posts referenced and featured toys from her store, with special deals, competitions and the

latest offerings, and video demonstrations. For example, on 16 May 2022, Pixie posted a video of her with a ‘LOL OMG’ doll and Mermaze doll, and the caption:

My biggest warehouse sale has just been extended and stacks of super cool new stuff added including accessories! We’ve also just dropped some cool new products ❤️

Posts also featured Pixie ‘working’ – visiting the toy warehouse on 30 March 2022, in her school uniform, with the caption ‘Stopped in to help the team with the orders after school – there was a stack of new arrivals - ❤️👉 @pixiespixonline’

Mainstream media coverage of Pixie’s success as a ‘business child’ was also prominent until late 2022, with headlines such as ‘Inside the life of mini business mogul Pixie Curtis’ and ‘Pixie Curtis can “retire at 15” thanks to the success of her toy empire’.

In a similar fashion, Scarlet also used her posts in 2022 and 2024 to promote her parents’ business interests, including their offshoot brand, ‘Belo Baby’, that sells skincare products for babies and toddlers. The brand was created when Scarlet was born and was included in one of her first posts before she turned two. For example, in March, Scarlet posted: ‘It’s my birthday tomorrow and I have a gift for you (if you’re lucky)! Follow @belobabylove on IG and they’ll tell you how to win these gift packs. 🎁👉’

The Belo dermatology and surgical centre business was also promoted in June, with a picture of two prominent Philippine SMIs who were pretending to be cosmetic treatment patients that were being attended to by Scarlet: ‘I’ve two new patients to practice on at our @belobeauty clinic at home. I don’t know what to do with them because they both already look nice. @alexilacad @kdestrada_’

Both children’s posts were also highly gendered, with the older Pixie pictured having her hair and make-up done, displaying manicured nails, or unboxing skincare or make-up. Scarlet was often pictured with her mother in matching or complementary ‘event’ outfits.

In summary, expensive, luxury brands and destinations were regularly featured. The children’s posts were peppered with references to brands through the photo and video imagery, hashtags and tags. Paid partnerships were not disclosed in Scarlet’s posts, although regular mention of such brands as junk food retailer Jollibee point to paid partnerships in place. Pixie disclosed some relationships with the title ‘paid partnership’, but some posts did not include any disclosure. Both children linked posts to promotion of their parents’ or their own business interests. The two children regularly had content that appealed to the local audience while also being international, with strong local cultural references. Most of the Instagram posts of both child influencers gathered thousands of Instagram likes and generally positive comments. Engagement was often in the form of positive emojis such as hearts and heart eyes. Brands are attracted to these accounts because of their presumed authenticity and high engagement rates (Koevska Kharoufeh, 2021).

Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis shows that the two children were being used to promote, often without disclosure of payment, a myriad of brands, including some that are obviously for children, such as toys and fast food, but others that would usually be aimed at adults including restaurants, expensive resorts, holidays, and retail outlets. Further, high-end

brands such as luxury fashion items were promoted by both girls. Pixie's more recent promotions were related to skincare, make-up and other beauty products. Scarlet's promotions did not contain any declaration of payment amidst frequently reported posts of locally famous product brands that were often embedded in posts about key life milestone celebratory events with subtle but sophisticated marketing style offers or calls to action included in the posts. Pixie's infrequent posts in 2024 showed a marked difference to the previous 10 years of posts that had contained myriad brand mentions.

Our analysis also raises concerns of the children as workers and raises the question of labour laws for children, echoing insights from Ågren (2022) and the issues of privacy and exploitation, mirroring the issues raised in legal scholarship (e.g. Haley, 2020; Masterson, 2021) about the digital rights of a child. The two children's accounts were promoting fast food and materialistic consumption. Both children promoted products that envisage a highly gendered future for girls that could include plastic surgery, make-up, and high-end fashion. The issues surrounding anxiety related to social media work in adults (Lehto, 2022) are something that may warrant further attention related to children, given the children are expected to perform their childhood for a consuming audience on an almost daily basis. Given that both countries currently do not have clear guidelines on how kidfluencers' labour is monetised, there is little known about legal parameters that inform and protect children's participation in this multi-billion-dollar industry.

This article has limitations as it only focuses on the case studies of two high profile influencer children in Australia and the Philippines and only examines publicly available social media accounts of the children that are managed by their parents. Each country has different rules and guidelines related to social media practice. The children were not interviewed and nor were the parents, so there is room to gain an understanding of the behind-the-scenes promotional practices that are at play in future studies.

Employing children as SMIs is a global phenomenon, and future research of children in other countries could show local and global similarities and differences. This research focused on Instagram, a popular platform across the world. However, the rise of TikTok has also seen a take-up of children performing on this platform (both Scarlet and Pixie also had a presence in 2022 on TikTok and their TikTok videos were reshared on Instagram). Questions are already being raised in the media about the potential exploitation and sexualisation of children and teens through TikTok (Hussain, 2022). YouTube is also a favoured platform for SMI children and so both platforms are sites worthy of research related to PR and influencers. The findings from these two cases could be seen as raising more questions than they answer. Future research could involve interviews with parents as managers of SMI children and potentially the SMI children themselves to gauge the motivations and rationalisations for the practice. Surveys and/or interviews with followers of SMI children are also required. One area of opportunity for further research is to investigate the 'invisible hands' – the marketing and public relations practitioners and agents who liaise and work with parents and their children on behalf of brands.

In summary, our longitudinal investigation of the Instagram sites of two prominent social media influencers in different cultural settings raises significant legal and ethical concerns, including the commodification of the child, undeclared advertising, and child labour. It is apparent that some children and their parents can make significant sums of money from the children's playbour, and the media landscape's changes have facilitated this with little

regulation. As some of the kidfluencers come of age and reflect on their time growing up in the spotlight, they will have a chance to speak of their time as Instafamous celebrities.

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