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Kidfluencers, public relations and human rights: An exploration of the impact on the human rights of children as social media influencers within public relations and promotional practice

Catherine Archer
Edith Cowan University

Kate Mirandilla Delmo
University of Technology Sydney

Abstract

In this article we explore the human rights of children as important stakeholders in public relations (PR) practice by examining the phenomenon of social media influencer children, commonly termed kidfluencers. Children's human rights in the digital realm have been a focus for the United Nations and those researching from media, communications and law disciplines, but have largely been ignored by PR scholarship. Given social media influencer relations is now an important part of PR practice, and a multibillion-dollar global industry, the need for more research on the genre from a PR perspective is apparent. Our research, using the UN (Human) Rights of the Child as a framework, and examining publicly available media reports on the topic of kidfluencers, uncovers key areas of concern for children working as kidfluencers, and for PR practitioners working with these children. We argue for more focus on children as stakeholders in PR research and suggest that PR practitioners and organisations need to put children at the centre of their thinking.

Corresponding author:
Dr Catherine Archer, School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University, 2 Bradford Street, Mt Lawley, Western Australia. 6050. Australia.
Email: Catherine.archer@ecu.edu.au

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Introduction

Children are important agents, actors and stakeholders within society and the digital realm. As stakeholders for organisations, children come under the purview of public relations (PR) practitioners and scholars. This article addresses an important area of PR practice: working with and through social media influencer children, an area that has not yet been given due consideration in PR research. As children spend more time online, the United Nations (2021) and digital communication scholars (see, for example, Livingstone and Third, 2017) have focused on the human rights of children related to the digital environment. Scholars from media, communication, and the law (to name some disciplines) have researched and provided commentary on the child social media influencer phenomenon through the lens of children's human rights (see, for example, Fishbein, 2022; Shomai et al., 2024). Simultaneously, PR has adapted to the changing terrain of social media with the use of social media influencers (SMIs) in communication campaigns now a common practice (Borchers and Enke, 2021; Davis and Hobbs, 2020; Gallagher, 2021).

Influencer relations practice now includes working with children, often through the children's parents as their agents (Archer and Delmo, 2023; Fitch, 2020), and targeting children as stakeholders and consumers. We explore the role of PR in relation to children's human rights specifically when children are key players in the influencer ecosystem as social media influencers or kidfluencers. PR as a scholarly discipline has remained largely silent on the use of children within PR campaigns or their role as stakeholders of brand organisations. This scholarly silence is despite the baby and child market generating a revenue of US$4.84bn worldwide in 2024 (Statista 2024) and children and families being important stakeholders for many organisations worldwide. Further, we examine the human rights issues for kidfluencer children reported by mainstream media. We write this article as a provocation, to bring to light PR's myopia about critical issues related to the increasing involvement of PR in the influencer economy. Our paper is largely conceptual and exploratory given the paucity of attention within PR scholarship to children in the digital realm.

When we presented an early version of this research at the post-International Communication Association conference in 2024, one audience member asked an important question regarding our work: "But isn't this just marketing"? It is right to query our work's legitimacy to be part of a critical PR conference as we acknowledge that the work of practitioners in influencer relations is now often referred to as influencer marketing. Indeed, the term influencer marketing has arisen as a catch-all title for brands and organisations when they work with SMIs to gain influence among stakeholders. Its name (and the fact that money often changes hands) could be seen as coming under the realm of marketing or advertising (Belanche et al., 2021).

However, while marketing and advertising are part of the kidfluencer ecosystem and have claimed the use of influencers as their territory, PR as a field has also adapted to this important form of stakeholder communication (Borchers and Enke, 2021). For example, the largest global PR (communications) agency, Edelman, (also self-described as a leading global voice on trust) promotes its expertise in influencer marketing on its website. Other top global PR firms, including Weber Shandwick and BCW, promote their abilities in this space with BCW labelling its work as influencer advocacy.

Within the specific field of working with children as social media influencers, there are specialist PR agencies who promote their expertise in this niche but lucrative work. For example, Australian agency Piccolo PR, (https://www.piccolopr.com.au/expertise/kids-pr-marketing) promotes itself on its website in these terms:

> Kids PR Agency Melbourne Piccolo PR offers you a vibrant, specialist PR and comms team who take pride in elevating your brand story….Tapped into the discerning kids and family PR spaces, we maintain close relationships with influential social media players and the most trusted voices in the market to position your brand with sophistication and finesse. (website accessed in 27 March 2024).

American agency KidStuff PR says it does traditional media placements but also works in influencer marketing (https://kidstuffpr.com/).

Given that many PR practitioners work in influencer relations, we shed light on important questions related to working with children as social media influencers by focusing our attention on this Special Issue's call to answer, in part, the following question: What (new) insights can a critical, human-centred approach to PR and promotional communication theory and practice provide about our collective (in)humanity in the digital age?

Literature review

This section starts with an overview of the child social media influencer phenomenon. We then discuss most recent research of influencer relations within PR practice and outline recent academic work from other fields on kidfluencers. We also discuss the evolution of children's human rights as a concept to set the stage in discussing children as workers first in related entertainment industries, and eventually their ability to attract and engage with followers as SMIs.

With the rise of social media, mothers who had a large social media following (and worked as SMIs themselves) as 'mum/mommy bloggers' (Archer, 2019) began 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 (Abidin, 2015). As time went on, other parents who were not SMIs themselves began to purposefully manage their children as kidfluencers. The children are enlisted by brands to appeal solely to other children (for example, through the popular genre of 'unboxing videos') (Rotimi et al., 2024) or often to appeal to both

children and adults (Archer and Delmo, 2023). Another genre of social media influence is the family influencer with whole families providing curated content on social media, garnering attention and promoting brands (Abidin, 2017).

Within this nexus of online activities involving kidfluencers, the notion of constructed portrayals of everyday activities of children challenges the concept of trust in SMI brand endorsements (Ågren 2022). The content of kidfluencers is created with input by their parents as coach and manager, creating two layers/ of non-transparent staging or what could be termed as performative authenticity (Shtern et al., 2019) as there are more actors invited to participate in this curated/constructed environment (Van Den Abeele et al., 2024). Relationships with brands working with children and their parents are also not always transparent (Archer and Delmo, 2023).

Children's human rights as the central actors in this lucrative influencer industry remain to be fully explored. This article contributes to that conversation by exploring how child social media influencers are used in PR and promotional practices, drawing on children's rights concerns raised in publicly available online media reports. By adopting a critical, human-centred lens on influencer marketing involving children, we spotlight troubling online practices that compromise children's fundamental dignity and deepen existing social inequalities. We argue that PR and related industries must reflect on their role in the rapidly growing business of using children in promotional content. Drawing on the historical precedent of child actors in film and television, we highlight the urgent need to consider appropriate regulations to protect children from potential exploitation. We highlight several ethical and human rights concerns, including the impact on child audiences exposed to often undisclosed paid or advertorial content. We also examine the effects on kidfluencers themselves, whose playbour (Authors, 2023) – labour and play - generates income not only for their families but also for global brands that profit from children's eyeball-pulling power. We argue that PR capitalism (Cronin, 2018) now views children not only as a powerful consumer market, but also as human capital for brands to use. We use the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child as a framework guiding our analysis.

Influencer relations in public relations practice

Even as practice in influencer marketing, also known as influencer relations, has seen huge growth for PR consultancies, the academic literature has been slow to catch up (Borchers and Enke, 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Two recent systematic reviews of PR research in social media in the previous decade published in *Public Relations Review* highlighted that there has been limited research on the role of SMIs in PR (see Roth-Cohen and Avidar, 2022; Wang et al., 2021). Both studies explicitly called for more research into SMIs and PR.

The selling power of these 'authentic' social media influencer (SMI) storytellers is well documented (Audrezet et al., 2018), and their growing influence has further blurred the lines between PR, marketing, and advertising (Borchers and Enke, 2021; Navarro et al., 2020).

Recent PR research has focused on influencer relations such as, for example, Smith et al. (2023: 7) who argue that 'influencer relations works within the sphere of PR as a tool for long-term impact in the form of mutually beneficial relationships for organisation and influencer.' They contrast influencer relations with influencer marketing that manages the paid endorsement of influencer content. Smith et al. (2023) argue for best practice in influencer relations that is (1) based on playing the long game, (2) 'active' listening should be the norm for both parties and manipulation and exploitation should be avoided', and (3) practitioners should grant creative freedom to influencers but be 'partners in the creative process'. Influencer relations is a personal endeavour, so influencers should be treated as friends rather than media outlets.

Borchers and Enke's (2022) investigation of influencer industry ethics found 10 areas of concern that their interviewees considered important, namely: transparency, sincerity, truthfulness, caring, professionalism, reciprocity, respect, loyalty and social responsibility. They did not explicitly mention any ethical concerns related to practitioners working *with* children, but under the term 'caring' did highlight concerns around marketing products *to* children and the possibility of exploiting children as consumers. Davies and Hobbs' (2020) investigation into the motives, methods and strategies of PR practitioners related to using SMIs found that practitioners may be predisposed to persuasive strategies and covert activities that are inconsistent with ethical ideals of best practice for organisational PR.

To sum up, while some work has been done related to influencer relations in the PR field, there has been limited focus in the discipline on children either as consumers or SMI creators.

Kidfluencers in related academic research

Within other academic realms (e.g. childhood studies, law, sociology, and media and communication), research on kidfluencers is growing. Two recent studies have involved interviews with the kidfluencers themselves. Shomai et al. (2024), highlighted the need for more regulation related to children as social media influencers based on their interviews with former child influencers (over 18) who were reflecting on their time in the spotlight. Key issues associated with being a kidfluencer according to the interviewees were: work-life balance implications, how safe they felt online and in the physical world, how they maintained friendships, pressure felt in elevating their profiles, and their mental health and well-being. Van Den Abeele et al. (2024)'s analysis of their interviews with children and their manager parents (i.e., 'momagers') concluded that essential measures to effectively safeguard the well-being and privacy of children are still lacking. Similarly, Ågren's (2022) visual analysis of kidfluencer content found that there is urgent need for a legal framework for child labour on social media. A conceptual paper within the marketing realm used paradox theory to highlight the tensions related to influencer marketing and kidfluencers including focusing on the concept of playbour amongst children (Rotimi et al., 2024). More recently there have been calls by Hudders and Beuckels (2024) for more research with the children as influencers that explores both the positive and negative

impacts of children working as SMIs. Most work up to date has, they suggest, posited a reductionist view of the industry and complex ecosystem involved.

The evolving notion of the human rights of children and child labour

The focus of this paper is the human rights of children as digital media influencers interacting with brand representatives, followers, and other stakeholders in their work including PR practitioners. The following section reviews the historic development of the concept of children's (human) rights and its more recent application of their rights in the digital realm. The Declaration of the Rights of the Child was established in Geneva in 1924, marking the first recognition within the international legal framework of fundamental rights for children's wellbeing in their growth and development (Siewert, 2024). In 1989, the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) by the United Nations was adopted. Within the CRC, Article 32 says that Governments should protect children from work that is dangerous or that might harm their health or education, emphasising the overarching principle of the child's best interests. A simplified version of the CRC is contained in the appendix for reference.

Guided by the literature review that we conducted for this paper, and a careful reading of the CRC articles, we have highlighted that the following are most relevant to the scope of our paper. Note the wording of these articles is the simplified version from UNICEF. (UNICEF, 2024)

(1) Article 16 Children have a right to privacy: The law should protect them from attacks against their way of life, their good name, their family and their home,
(2) Article 18 Both parents share responsibility for bringing up their children and should always consider what is best for each child,
(3) Article 31 Children have the right to relax, play and to join in a wide range of leisure activities, and
(4) Article 36, Children should be protected from any activities that could harm their development.

Since the adoption of the 1989 UN CRC, the growth of children's use of digital technologies (often not designed with children in mind) had the UN respond to the question of children's rights in the digital environment. In 2021, recognising that 'the digital environment is becoming increasingly important across many aspects of children's lives' (United Nations, 2021: 1), the UN issued a 'General Comment on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment'. The General Comment was issued following consultation with children. It applied the initial CRC to parameters of the digital world with headings relevant to the 'kidfluencer industry' such as 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: 6).

In September 2024, the UN made children's human rights in the digital realm more explicit by developing the Global Digital Compact at the Summit of the Future in New York City. In the final text, states reaffirmed their determination to protect children's rights in the digital world. Notably, they committed to 'strengthen legal and policy frameworks to protect the rights of the child in the digital space' and to 'prioritise the development and implementation of national online child safety policies and standards' by 2030 (5 Rights Foundation, 2025). According to the UN, the purpose of the Global Digital Compact (GDC) is to establish an inclusive global framework that requires multi-stakeholder action to overcome digital, data and innovation divides. The compact is expected to outline principles, objectives and actions for advancing an open, free, secure and human-centered digital future for all, one that is anchored in universal human rights in upholding the UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2024). The UN has invited submissions to the General Day of Comment (GDCC), with organisations like Save the Children contributing input focused on children's rights (Save the Children, 2023).

It is important to acknowledge that there are complexities and debates related to children's digital and human rights recognising that even the concept of 'childhood' is a slippery one. Media scholar Sonia Livingstone is a prominent advocate for children's rights in the digital age, emphasising that efforts to protect children should not come at the expense of their agency, right to participate, or the benefits they can gain from digital media (see, e.g., Livingstone and Third, 2017). Children and parents are at the centre of Livingstone's research.

Children in promotional practice and entertainment: Across different media and through the years

Children and babies have been used in PR, advertising and promoting brands, services, and experiences for many years often to appeal to adults and sometimes other children (Ågren, 2022). Children are also frequently used in not-for-profit, humanitarian, and other fundraising communication/PR and marketing initiatives (Seu, 2015).

The use of children in media and promotions spans a long history, dating back to the early days of movies, television, radio, and print. A prominent example is child actor Shirley Temple, whose 'star power' in the 1930s and 40s captured widespread attention. Another example is Jodie Foster, who, as a three-year-old, was featured in a Coppertone sunscreen ad before transitioning to become a child movie star in the 1970s (Baker et al., 2022). These child stars were known to generate revenue from childhood to adulthood (Baker et al., 2022). However, as discussed earlier in this paper, the practice of brands employing children through agreements with their parents is a relatively recent development. This trend often follows the rise of parents becoming social media stars themselves, having gained the skills to effectively liaise and collaborate with brand representatives such as PR and marketing professionals (Abidin, 2015, 2017). The

economic and emotional spheres are intertwined, with mothers specifically and women in general viewed as important consumer target public/markets by brands and those employed to promote the brands (Ågren, 2022).

It has been shown that using children's personal stories for example in charitable fundraising initiatives, encourages females to donate considerably more than males. This is partly explained by feelings of "empathic concern" among women (van Rijn et al. 2019). Research shows that children are effective in capturing audience attention and can evoke feelings of "empathic concern," particularly among women (Van Rijn, Quiñones, and Barham, 2019). This is likely due to the common perception of children as innocent—and, by extension, inherently authentic.

When social media posts are constructed on behalf of children, the concept of authenticity of personal or human brands (Audrezet et al., 2018) presents a new dimension to explore. The kidfluencer business model exacerbates concerns on trust and authenticity because not only is a parent (often an influencer as well) not always fully revealing the nature of brand sponsorships/relationships when they ask their children to pose on social media, but also the image that the child creates on social media is not entirely of the child's own making, with input from their parents as managers and content curators (Jorge et al., 2022; Masterson, 2021) and potentially PR and marketing practitioners working on behalf of brands (Ågren, 2022). Children are on the 'bottom step', doing labor by just existing, in a world where privacy, childhood, motherhood and entrepreneurship are interwoven (Ågren, 2022). This 'bottom step' is not aligned with the spirit and intention of the United Nations' Convention of the Rights of the Child and therefore within PR more research is required related to children's human rights as influencers.

Based on the above literature review, we explored the following research question:

What are the key concerns and themes, related to children's human rights and kidfluencers, reported in English language newspapers in the past year?

Methodology

This study uses qualitative content analysis of texts (Weerakkody, 2015; Daymon and Holloway 2010) that include publicly available mainstream media stories that were generated from Factiva, a research tool that aggregates information from licensed and free sources globally. Online news stories proved to be rich sources of information that point to ethical, human rights, and legal concerns raised by various stakeholders around kidfluencer experiences and practices. Content analysis of texts is useful for those undertaking research from a cultural perspective, as 'documents as cultural texts provide valuable knowledge of the cultural dimensions of the marketplace or of the production and consumption of culture' (Daymon and Holloway, 2010: 277). Further, our form of textual analysis is discourse analysis, described by Weerakkody (2015: 272) as a 'method of data analysis used to examine how a topic or subject gets 'talked about' in society and media messages, to uncover the power relations embedded in Society.'

Using Factiva, we searched for media articles on kidfluencers that were published within the last 12 months from August 2023 to August 2024. This timeframe was chosen as it is most recent and is also a period where new laws have been introduced in some

countries related to children as SMIs. We searched for articles written in English that contained 'child influencers' and/or 'kidfluencers' in their titles. Out of the 474 documents that were initially generated, 451 were considered as valid entries for thematic coding. We considered 23 articles as negligible because either they were duplicate articles or the story length (i.e. mostly two paragraphs) was not consistent with the detailed information provided by the selected articles.

Findings

Global interest in kidfluencer stories

We found that children working as SMIs or kidfluencers is a global phenomenon. Factiva automatically categorised the total number of generated articles used for thematic coding ($N = 451$) based on their regions/places of publication, subjects/topics mentioned in the articles, names of companies, brands, industries, and sectors mentioned in the stories, and the media organisations that published the stories.

Out of the 451 articles on kidfluencers, most were reported on by the media in the United States ($n = 259$), followed by the United Kingdom ($n = 73$), Australia ($n = 36$), China ($n = 19$), Canada ($n = 15$), India ($n = 15$), and Israel ($n = 10$). The place of publication did not mean that other kidfluencer practices in other countries and/or regions were not mentioned. For example, cases in various European countries such as in Spain, France, and Italy were mentioned in stories published in the US, the UK, and in Australia. Similarly, kidfluencer experiences in Brazil and Singapore were also included in stories published in the other countries mentioned.

Table 1 below shows the most mentioned topics that were discussed in kidfluencer stories. Out of 451, 23 and 22 solely focused on kidfluencer issues related to child labour and regulation/government policy, respectively.

Most mentioned industries in the media stories are on skin care products, baby products, and advertising, gambling, and streaming services. These stories illustrate clusters of brands and/or services mostly associated with kidfluencers that were reported on by the media. Table 2 below shows the breakdown.

In terms of the most mentioned names of companies, Table 3 below shows that Meta, YouTube, McDonalds Corporation, and the US Federal Trade Commission have been included in the media stories. The list, however, is inconclusive. It does not include other brands, both multinational (such as Sephora, e.g.) and local to countries (such as mobile companies), that were mentioned in other media stories included in the sample.

Kidfluencer stories were published globally such as the Canadian Press, CE NoticiasFinancieras (Latin America)Daily Mail, Washington Post, New York Times, Chicago Daily Herald, and Financial Times, among others.

The following section shows some of the key human rights concerned covered in the news stories, based on the three UN CRC Articles that we selected for this study.

Table 1. Most mentioned subjects in media reports on child influencers from August 2023 – August 2024. (Source: Factiva).

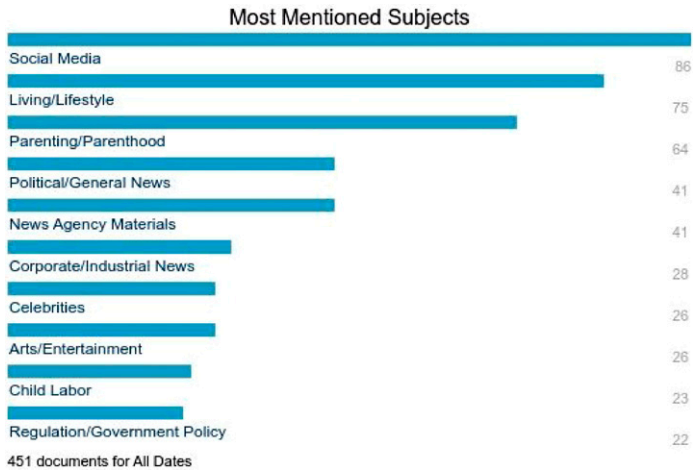
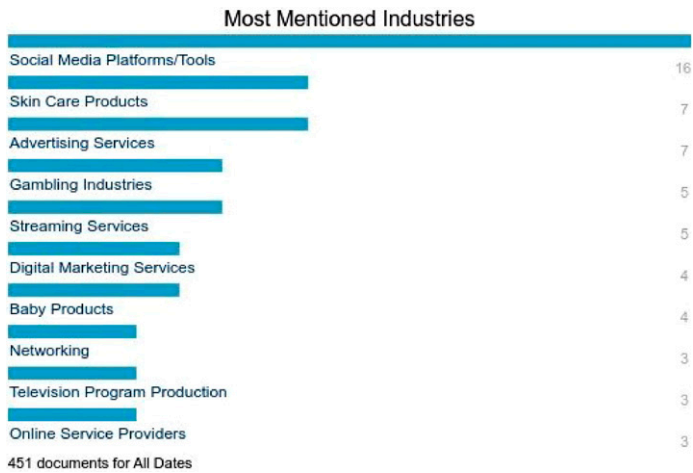


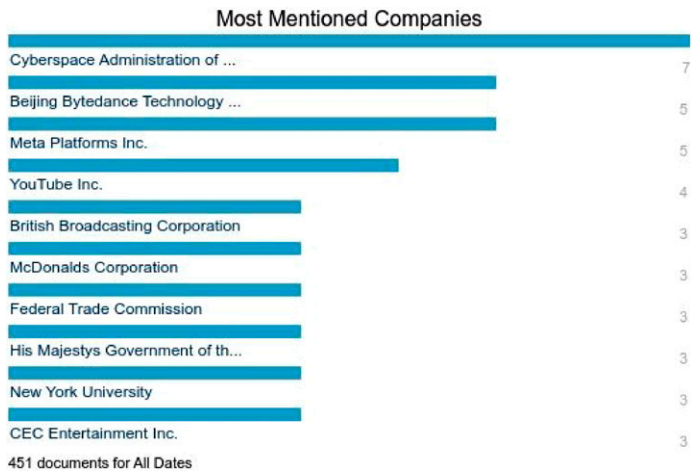
Table 2. Most mentioned industries in media reports on child influencers from August 2023 – August 2024. (Source: Factiva).



On children's right to privacy: Article 16

Media reports analysed describe cases that raise ethical concerns around a kidfluencer's right to privacy. For example, in May 2024, CNN published a story about Barrett, a former kidfluencer who is now 25 years old. The story quoted Barrett in saying, *"I was in fourth grade. I was 9 years old. The date was September 9, 2009. And my mom posted*

Table 3. Most mentioned companies in media reports on child influencers from August 2023 – August 2024. (Source: Factiva).



...something like, "Oh my God, my baby girl's a woman today. She got her first period." A lot of my friends and their parents had social media, so it was super embarrassing."

In the US, Chris McCarty, a 19-year-old from the University of Washington, is a former kidfluencer who has started the organisation, Quit Clicking Kids to support financial compensation of kids on social media. The media article published by CNN quoted McCarty in explaining, *"I have spoken with some... child actors, and one of the things that really stood out is that when they were filming as child actors, there was a very clear distinction between when they were on and when they were off camera...When they were home at the end of the day, they knew they didn't have to perform anymore. But this new generation of children, there's no home to go to at the end of the day where they can disconnect, because the camera is inside the house. It's like living in a movie set all day, every day."* (CNN, 2024).

On children right to relax, play, and enjoy leisure activities: Article 31

France, the US, Spain, and Italy lead the world in government legislation around kidfluencers. Majority of the media reports analysed in the 12-month period raise the need for governments around the world to act in enforcing laws that espouse children's labour rights in the unregulated digital space. The media reports highlight that the labour practices kidfluencers are asked to participate in blur the lines between what is considered as play and relaxation versus paid labour. As an article published by Channel News Asia in June 2024 states, "*it must first be recognised that so long as money is generated, kidfluencing is work."*

Many media reports cited Illinois as the first state in the US to pass a law in July 2024 around the right of children to access financial income at the age of 16 from monetary deals made on their behalf as kidfluencers. The law mandates parents of children under the age of 16 to open a trust fund that their children can access for income generated by brand and marketing deals that they participated in when they were younger. The law requires parents of kidfluencers to record the amount of content created and the income that was generated from it. Minnesota will follow as the second state enforcing a law on the right of children to be paid of their labour as kidfluencers. The law, expected to take effect in 2025, indicates that kidfluencers at the age of 14 can access proceeds that are saved as a trust fund that was set up by their parents.

Other media stories report that other states in the US such as Maryland, California, Georgia, Missouri, Ohio, Arizona, Washington, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania have bipartisan-supported proposed bills around protection of child influencers especially on monetary compensation in exchange for their contribution in content production. Maryland has proposed a bill for minors' right to be forgotten, a provision that is not include in the Illinois law. This right provides agency to a child to remove content from online platforms if s/he wishes to do so. Proponents of the bill highlight that the existing so-called Coogan Law in the US (the law that applies to children working as child entertainers in mainstream media) does not protect children's right for just monetary compensation because it fails to capture complex labour structures around content production in the influencer economy.

In countries such as Brazil, China, Canada, Singapore, India and Australia, the need for legislation around protection of children's rights as kidfluencers is similarly recognised, but concrete moves towards this direction is slow. Singapore laws exist to protect children younger than 13 years old from being employed. "*However, the focus is on the type of work children can undertake in industrial settings versus non-industrial settings, and there are no express regulations for the work of child actors or kidfluencers. This is perhaps because such work is considered to be "participation in artistic performances", which is an exception to the prohibition of child labour under Convention 138 issued by the International Labour Organization that Singapore has ratified,*" explained by an article published by the Channel News Asia (2024).

Media stories also highlight that brand relationships with products such as skin care and cosmetics are prevalent amongst kidfluencers. In Brazil, kidfluencers play grown-ups as shown in the increasing trend called "*Get Ready With Me"* (GRWM). The latter are occasions for brands to be mentioned by kidfluencers as they enact role-plays to show their skin care and make-up routine as they prepare for parties with friends. Media reports show that the age of these kidfluencers range from 13 to 15 years old, still relatively young to be consuming luxury cosmetic brands catered to adults. This is like the Sephora Kids phenomenon in the UK where young girls promote make-up brands sold in Sephora, a multinational skin care/cosmetics/perfume distributor, to Generation Alpha, i.e., those born from 2010 (Financial Times, 2024). In India, GRWM also has increasing popularity. The Mint Lounge (2024) reported about a mother of a kidfluencer who describes that her daughter *works on the content almost every alternate day from 9pm-3am. The recording happens on an iPhone 13, gifted by her mother last year, and editing on Instagram. She's*

learnt everything on her own, Poonam says proudly. "I just help her zero in on the content and her outfit. The make-up, the editing...she watches many videos to learn all these skills; it's all her hard work."

In Singapore, the reels shared by Ember Yong on Instagram featuring her children are one of the most popularly viewed in the country with 288,000 followers. According to the media report, *"Ms Yong's channel chronicles the activities, travel, school and home life of her twin girls and their 5-year old brother Luke. The posts average 1,000 "likes" with paid posts featuring her cherubic kids promoting everything from cars to tuition centres, fashion and toys. HypeAuditor's Instagram pricing calculator places the estimates rate for a post on @leialauren at US$1,100 to US$1,500."* (Channel News Asia, 2024).

While most of the articles reviewed focused on the predominant narrative of children working, an (Australian) ABC article was one of few to highlight parents' views on the positive impacts for children. According to one parent quoted: *"It's given her more exposure around the world for the future, and it allows her ... to possibly have more opportunities and to realise that she could go [down] many different avenues."* (Longbottom et al., 2024).

On children's right to be protected against any harm: Article 36

One of the primary types of harm on kidfluencers reported in the last 12 months is their vulnerability to sexual exploitation. This has been identified as a common concern across countries that have been reported on above. Media reports on Australian kidfluencers revealed the growing number of adult male followers who are strangers to teen accounts of kidfluencers. "*Of the top 50 accounts with large male followings, half were child modelling accounts*", according to HypeAuditor, a social media demographics company who examine online behaviour and practices (2024, Channel News Asia). The news article described that*"the older men also left hundreds of comments on the pages of underage girls lusting after them, including "sweet and sensual", "hot as coffee", "so cute" and telling one child she was beautiful beautiful beautiful perfect princess, you in a bikini are the best I love you beautiful princess."*

Australia's current e-Safety Commissioner, Julie Inman-Grant, was cited in several media articles when she explained in a recent documentary produced by a leading investigative journalism program in the country, Four Corners, that Australia needs to be proactive in ensuring safety of children, kidfluencers in particular, from verbal, sexual, mental and emotional harm that can come from online behaviour of their social media followers.

Several media stories analysed highlighted cases in Brazil where kidfluencers are used to promote online gambling ads in their social media platforms. The São Paulo Public Prosecutor's Office has requested explanation from Meta about why profiles of kidfluencers as young as 6 years old embed online betting games of chance such as soccer games. These kidfluencers based in Brazil have large follower bases ranging from 200, 000 to over 9.5 million. An extreme case reported described how a 17-year-old Brazilian kidfluencer died by suicide after losing R$50,000 from the online slot machine, Fortune Tiger ("Little Tiger Game") (CE Noticias Financieras English, 2024). The same media

article described, *"a 16-year-old teenager, who became known for her dance moves and has 7.7 million followers on Instagram, advertises bets among her posts filled with images in which she appears in sensual poses."*

Due to the pressure to garner attention and views online, the desire for increased engagement with followers was noted in several media articles analysed for this study where extreme practices of parents were documented. One example is the Hobson family in the US who curates the YouTube channel called Fantastic Adventures (Channel News Asia, 2024). It has 700,000 followers with more than 240 million views. Machelle Hackney, the adoptive parent of seven children, runs the social media account. The media report says that "*Hackney not only kept all the money made from the channel, she would hit, pepper-spray, sexually assault them or withhold food if they did not comply with production requirements or simply forgot their lines,"* (Channel News Asia, 2024).

Other pranks recorded on videos by parents instilled emotional harm on their children. To quote a media report, *In Singapore, influencer Naomi Neo faced backlash in 2022 after she posted a TikTok video of a prank she played on her then four-year-old son. While her son is not a kidfluencer in his own right, he is featured regularly on her social media. Neo and her husband let her son watch what seemed like a dance video on the phone, then ran out of the room, locking their son in it, as a "ghost" appears on the screen. Neo's son appeared frightened, screaming and crying. The video gained 22.9 million views. Other pranks Neo has pulled on her son, resulting in tears, included pretending he had become invisible (over 14 million views) and pretending she was not there to pick him up from preschool (54.1 million views)* (Channel News Asia, 2024).

In India, a media report stated that algorithm-driven business models can harm children. *"Linking of self-esteem to constant public approval, with unrefined coping skills in childhood, is dangerous because a noticeable portion of what makes a video successful online is the algorithm, and if a video does not do well, the child may not understand that. Instead they might take it as a personal attack on their character, skills or efforts. It's an ethical concern. Plus, you are also exposing your child to a lot of bad characters. So, parents need to be extra vigilant at* all times. Then there's the trolling." (Mint Lounge, 2024).

Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis of media reports from 2023 to 2024 revealed several key concerns related to kidfluencers. These concerns include: the absence of clear guidelines around the children's labour and the nature of their 'work'; potential exploitation; exposure to various harms, including risks of sexual abuse and negative impacts on mental health; infringements on children's privacy; and the use of children to promote illegal or inappropriate products, such as gambling, adult clothing, and cosmetics. Our findings point to several considerations for both public relations theory and practice discussed below.

While PR scholarship is beginning to focus on influencer relations, the important genre of "kidfluencer relations" – working with children as kidfluencers and their parents as their agents – has not yet been given due consideration. There is a dearth of research related to children as stakeholders within PR, reflecting a broader pattern of neglect in the field. A decade ago, Daymon and Demetrious (2014) highlighted a similar gap in their

groundbreaking book *Gender and Public Relations*, noting the lack of serious studies on the socially constructed roles of women and men in PR. Building on this critical perspective, Ciszek (2018) later called for a queer PR theory to challenge the heteronormative assumptions embedded in PR scholarship. Similarly, Fitch (2017) identified a research gap concerning promotional culture—arguably overlooked because it is often associated with 'women's work' and thus not considered worthy of academic attention. Our analysis suggests that the reason for PR scholarship's "'blindness" to children as stakeholders is because PR's quest for legitimacy has meant that it has focused on organisational and managerial perspectives for too long, an approach that may be finally breaking down, due to the efforts of scholars and editors from journals like this one. Crystal Abidin, a widely-cited digital anthropologist scholar whose work focuses on SMIs, discusses the tendency in some academic quarters to ignore areas of research considered as "unworthy". Abidin (2016) cites Banet-Weiser (1999: 4) suggesting that leading scholars' tendency to ignore some areas is a "dangerous dismissal[s], because [they] immediately and apparently unselfconsciously defin[e] particular cultural sites as worthy of intellectual attention and others . . . [as] junk".

We therefore propose that PR needs to once again take off the blinkers and widen its thinking to include all members of society. Children make up an estimated one third of internet users worldwide (Save the Children 2023). Ignoring them as stakeholders is foolish at best, and dangerous at worst. A recent proposal by the Australian Government to limit children's access to social media shows that children are front and centre of many organisations and governments' thinking (Ritchie, 2024). Recent (2025) top-rating documentaries focusing on kidfluencers, including *Bad Influence* on Netflix and *The Devil in the Family: The Fall of Ruby Franke* on Disney Plus, released after the drafting of this article, would presumably mean that there would be even more media coverage of concerns around potential extreme human rights violations of children.

The limited scholarship on influencer relations within PR proposes definitions and normative frameworks that may not fit the kidfluencer space. For example, Smith et al. (2023) suggest influencer relations is a tool for long-term impact in the form of mutually beneficial relationships for organisation and influencer. Newspaper reports we reviewed generally highlight that the kidfluencers may often not be in a 'mutually beneficial relationship' with the influencer relations practitioners and that in some cases it is an exploitative relationship with a power imbalance. Further, the narrative in the media generally reports on 'manipulation and exploitation' that Smith et al. say should be avoided, and this gives us cause for concern. Borchers and Enke's (2022) work on influencer ethics is laudable but does not factor in the work of children or the work of practitioners with children and their parents in this space. We concur with scholars from other disciplines (see Shomai et al., 2024; Van Den Abeele et al., 2024) that kidfluencer activity should be subject to regulation—particularly in relation to labour laws and children's right to be forgotten. While other literature in different disciplines has provided evidence of exploitation in the kidfluencer industry, we suggest our work is a first step in highlighting the need for PR to consider children as stakeholders in this ecosystem. Further, PR scholarship on kidfluencers specifically as important agentic actors should be pursued.

We have met the Special Issue's call to go beyond our discipline to shed light on a societal and industry issue. Further, we argue that our peak industry bodies, such as the International Association of Business Communicators and the Global Alliance for PR and Communication need to take the lead in educating and developing ethical guidelines for practitioners regarding the human rights of children (and influencers in general) who work in influencer relations.

This research has limitations as we relied on publicly available, global English language media reports to explore the human rights issues reported related to children working as SMIs. As discussed previously, we intend this paper as a provocation and exploration, to shed light on a practice that has not been given attention widely in our discipline. We acknowledge that news values mean that the more sensational and controversial aspects of the kidfluencer industry may be more likely to be reported (Bednarek and Caple, 2012).

However, given the reports also discuss recent law changes by some countries and US States regarding children as SMIs, the practice is clearly a space of concern for citizens and Governments. Future research should include consideration of interviewing or surveying practitioners working with kidfluencers on their current practices and views regarding ethical practices and human rights of children. Interviews with the child influencers and their manager parents would also be of value, while they may be more difficult to obtain.

We also recommend research that explores the views of the children as consumers and stakeholders of the organisations involved and the kidfluencers, on their views of the phenomenon. Further, children's human rights, we argue, should be central to practitioners' thinking, even when working within a capitalist economy that may view them as a 'target market' and commodity. Meta's recent decision to create a 'teenage friendly Instagram' shows that corporations are only beginning to catch up related to their impact on under 18s as stakeholders within social media and beyond. It is our belief, evidenced by our research, that stakeholder and PR theory will only benefit from broadening its scope to include children.

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Ethical statement

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ORCID iDs

Catherine Archer https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3710-0999
Kate Mirandilla Delmo https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0259-1302

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Author biographies

Catherine Archer is a Senior Lecturer and Acadenic Lead for Communication and Culture at Edith Cowan University. Her current research interests include social and digital media, particularly related to families and health, with a complementary focus on social media influencer relations and ethics. Catherine is an Associate Investigator with the Digital Child, an Australian Research Council (ARC) national research centre of excellence, comprised of researchers from six universities.

Kate Mirandilla Delmo is with the Strategic Communication Discipline of the School of Communication at the University of Technology Sydney. Kate's research agenda promotes the UN Sustainable Development Goals on Sustainable Communities (11), Climate Action (13), Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (16), and Good Health and Wellbeing (3). Apart from disaster risk resilience research, Kate studies the digital rights of children in the social media influencer industry. Her collaborative project in this area focuses on the role of public relations and strategic communication in working with parents and brands to protect children from potential harm online.