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THE INFLUENCE OF CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA: YOUNG INFLUENCERS AND THE IMPACT AMONG PEERS

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Abstract: This study critically analyzes how the media performance of children affects the socialization of their peers, emphasizing processes of identification, admiration, and imitation. The overall objective is to examine the ability of child influencers to shape the attitudes, consumption, and values of other children and adolescents, questioning both the potential benefits and the ethical consequences associated with early commercial exploitation. The proposed methodology is a qualitative-descriptive approach, based on an interdisciplinary literature review (communication, psychology, education, sociology) and documentary analysis of reports such as TIC Kids Online Brasil 2023. The results reveal that 95% of Brazilian children between the ages of 9 and 17 are connected to the internet and 88% have active profiles on social networks, where child influencers operate through sophisticated native marketing strategies that mask the commercial nature of their messages. The research highlights risks associated with early influence, including early access to inappropriate products (the “Sephora Kids” phenomenon), aesthetic pressure with a 6.57-fold increase in body dissatisfaction, and psychosocial consequences such as anxiety and depression. The study highlighted important regulatory gaps, contrasting the Brazilian experience with international regulatory frameworks such as the 2020 French law on the commercial exploitation of children’s images. It concludes that digital balance and healthy development require a multi-pronged protection agenda, including interministerial public policies, media education in school curricula, mandatory trust funds, platform accountability, and specialized psychological support. The transition from an economy of child exploitation to an ecology of responsible influence requires robust regulation, parental co-responsibility, and broad digital literacy.

Keywords: Child influencers; Social networks; Child advertising; Children’s rights; Digital marketing; Child development; Comprehensive protection.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of child influencers on digital platforms is a paradigmatic phenomenon of contemporary culture, in which childhood is no longer just a target audience but has become a producer of content, audience, and symbolic merchandise simultaneously. Recent data indicate that 95% of Brazilian children and adolescents between the ages of 9 and 17 are connected to the internet, usually through smartphones, and that 88% already have active profiles on social media. Such omnipresent s justify academic interest in the subject, especially because the model of peer communication moves away from traditional advertising and puts into circulation mediation practices that are still poorly regulated (LIVINGSTONE; RAHALI, 2022).

The social relevance of the topic therefore lies at the intersection between children’s rights, the economy of digital influence, and identity formation. By narrowing the focus of this study to the ability of child influencers to shape the attitudes, consumption, and values of other children and adolescents, we aim to problematize not only the potential benefits (creativity, engagement, autonomy), but also the ethical consequences linked to early commercial exploitation.

Thus, the overall objective is to critically analyze how the media performance of child content creators impacts the socialization of their peers, emphasizing processes of identification, admiration, and imitation. Specifically, we seek to:

1. map data on children’s access to and participation in the main networks;
2. discuss strategies for building influence;

3. reflect on psychosocial effects in light of social learning and socio-interactionist theories.

The research adopted a qualitative-descriptive approach, understood as the method capable of offering “a comprehensive summary of events in the everyday terms in which they occur” (SANDELOWSKI, 2000). From this perspective, priority was given to the interpretation of meanings, values, and social practices associated with the actions of child influencers, without the intention of testing hypotheses or quantifying variables, but rather to capture the complexity of the phenomenon based on the available narratives and documents.

The descriptive design was based on an interdisciplinary literature review and documentary analysis of institutional reports, adopting intentional theoretical sampling, as recommended by Patton, who emphasizes that the choice of sources should be strategic to maximize informational richness (PATTON, 2015). The systematic search included databases such as SciELO, CAPES Portal, Google Scholar, and official repositories, using combinations of descriptors in Portuguese, English, and Spanish. Studies published between 2015 and 2025, with full text and thematic relevance, composed the final corpus.

The data were examined by thematic content analysis, following the hermeneutic-dialectic proposed by Minayo, which emphasizes the articulation between context, text, and meaning to ensure interpretive reliability (MINAYO, 2011). Triangulation between different types of sources (articles, reports, legislation) strengthened internal validity, while transparent exposure of each stage ensures the auditability of the study.

THE CURRENT SCENARIO OF CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

Statistics reveal increasingly early digital insertion: 24% of Brazilian children start surfing the internet before the age of six (CRIANÇA E CONSUMO, 2023), while in the United Kingdom, one-third of users aged 5-7 already use social media without supervision (OF-COM, 2024). This phenomenon is reinforced by global trends; in the United States, 93% of adolescents aged 13-17 use YouTube, 63% use TikTok, and 60% use Snapchat (ANDERSON; FAVERIO; GOTTFRIED, 2023). These indicators show the centrality of these platforms in children's daily lives, progressively replacing television as the main source of entertainment and information.

The growth of the child influencer market accompanies this expansion of access. It is estimated that the digital advertising segment aimed at children generates eight billion dollars annually and is projected to grow robustly until 2030 (MARKWIDE, 2024). Emblematic examples, such as Ryan Kaji or Like Nastya, accumulate hundreds of millions of views, demonstrating the scalability of the audience when content is produced “by children for children.” As Rahali & Livingstone (2022) note, “the messages of these influencers are perceived as more authentic and honest than conventional advertising,” which enhances their persuasive effectiveness.

In addition, the normalization of intra-age group consumption is visible in the high engagement rate: 71% of American teenagers access YouTube daily and 17% report “almost constant” use of TikTok (PEW RESEARCH CENTER, 2023). In Brazil, 70% of users aged 13-17 indicate Instagram or TikTok as their preferred platforms for following people of the same age (CETIC, 2023). This intensive circulation feeds a cycle in which the algorithmic logic itself increases the visibility of you-

ng creators, reinforcing fashions, slang, and behavior patterns.

However, the scenario also raises concerns. Studies show that 90% of kidfluencer videos analyzed feature ultra-processed food products (LESTARI, *et al*, 2024), while research by Sonia Livingstone (2022) highlights the risk of disguised advertising that children under 12 are not yet able to fully distinguish. From a psychosocial perspective, Common Sense Media (2021) shows that 67% of adolescents admit to losing sleep due to nighttime cell phone use. These data strain the optimistic discourse of children's creativity, requiring public policies for regulation and media education.

For all these reasons, understanding the extent of children's participation in social media implies recognizing the intertwining of opportunities (expression, socialization, learning) and risks (commercial exposure, privacy, physical and mental health). Critical analysis must therefore transcend moralistic or technophilic readings, integrating empirical evidence that supports balanced interventions in defense of the best interests of the child.

BUILDING INFLUENCE: THE IMPACT AMONG PEERS

From the perspective of Social Learning Theory, "much of human behavior is learned by observing models" (BANDURA, 1977). In the digital environment, child influencers become accessible models, whose actions are repeated by peers due to processes of attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. When a nine-year-old child presents a toy in a video, they not only describe the product, but also act out emotions that elicit identification and, consequently, trigger the intention to purchase among viewers of the same age group.

This dynamic is intensified by the logic of the virtual community. Comments, reactions, and "fan clubs" reinforce the sense of belonging and validate internal norms, such as "unboxing" scripts, dance challenges, or specific slang, for example. Vygotsky argues that cognitive development occurs in the "zone of proximal development," mediated by interaction with more experienced peers (VYGOTSKY, 1984). In the context of social media, child influencers temporarily assume the role of this more competent peer, guiding behaviors that then spread horizontally.

In addition to the imitation of products, replicas of lifestyles can be observed: skincare routines, trendy diets, or viral choreographies. The literature points out that such practices can shape beliefs about body, gender, and consumption in an uncritical way (RAHALI; LIVINGSTONE, 2022). Converging with this, Brazilian research finds that 67% of users aged 9-17 encounter advertising on video sites and 35% seek health information online without adult guidance (CRIANÇA E CONSUMO, 2023).

On the other hand, early monetization raises questions about the boundary between work and play for children. Studies on "playbour" describe recording sessions, editing, and contracts that, if unsupervised, constitute exploitation of digital child labor (ARCHER; DELMO, 2025). The absence of specific legislation on exposure time, income sharing, and data protection leads to gaps that must be urgently filled.

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH EARLY INFLUENCE

The growing role of child influencers on digital platforms raises a specific set of risks that transcend traditional concerns about child labor. According to studies in developmental psychology, children involved in the digital content production ecosystem face psychosocial consequences that can compromise their

overall development. The Brazilian Society of Pediatrics (SBP) warns that “children and adolescents should not have a public life on social media,” since early media exposure can have long-term impacts on identity formation and mental health (SOUZA, 2021). Furthermore, the absence of specific regulatory frameworks for this type of digital child labor leaves important gaps in the protection of these children’s fundamental rights (EBERSPACHER, 2025).

The current configuration of digital platforms facilitates early access by children to products and information that are not appropriate for their age group. The phenomenon known as “Sephora Kids” exemplifies this problem: girls between the ages of 8 and 12 consume and promote skincare products with ingredients such as retinol, a substance recommended for mature skin (CORSINI, 2024). Such early exposure not only compromises dermatological safety, but also illustrates the normalization of consumption practices that are inappropriate for children.

Another worrying aspect is the growing aesthetic pressure on children. Studies show that daily access to Facebook and Instagram for more than 10 hours increases the chance of body dissatisfaction in adolescents by 6.57 and 4.47 times, respectively (LIRA, *et al*, 2017). This dynamic intensifies when children take on the role of content producers, creating visual narratives based on adult aesthetic standards. Clinical psychologist Sophia Borges explains that “the ideal of beauty perpetuated on social media is guided by digital media, with influencers and advertising,” shaping “the way adolescents construct their identity, often in a rigid and harmful way” (ANDI, 2025).

The psychological consequences of media overexposure manifest themselves through anxiety disorders, depression, and eating disorders. The phenomenon of *sharenting*—a term that combines “sharing” and “parenting”—places children in a vulnerable situa-

tion from birth. “A study by the University of Michigan revealed that, by the age of 13, the average child already has about 1,300 photos posted online by their parents” (GOMIDE, 2025). Experts warn that this practice “may provoke instant admiration, but at the same time, invoke hatred due to feelings of helplessness in the face of the impossibility of reaching that world without the limits imposed by real life” (ANUNCIAÇÃO, 2023). Consequently, children exposed to this dynamic may develop excessive anxiety, distorted self-image, and even suicidal thoughts.

The systematic violation of the right to privacy poses another fundamental risk. Article 17 of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA) expressly guarantees “the right to freedom, respect, and dignity, including the preservation of image, identity, and private life” (BRAZIL, 1990). However, the commercial logic of platforms encourages overexposure, creating a permanent “digital footprint” without the child’s consent (GOMIDE, 2025). This practice can result in the misuse of images by third parties, the creation of fake profiles, the collection of personal data, and exposure to digital predators (SOUZA, 2021).

In addition, the effects of overexposure have repercussions on cognitive and social development. A study of nearly 12,000 children aged 9 to 13 showed that increased daily use of social media (from 7 to 74 minutes) predicted a 35% increase in depressive symptoms over three years. The research also highlighted that less sleep and cyberbullying were aggravating factors (GIBSON, 2025).

Furthermore, the routine of producing content can interfere with time devoted to leisure, studies, and family life, compromising essential milestones in child development. As Professor Nara Helena Lopes, from the Institute of Psychology at USP, observes, “the online environment enhances this exposure for both sides, producers and child consumers,”

affecting “mechanisms used to deal with everyday life, such as frustration, and social interaction” (FUENTES, 2021).

This set of risks therefore requires multidisciplinary approaches that include not only legal regulation, but also media education strategies for families and comprehensive protection policies appropriate to the contemporary digital reality.

CONSUMERISM AND TARGETED MARKETING

Marketing targeted at children through child influencers represents a sophisticated evolution of traditional advertising strategies, taking advantage of the emotional closeness and perception of authenticity that characterizes peer communication. Unlike conventional television advertising, which was easily identifiable and regulated, digital marketing operates through formats integrated with entertainment, making it difficult to distinguish between playful content and commercial messages (TEIXEIRA, *et al*, 2019). Brands have found child influencers to be effective vectors for reaching children, since children give greater credibility to recommendations made by their peers than to explicit advertisements. This strategy is based on what the literature calls “native advertising,” where the marketing message is organically integrated into the editorial content (MARTINS, 2020).

The techniques employed by companies include providing free products to child YouTubers and TikTokers in exchange for exposure in “unboxing,” “review,” or “received” videos. It is estimated that the unboxing category, added to product reviews, represents more than 5 billion views on YouTube Brazil, demonstrating the massive reach of this strategy (TEIXEIRA, 2019). The effectiveness of these practices lies in the naturalness with which children present products, creating a playful atmosphere that masks the commercial na-

ture of the communication. Brands from various segments, from toys to ultra-processed foods, use child influencers as ambassadors, exploiting the trust that children place in these figures (CRIANÇA E CONSUMO, 2021).

Disguised advertising becomes particularly problematic when directed at children, who have limited capacity for critical discernment in relation to persuasive messages. The Consumer Protection Code, in its article 36, requires that “advertising be conveyed in such a way that the consumer realizes that they are viewing an advertisement” (BRAZIL, 1990). However, videos featuring children often violate this principle, presenting products as spontaneous recommendations when, in reality, they are paid advertising (TEIXEIRA, 2019). Resolution No. 163/2014 of the National Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents (Conanda) considers advertising directed at children to be abusive, classifying such practices as illegal under Brazilian law (BRAZIL, 2014).

The “Sephora Kids” phenomenon emblematically illustrates the consequences of this marketing communication aimed at children. Children between the ages of 8 and 12 began to consume beauty products originally developed for adults, influenced by skincare tutorials and self-care routines promoted by influencers of the same age group (CORSINI, 2024). This movement did not arise spontaneously: cosmetics brands invested in strategies with visual appeal and attractive scents for children, including collaborations with candy and gum brands to make products more appealing to young audiences (SENA, 2024). As a result, stores such as Sephora have reported “invasions” of girls seeking products with ingredients that are unsuitable for young skin, such as retinol and hyaluronic acid (TAYLOR, 2024).

Regulating this type of marketing faces significant challenges due to the convergence between child artistic work and commercial advertising. While child artistic work is permitted with judicial authorization, according to Article 149 of the ECA, the activities of child influencers often occur without this legal formalization (LANGSDORFF, 2025). Child rights organizations have already reported cases in which children promoted products without adequately signaling the advertising nature of the content, constituting both irregular child labor and misleading advertising, such as the São Paulo Public Prosecutor's Office, which filed a civil lawsuit against Google requesting the removal of videos by child YouTubers who were advertising toys in a disguised manner (REVISTA VEJA, 2019).

Coping strategies include both regulatory and educational measures. The National Council for Advertising Self-Regulation (Conar) establishes specific guidelines to protect children from commercial exploitation, determining that minors “may appear in campaigns, but without speaking or holding the product, avoiding direct persuasive communication” (LANGSDORFF 2025). At the same time, media education initiatives are gaining relevance in empowering parents, educators, and children themselves to identify and question disguised advertising messages. As the coordinator of the Criança e Consumo (Children and Consumption) project points out, “it is possible to report abusive advertising practices targeting children to the entire consumer protection system,” including regulatory bodies and digital platforms themselves (TV BRASIL, 2022).

In summary, marketing aimed at children through child influencers is a complex phenomenon that requires coordinated responses between legal regulation, sector self-regulation, and education for conscious consumption. The comprehensive protection of chil-

dren, a fundamental principle of Brazilian law, requires constant vigilance so that the right to entertainment and creative expression is not exploited by commercial interests that compromise the healthy development of childhood.

ETHICAL AND LEGAL ASPECTS OF CHILDREN'S EXPOSURE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Brazilian law already confirms the inviolability of the image, identity, and privacy of developing individuals through the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA). Article 17 establishes that any use of a child's image must respect the physical, psychological, and moral integrity of the minor, a principle reiterated by the Constitution (art. 227) and the Consumer Protection Code (CDC), which considers advertising directed at children to be abusive (AGÊNCIA SENADO, 2014).

However, online practice contrasts with the letter of the law. Conanda Resolution 163/2014 classifies as abusive any marketing communication that exploits children's vulnerability, but its effectiveness depends on intersectoral oversight, which is still insufficient in fragmented digital ecosystems (MINISTÉRIO PÚBLICO DO PARANÁ, 2014). At the same time, the National Council for Advertising Self-Regulation (Conar) has issued specific guidelines for influencers, requiring clear identification of paid content and extra care when the target audience or protagonist is children (CONAR, 2021). Such instruments, although relevant, remain in the sphere of self-regulation and lack the sanctioning power equivalent to that of the state.

In the field of data protection, the General Personal Data Protection Law (LGPD) requires explicit parental consent and transparency in the processing of children's data (LGPD BRASIL, 2018). However, the absence of robust age selection mechanisms allows millions

of minor profiles to operate without effective supervision, exposing them to massive data collection for advertising segmentation. The Brazilian scenario reflects gaps similar to the international context: COPPA, in force in the United States since 2000, requires verifiable consent for users under 13 years of age, but faces questions about its effectiveness in the face of sophisticated collection techniques and the application of iterative applications (HANNA, 2022).

The proposal is compared with other approaches. In 2020, France passed the Law on the Commercial Exploitation of Children's Images on Online Platforms, framing the activities of "kidfluencers" in the Labor Code, requiring prior authorization, restricting digital "working" hours, and depositing income in a blocked account until the age of 16 (LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, 2020). The French law also introduces the "right to be forgotten," requiring platforms to remove content at the child's request, reinforcing informational self-determination.

Even with specific advances, the need for parental and third-party accountability persists. The Brazilian Public Ministry of Labor has reported cases in which children monetize networks without a court order, constituting irregular artistic child labor (HARARI, 2025). Parents, managers, and agencies become civilly and criminally liable when there is excessive working hours, exposure to risks, or misappropriation of the minor's income.

The complexity increases with the actions of the platforms themselves. Meta announced "Teen" accounts with automatic privacy restrictions, messaging limitations, and nighttime "sleep mode" for users under 18 (ROUSH, 2024). Although such measures demonstrate corporate sensitivity, they still depend on good business projects and do not replace state regulation.

REGULATORY LIMITS AND DILEMMAS

1. **Digital territoriality:** content created in Brazil can circulate in more stringent jurisdictions, generating conflicts of applicable law.
2. **Technological speed versus legislative process:** laws become obsolete in the face of new affordances (live shopping, metaverse).
3. **Bargaining power:** economically vulnerable parents may depend on their children's digital income, straining principles of comprehensive protection.
4. **Algorithmic transparency:** there is no legal requirement for independent audits to verify recommendations of children's videos or subsequent advertisements to minors.

RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

The duty of parental supervision stems from Article 932 of the Civil Code and is reinforced by the ECA, which assigns joint responsibility for the violation of children's rights. When child influencers exceed recording hours or promote important products, parents may be liable for moral and material damages (HARARI, 2025). Media education initiatives should enable them to:

- Evaluate contracts and brands involved.
- Manage income transparently and set aside funds for the child's future (trusts or linked accounts).
- Adopt "Digital Informed Consent," explaining the implications of online exposure.

CONCLUSION

Returning to the discussion begun in the introduction, it is clear that the role of child influencers is ambivalent: they foster creativity, digital literacy, and income opportunities, but they also open up gray areas of commercial exploitation, mental health risks, and privacy concerns. The analysis of the topics outlined how peer identification processes, disguised marketing strategies, and regulatory gaps converge to amplify impacts on other children and adolescents.

From a critical point of view, balancing digital presence and healthy development requires reflection on the power asymmetry between global platforms and families. Corporate self-regulation is advancing, but it does not replace guarantees of structural rights. Without clear legal frameworks, market logic prevails, in which the “attention economy” monetizes every child’s click.

Therefore, a multi-pronged protection agenda is suggested:

- **Interministerial public policies:** creation of a National Committee on Digital Influence on Children, bringing together the Ministry of Human Rights, the Public Prosecutor’s Office, Anatel, Conar, and civil society to harmonize parameters for exposure time, salaries, and advertising audits.
- **Media education curriculum:** mandatory inclusion of critical digital skills in elementary and high school education, enabling students to identify paid content and understand the implications of personal data.

- **Mandatory trust funds:** replicating the French experience, allocating a minimum percentage of all children’s digital income to a blocked account supervised by the Children’s Court.
- **Platform responsibility:** import semi-annual reports on child content moderation, recommendation algorithms, and revenue from targeted advertising, under penalty of fines from the ANPD or Procon.
- **Psychological support:** offer specific mental health care lines for young creators, financed by a Big Tech contribution fund, addressing audience pressure, toxic comments, and “cancel culture.”
- **Digital parenting campaigns:** guide families to define internal “usage agreements,” control recording schedules, and value offline spaces, avoiding dependence on online validation.

This is not about banning them from cyberspace, but about redesigning structures that ensure their safe, dignified participation in line with the best interests set out in international children’s rights treaties. Only with solid regulation, parental co-responsibility, and broad digital literacy will it be possible to transition from an economy of child exploitation to an ecology of responsible influence, in which creativity, ethics, and digital citizenship feed back into each other in a sustainable way.

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