

The Brat Pack: Mini-Influencers on the Internet

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“Sharenting” is a phenomenon where parents share information and photographs of their children on social media, often without the children’s understanding or consent. Sharenting has become a lucrative business with parents of “mini influencers” (children with a large following on social media) earning millions of dollars and free products through product placement and endorsements via social media posts aimed at other parents and children (DeVierman et al., 2019). Children today grow up as digital natives where they have easy access to online information and entertainment. In fact, 39% of children in the U.S. own smartphones and spend an average of 170 minutes per day on social media (Watson, 2019).

However, children have been found to be a vulnerable group, as they do not possess the cognitive ability to judge the ethical impact of their activity on social media (Hudders & Cauberghe, 2017). Child influencer posts on social media are often curated in the same manner as adult posts, highlighting physical attractiveness (Van de Sompel & Vermeir, 2016) and physical attractiveness of a post subject has been found to increase source credibility (DeVierman et al., 2019). Further studies conducted on adult Instagram influencers have found that monetization of sexual content has become an ‘attention economy’ that attracts brands and followers (Drenten et al., 2020). Although some research has been conducted with adult influencers, other research has found sexualized content across children’s media (McDade-Montez et al., 2017).

There are currently no laws protecting the rights of children used in these kinds of social media posts and earnings often come at the expense of their privacy (O’Neill, 2019). As sharenting becomes increasingly monetized, it is important to investigate how children are being represented in these paid social media posts, with particular attention to sexualized content and commercialization. Existing studies on mini influencers have focused primarily around YouTube and researchers have called for further investigation of other popular platforms such as Instagram (DeVierman et al., 2019). There are over 1 billion active users on Instagram per month making it one of the top social networks in the US, with two-thirds of users being under age 34 (Clement, 2020). One-third of Instagram users participate in order to monitor brands (“Leading Instagram,” 2019). Thus, the purpose of this research is to investigate the public posts of mini influencers (ages 6 - 9) on Instagram to investigate how children are being represented in terms of sexualized and commercialized appearances. This is particularly relevant for the apparel industry, as paid social media posts are dominated by the fashion sector (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

The present research is guided by cognitive development theory, which states that children’s ability to understand promotion and product placement develops as they get older (Hudders & Cauberghe, 2017; John, 1999). It is further informed by social cognitive theory, that

posits that children learn by modeling the behavior of others they observe personally or through media (Bandura, 1986).

Method

To understand the sexualization and commercialization of children on social media, a content analysis of Instagram photos depicting mini influencers was conducted. After Institutional Review Board approval, publicly-available Instagram photos from accounts depicting child influencers that had follower counts over 500,000 were used in the analysis. Seven accounts were identified through a snowball sampling method. The seven mini-influencer accounts featured female children between the ages of 6 and 9, with four of the accounts featuring twins. Post captions and photographs were analyzed using previously-validated codes for sexualized and commercialized media content (McDade-Montez, et al., 2017; McRoberts et al., 2016; Tanner-Smith et al., 2006). Further codes for promotion (e.g., product placement, self-promotion) were adapted from the research of Schwemmer and Ziewiecki (2018). Two researchers coded the first 10% of the data achieving an acceptable intercoder reliability of 82% (Creswell, 2017). A total of 101 captions and 95 photos had been analyzed when data saturation was reached (Creswell, 2017).

Results

A frequency analysis of the coded data revealed that the top five codes for the pictorial data were High Editing (43), Product Placement (38), Knee Bend (30), Makeup (21), and Reveals (21), while the top five codes for post text were Brand (185), Cross-Promote (89), Appearance (60), Call to Action (31), and Self-Promote (30). Based on the findings, it is apparent that a high amount of sophistication and curation is incorporated into mini influencers' posts, as nearly half of the photos (45%) included high amounts of photo editing and obvious incorporation of product placements (40%). When comparing photo codes against post text codes, the purposeful curation of brands is supported, as 65% of posts included specific mentions of brands and 60% of posts included cross-promotion of brands (e.g., @brand).

Previous literature was supported in terms of the link between appearance, sexualization, and brands (DeVierman et al., 2019; Van de Sompel & Vermeir, 2016). Three out of five of the top codes for the pictorial data were relating to sexualization and appearance, with one-third of posts including Knee Bends, almost one-quarter containing mini-influencers wearing Makeup, and over one-fifth containing clothing that Reveals sexualized areas of the body. Connecting to the photo evidence were references to Appearance falling into the top five text data codes (41%) (Figure 1).

Discussion

The findings revealed a connection between mini-influencers' appearance and attempts to promote brands and sell product through sexualization of content. Understanding the presentation of these young influencers on social media is important because of the widespread consumption of social media by children (Watson, 2019) and the influence of media content on their development (Bandura, 1986). Further, these results are relevant due to the lack of understanding that young children have of promotion and product placement (Hudders & Cauberghe, 2017; John, 1999), the lack of oversight of social media content compared to other

forms of media, and the absence of laws protecting child influencers (O'Neill, 2019).

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