

## Kidfluencers' lived experiences of influencer culture: a time for regulation?

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**'Kidfluencers' lived experiences of influencer culture: thick or thin agency?**

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## Abstract

### Design/methodology/approach

The study used semi-structured interviews to capture the retrospective experiences of ten young people as 'kidfluencers' on the social media platforms, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube.

### Purpose

Kidfluencer is a relatively new term and refers to where young people actively exert influence through the use of social media. This study focused on capturing the complexities of this phenomenon.

### Findings

The findings identified several issues associated with being a kidfluencer, such as affecting individuals' work-life balance, their education, how safe they felt online and physically, how they maintained friendships, pressure to increase their profile, and their mental health well-being. Overall, the study suggests that kidfluencing has specific negative effects on kidfluencers and their childhood experiences.

### Research limitations/implications

All participants were above the age of eighteen. Therefore, their contributions reflect upon their past, rather than speaking about their recent experiences, which can lead to retrospective bias.

### Practical implications

The study provides evidence that the French legislative approach is relevant and that there needs to be regulation in other countries to deal with this issue.

### Originality/value

The study is highly relevant in the context of the new law adopted by the French National Assembly in 2020 to provide a legal framework for the activities of child influencers on a range of online platforms. To date, France is the only country where such laws have been enacted. Thus far, there has been no specific evaluation of this

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3 law. While this research is not such a specific evaluation, there has been very little  
4 research on the experiences of kidfluencing from kidfluencers themselves, making  
5 this study timely in this context.  
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### 10 **Keywords**

11 Kidfluencers/ kidfluencing; child online safety: mental well-being; social harms; social  
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### 17 **Introduction**

18 The use of actors, politicians and celebrities to influence the public via television and  
19 newspaper articles has existed for many years. However, arising out of the growth of  
20 the internet has been the phenomenon of ‘influencer culture’, which refers to  
21 ‘individual internet users developing an online community over which they exert  
22 commercial and non-commercial influence’ (Digital Culture, Media and Sport  
23 Committee (DCMSC), 2022:4). With the growth of social medial platforms such as  
24 Instagram and YouTube, a new type of influencing culture has emerged, that of  
25 social media influencing, which refers to the use of social media platforms to  
26 influence. Despite being a relatively new phenomenon, the estimated value of the  
27 social media market is \$221 billion dollars (The Business Research Company, 2022).  
28 There are many different types of social media influencers, but one which has  
29 emerged as a significant niche is the use of children as influencers. Contemporary  
30 parents and childcare professionals will probably be aware of social media sites such  
31 as Ryan’s World, Ethan Gamer or Jo Jo Bows, which are based on children as social  
32 media influencers.  
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46 This niche has led to the term ‘kidfluencers’, which refers to ‘children who feature in  
47 online content across social media platforms, often earning an income through  
48 sponsorship and partnerships with brands’ (DCMSC, 2022:41). As this DCMSC  
49 Report notes, kidfluencers have not just become some of the most successful social  
50 media influencers, but have become some of the most successful influencers per se,  
51 as evidenced by the fact that the child behind Ryan’s World, Ryan Kaji, earned \$29.5  
52 million in 2020 and has almost 33 million followers in YouTube (ibid). Kidfluencers in  
53 this context are children below the age of eighteen who are social media influencers.  
54 Kidfluencer content ranges from videos of kids playing with toys, lifestyle videos, and  
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3 family as well as videos of kidfluencers unboxing toys and gifts from brands.  
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5 Kidfluencers are often paid to endorse products they may like and use in their  
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7 everyday lives, and this means that they can provide specific recommendations for  
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9 items their followers should buy or avoid. A study by Martínez and Olsson (2018)  
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11 demonstrated the significance of kidfluencers in the formation of their viewers'  
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13 identities, wherein they outlined that kidfluencers were seen as role models  
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15 influencing other kids' consumption. In this context, kidfluencers have emerged as  
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17 'valuable brand partners capable of facilitating peer-to-peer interactions with other  
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19 child viewers' (Freeman and Dardis, 2022: 256).

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21 To date, kidfluencing is a largely unregulated activity in most of the world and has  
22  
23 been described as a 'wild west' industry' (McLaughlin, 2021), which is a term that  
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25 refers to a situation of lawlessness. However, an exception to this is the law enacted  
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27 in France in 2021 to provide a legal framework for the activities of child influencers on  
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29 a range of online platforms. The law occurred from the negative effects of  
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31 kidfluencing on children, specifically a concern that such children were being  
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33 exploited for financial gain. France remains an outlier in this respect, despite the fact  
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35 that in many countries, there have been similar concerns about kidfluencing from  
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37 parliaments and legal bodies in other parts of the world, such as in the UK (DCMSC,  
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39 2022) and Australia, (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2023). In  
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41 the USA there has been legislation at state level in Illinois and California to protect  
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43 the earnings of children, and similar proposed law in Washington, although there has  
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45 been no federal law akin to that passed in France.

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47 This paper examines the effects of kidfluencing on children who have grown up as  
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49 influencers and subsequently transitioned into adulthood. This is distinct from  
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51 previous research where the primary focus has been on the effects that their role as  
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53 kidfluencers has on their child audiences. Consequently, little is known about the  
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55 effects of kidfluencing on the children who are producing the content, as access to  
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57 kidfluencers is particularly difficult. This paper plays a pivotal role in bringing forward  
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59 the voice of kidfluencers. It provides a deeper understanding of the challenges and  
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risks faced by this group and possible support that may be necessary for the children  
and their parents. As we live in a digital era, children will inevitably watch kidfluencer  
videos, and some may aspire to be like them, without fully understanding the reality

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3 of this role. This information will better inform policymakers by identifying issues that  
4 may need to be addressed by regulation/legislation.  
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8 The next section provides a brief analysis of the current literature on a central theme  
9 around childhood relevant to kidfluencers, that of agency. Following this, there is an  
10 outline and rationale of the methods taken for the research, relating to data  
11 collection, recruitment of participants, analysis of data, and ethical considerations.  
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13 The subsequent section then presents the findings from the research, including their  
14 possible implications. The paper ends with a consideration of the limitations to the  
15 study, and recommendations for future study.  
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## 22 Literature Review

23 It should be noted at this point that most of the social media sites where kidfluencers  
24 appear, and which are accessed by children, have a minimum age of 13 for children  
25 to sign up to them. This means that kidfluencers under the age of 13 typically require  
26 parental permission before creating social media accounts. This often leads to  
27 kidfluencers' social media accounts being created by and managed by their parents.  
28 However, the fact that kidinfluencers have become so popular with kids suggests that  
29 this age requirement is largely ignored, as evident from a Pew Research Center  
30 (2020) study in which 89% of parents revealed that their children aged five and  
31 eleven watch YouTube videos, 53% reported that their children watch these videos  
32 daily, and 35% revealed that they did so several times a day. The content found on  
33 these platforms includes images, videos and live feeds. Similarly, as the use of social  
34 media by children has increased, so the presence of children on social media has  
35 also increased, ranging in age from those in their teenage years to those whose  
36 digital footprint began 'in utero', as evident from parents announcing their  
37 pregnancies by posting baby scan pictures online. Some children have always had a  
38 life on the internet, with parents often sharing birth pictures of their children online.  
39 This has led to various concerns regarding consent and privacy, and whether  
40 children's privacy is being violated, for example as a result of the 'sharenting' by  
41 parents of their children's pictures and videos without the child's consent (Kopeckya  
42 et al., 2020).  
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3 Such concerns are not new in the field of childhood studies, as evidenced in debates  
4 about the depth and type of children's agency (e.g., Durham, 2008; Langevang and  
5 Gough, 2009). As this field of study developed, the mutual interest in children as  
6 social actors led to a debate about the depth and type of children's agency (Durham,  
7 2008, cited in Holloway et al., 2019). For example, Klocker (2007) proposed a  
8 distinction between 'thick agency' ('having the latitude to act within a broad range of  
9 options') and 'thin agency' ('decisions and everyday actions that are carried out  
10 within highly restrictive contexts'). The notion of thin agency is perhaps most  
11 extremely represented where children are required to become child soldiers, as their  
12 agency over their childhood is removed and their innocence taken away from them  
13 as they are recruited and trained to be child soldiers (Katz, 2019). Thin agency is  
14 perhaps best understood in the context of child labour, and the negative effects that  
15 this can and does have on childhood (Bequele and Boyden, 1998). However, due to  
16 the positive developments regarding children's rights such as the Convention on the  
17 Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), Abede (2019:11) observes, 'It is often  
18 taken for granted that children are social actors, that they have agency...Children's  
19 agency is often romanticized in universal, rights-based discourses and agency-  
20 centred studies in which they are recognized as competent and independent'. What  
21 this means is that it is thick descriptions of agency in childhood studies that  
22 predominate in literature and policy. This is evidenced in depictions of the  
23 engagement of children in popular culture and activism, as perhaps most evident in  
24 the 'Greta Effect' relating to Greta Thunberg, the young environmental campaigner  
25 (Jung et al, 2020). This dichotomy between thick and thin agency is perhaps best  
26 illustrated when discussing how children are commodified and 'construed as  
27 accumulation strategies' by parents in an attempt to avoid 'contemporary ontological  
28 insecurity' (Katz, 2018: 729). On the one hand, parents sacrifice money, assets and  
29 class position to give their children resources and an opportunity to succeed in life  
30 (Brantlinger, 2003; Devine, 2004). In return, parents gain pleasure, a sense of  
31 accomplishment in creating a valuable commodity and the 'narcissistic pleasure of  
32 realising their investments in a successful child' (Katz, 2018: 729). The overall aim of  
33 such an investment is for the parent to cultivate commodified children for niche  
34 markets. In her memoir, 'Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother', Amy Chua openly shares  
35 what Katz, (2018: 729) describes as her strict parenting strategies and 'lacerating  
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punishments' for failure to conform to her parenting methods where 'mother not only knows best but the child knows nothing of what is good, desirable, or worthy of time'.

These above concerns are particularly pertinent in the lives of kidfluencers, bearing in mind that their lives will be significantly different from the childhood of most children, and also when they grow up as adults. Therefore, in this study, it is critical that an understanding of kidfluencers is gained within the context of childhood. This may be achieved by analysing how kidfluencers' lives differ and/or conform with societal expectations of childhood. These may include the age at which a child becomes an adult; when they should enter the world of work; at what point they should exit work, and expectations of children's access to education. Additionally, the role of the parent in safeguarding the child while being in control of their finances has been the cause for the most concern, as it has been argued that the fact that children have a lack of legal rights means that there is a heightened risk of exploitation in terms of having unsafe working conditions, or access to the earnings that they generate (Masterson, 2020). Such arguments create further questions and uncertainty as to the welfare of the child at the centre of kidfluencing. The 'Fantastic Adventures' YouTube channel is a relevant and disturbing example of the abuse that kidfluencers experienced in order to create content for commercial ends. An example of this pressure is a recent criminal trial in the US where evidence was provided by one child that a prime reason that their mom took them out of school was 'so they can keep filming their series and they mentioned they have not been in school for years' (Pinal County Superior Court, 2019). Examples such as these highlight the apparent risk of kidfluencing impacting children's access to education, especially the risk of these children being taken out of education to earn money to which they do not have any legal right (Wong, 2019).

In the UK, while similar abuse was also highlighted as a concern in the DCMSC (2022) report, the government response to this Report did not propose any specific legislation or policy to deal with this issue (DCMSC, 2022a). This non-response is again in contrast to other countries, such as France, which has introduced legislation to limit the hours that under-16s can work online, what happens to their earnings until they turn 16 and the need for companies to get permission from local authorities if they wish to employ kidfluencers (BBC, 2020).



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3 A relevant point to make here is that the primary focus of the research on  
4 kidfluencers has been on the effects that their role as kidfluencers has on their child  
5 audiences (e.g. Rasmussen, Riggs and Sauermilch, 2021; Freeman and Dardis,  
6 2022; Fernández -Gòmez, Vázquez and Fernández, 2022). Consequently, little is  
7 known about the effects of kidfluencing on the children who are producing the  
8 content. For example, research on children's digital media consumption has  
9 predominantly been conducted on the advertisement and product placement within  
10 children's videos on YouTube. Research has focussed on young adolescents'  
11 recognition of advertisements (De Jans et al., 2018), the unhealthy content of  
12 kidfluencers' videos (Alruwaily et al., 2020), and the importance of parents in terms of  
13 curating the 'authenticity management' of their kidfluencer children (Van den Adeele,  
14 Hudders and Vanwesenbeeck, 2024). Thus, while there has been some insight  
15 gained regarding the effect of kidfluencers, there is still a need to fully understand the  
16 perspectives of kidfluencers and the ways in which being a kidfluencer affects them,  
17 specifically in terms of their childhood and/or their transition into adolescence. This  
18 need is addressed in the study reported below.

### 31 32 33 Methods and Methodology

34 Kidfluencing is a relatively new and constantly changing phenomenon with what  
35 could be described as both a vulnerable and a hard-to-reach group, therefore  
36 requiring a data collection process that mitigates these factors.

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41 In line with the research aims, sampling was focused on recruiting those who had  
42 become kidfluencers before they turned 18. Potential participants were approached  
43 based on the content identified on their Instagram or YouTube accounts, but it was  
44 not always apparent who the influencers were. Having done this, there was a need to  
45 reach out to each individual user and find out how old they were. As it was not  
46 always obvious how long they had been influencers, and therefore whether they had  
47 been kidfluencers, a check was made to see when they had created their Instagram  
48 or YouTube accounts. This was then used as a basis for calculating how long they  
49 had been online, thus determining whether they had joined prior to turning eighteen.  
50 Following this, there was a need to find out at what age they became influencers.  
51 This was extremely challenging as many did not know they were influencers until  
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3 friends, family, and those around them began to call them influencers. Using the  
4 above process, the research identified twenty-six potential participants.  
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8 However, in trying to contact these potential participants, an issue was that the  
9 majority of them did not provide their personal contact details. This meant that all  
10 communication had to happen through the agency representing them, which caused  
11 a number of problems, such as creating a delay in receiving responses, due to such  
12 agencies receiving high levels of communications from worldwide public, fans and  
13 brands looking to work with the influencer they represent. Also, influencers are  
14 normally approached by brands offering them free products or funds in return for  
15 posting content, but this research project had no access to funding. Having no readily  
16 available funds to use as an incentive for participant recruitment made the process  
17 especially difficult and also led to a natural cull in potential participants.  
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27 Ten participants ranging from nineteen to twenty-five years old were eventually  
28 signed up for the project. Their profile in terms of their current age, age at start of  
29 kidfluencing, location, number of followers and social medial channels used is shown  
30 in Table I (attached separately). As the Table shows, participants encompassed a  
31 range of current ages, age at start of kidfluencing, number of followers and social  
32 media channels, and perhaps most significantly a range of countries, which is highly  
33 relevant in the context of the research's focus on considering whether legislation  
34 should be considered internationally.  
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43 As the research focuses on detailing in-depth information regarding what it truly  
44 means to be a kidfluencer, qualitative methods are employed as they are designed to  
45 generate meaning through detailed description. Data were collected through the one-  
46 to-one semi-structured interview format 'to gain insights into [participant's] subjective  
47 experiences, opinions and motivations' (Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger, 2020: 3).  
48 The interviews lasted, on average, around sixty minutes each. Each interview was  
49 transcribed, and to ensure accuracy, each of the transcripts was read through twice.  
50 As detailed above, the rationale for the research was that little is known about the  
51 effects of kidfluencing on the children who are producing the content, and this  
52 corresponds to Bazeley's (2013: 7) intellectual goal approach, wherein the focus is  
53 on 'understanding something – gaining insight into what is going on and why it is  
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3 happening, or answering some question that previous research has not adequately  
4 addressed'. Concomitantly, the data was analysed through inductive thematic  
5 analysis, as this enables a data-driven analysis approach that produces a rich  
6 description of the data (Nowell et al, 2017).  
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11 The sensitivity of the subject area and the issues involved in contacting (now adult)  
12 kidfluencers were fully discussed in the application to the University of X's ethics  
13 committee, who granted approval. Interviews were conducted and recorded via  
14 Microsoft Teams. Excerpts from the interviews used below are anonymised with  
15 pseudonyms.  
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## 20 21 22 Findings

23 Analysis of the interviews led to the identification of a number of themes relevant to  
24 the key experiences of being a kidfluencer. These included experiences related to  
25 work-life balance, education, online and offline safety, mental health and wellbeing, a  
26 hierarchy of influencing and a lack of control.  
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### 30 31 32 *Amount of time creating content*

33 Participants' accounts of their daily activities demonstrated that they were required to  
34 constantly create content. A typical day of content creating involved taking pictures  
35 and videos for use over a certain period of time. For example, some kidfluencers  
36 would record content for the following week all in the period of one day. Some of this  
37 content would feature advertisement products sent to the kidfluencers from  
38 collaborative brands. These included cereals, toys, stationery and children's clothes.  
39 For those kidfluencers whose content was shared on their parents' profiles, they also  
40 promoted items such as baby pushchairs, highchairs, and kids' skincare and haircare  
41 products. The length of time required to create a week's worth of content varied  
42 between forty to sixty hours. However, what stood out in all interviews was the sheer  
43 level of tenacity and dedication required for this role. For example, participants  
44 openly spoke about sleep deprivation, some of them mentioning this as a matter-of-  
45 fact:  
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56 *I've just gotten to getting up really early especially on content creation days.*

57 *And most times I sleep late helping my mum to edit reels or my YouTube*  
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3 *vlogs. I like hanging out with mum while she edits them so I can make sure*  
4 *she cuts the embarrassing parts.*  
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10 These specific days that were set aside for creating content (photoshoots, recording  
11 videos, creating reels) were a common occurrence among the interviewed group.  
12 What this suggests is that the day-to-day lives of the kidfluencers who took part were  
13 a lot less glamorous than suggested. For example, several participants shared their  
14 frustrations of repeatedly retaking videos and pictures until they were good enough to  
15 post. Chris illustrates these realities in the following quotes:  
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22 *I had to continually pose, fake smiling in pictures and in videos. My parents*  
23 *are a bit of perfectionists so they would happily retake photographs so many*  
24 *times until it looked perfect.*  
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29 *Whether I liked it or not I had to get up early in the morning and shoot a couple*  
30 *of videos for my fans before school. Sometimes it's fun sometimes it's not as I*  
31 *wanted to rest but my parents push me to just do it. It was probably because I*  
32 *had to just post to keep my followers.*  
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### 38 *Missing out on education*

39 Further accounts from the kidfluencers illuminated the extent to which kidfluencers'  
40 use of Instagram and/or YouTube impacted on their education.  
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42 All participants stated that they had continued with their education whilst also being  
43 kidfluencers. The biggest challenge they faced was balancing both roles of being a  
44 student and also a kidfluencer. At times, this did mean their education suffered.  
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46 Some jokingly revealed that, on several occasions, their parents had permitted them  
47 to skip. On the one hand, such an example reveals the true risk of children's  
48 education being impacted as a result of being kidfluencers. It also raises serious  
49 concerns over the parents' agreement and encouragement of a child missing school.  
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51 The overall understanding gained here was that for the majority of participants, being  
52 a kidfluencer had somewhat affected their education. Some had struggled with  
53 balancing the workload for both their roles as kidfluencers and also as school  
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3 children. None of the ten participants had dropped out of school as a result of  
4 kidfluencing.  
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### 8 *Feeling unsafe online and physically* 9

10 Another key theme that came up from the interviews was concerning the safety of  
11 kidfluencers, both online and physically. Kidfluencers often receive free products  
12 instead of financial payment. This process involves kidfluencers being contacted by  
13 brands or individuals and being offered them for free in return for them posting a  
14 positive review. Once kidfluencers have accepted the offer, they are required to send  
15 a postal address for the gift to be sent to them.  
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22 Online, Instagram gives its users the option to keep their profiles on a private setting,  
23 meaning that only the followers they approve can see the content they share on their  
24 page. All kidfluencers who were interviewed had their profiles on public settings.  
25 They gave slightly different reasons for this, although the overall reasoning appeared  
26 to be the desire to grow their following. Keeping their profiles on a public setting  
27 meant anyone could access their account and view their content. It also gave users  
28 the freedom to share this content with others. However, there are still safety fears  
29 that arise as a result of kidfluencers filming vlogs in their family homes. One  
30 interviewee mentioned that she had received a DM (direct message) on Instagram  
31 from a stranger notifying her that they knew where she lived. The person correctly  
32 identified where they lived. 'Meet and Greets' also posed significant safety risks.  
33 These include kidfluencers organising an event where their followers can come and  
34 meet them face-to-face. Influencers who have gone on to publish books, they can  
35 sell signed copies of their book at a meet and greet while others give out freebies  
36 and take pictures with their fanbase.  
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50 Related to this is the question of who oversees social media accounts of  
51 kidfluencers. There appears to be an assumption that it is the parents of kidfluencers  
52 who are under the age of thirteen who manage their social media accounts as well as  
53 control the deals that they sign with different brands. This assumption is due to the  
54 presence of the legal requirements detailed above. However, this was not reflected in  
55 the findings from the one-to-one interviews. Of the ten interviewees, eight revealed  
56 that they had complete control of their social media accounts prior to turning  
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3 fourteen, and that their parents were not involved in their use. Five participants  
4 disclosed that their parents were not aware when they first joined Instagram and only  
5 informed them once they started noticing a large increase in their following.  
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### 10 *Inability to maintain friendships*

11 Speaking to Samantha, it was evident that being a kidfluencer changed the way in  
12 which she made and maintained her friendships. A major concern for her was the  
13 authenticity of those she called friends. Other participants shared the same sentiment  
14 with Samantha, with several of them highlighting the fear of being 'used' by fake  
15 friends. It is worth noting that those who became kidfluencers in their teenage years  
16 had already formed friendships, which some of them were able to maintain after  
17 becoming influencers. Participants shared a consensus on ways of distinguishing  
18 real friends from fake ones. For example, some shared examples of friends who only  
19 reached out to them when in need of money or resources. Millie summarises this  
20 issue below:  
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31 *Friends are there but I'm not sure which ones are real friends and which ones*  
32 *are here for fame and money. We enjoy and play but at the end of the day, I'm*  
33 *always left wondering are any of them real. Which friends would stick with me*  
34 *if I didn't have fame and money you know?*  
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39 Participants also shared what their expectations were in friendships. They sought  
40 friends who would be 'there' for them; friends who did not treat them like celebrities  
41 but allowed them to be 'normal' people. This is a point that was emphasised by most  
42 interviewees. Despite having this influencer status, there appeared to be a desire to  
43 live a 'normal' day-to-day life. Some respondents expressed complete frustrations  
44 over their inability to 'be normal' or 'have one normal day'. Also, the nature of the  
45 recruitment criteria meant that some of the participants had now entered the 'dating  
46 stage' of their lives. There were mixed experiences surrounding this stage, with some  
47 participants giving examples where they had been expected to cover all expenses  
48 during dates. Some shared experiences of people taking, and publicly sharing,  
49 unflattering images of them online during dates. All such examples show the possible  
50 negative long-term effects of being a kidfluencer at a young age.  
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### *The pressure to increase their profile*

Despite all being under the same kidfluencer bracket, content creators can be divided into separate brackets - microinfluencers, macroinfluencers and nanoinfluencers. Knowing the distinction between these helps make a distinction between being famous and not so famous. Macro influencers are the celebrity influencers boasting an Instagram following or YouTube subscribers over a million (Nizri, 2022). Micro-influencers on the other hand have “smaller, yet highly devoted, audiences” (Nizri, 2022). They normally have a following ranging between ten thousand to fifty thousand. Nano-influencers have an even smaller following, usually ranging between one thousand to ten thousand. For kidfluencers on Instagram, kudos is dependent on how long they have been kidfluencers for and how many followers or subscribers they have. For example, at the time of Zac’s interview, he had 546, 945 followers on Instagram. He spoke of the ease with which he formed friendships and got invited to events since earning over three hundred followers. Prior to this, he struggled to get frequent invites to events from fellow kidfluencers and also from brands selling children’s toys. For YouTubers, it is determined by the number of views on their videos. In addition, how quickly one gets those views is also integral in determining their hierarchical position. For example, one who accumulates one thousand views within two minutes of posting a YouTube video is considered more popular than someone who gradually gains views over a long period of time. It was also clear that the majority of participants often felt lonely and anxious, as though they were missing out compared to fellow kidfluencers. They all also made a link between this feeling and it arising as a result of seeing content from kidfluencer with a larger following than them. This shows that, despite having over a hundred thousand followers, kidfluencers still feel inadequate compared to peers with more followers. It also shows that a form of hierarchy has developed in relation to the number of followers.

### *Affecting mental health and wellbeing*

Social media pressures were one of the central themes in the interviews. Some of these pressures included the pressure to share content constantly and consistently such as the pressure to increase Instagram followers and YouTube views as well as subscribers. For Instagram users, there was also a mention of the constant change in algorithms which often led to a reduction in follower engagement with their content. An example of this is YouTube’s system for content creators to share reels (videos)

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3 over still images. The fluctuating numbers relating to follower engagement were  
4 reported to have had a negative impact on participants' mental wellbeing. Mark  
5 reflects on this issue below:  
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8 *The pressure to perform is always there. For me to keep up with the latest*  
9 *trends and fit in and attract more deals to keep up with the life I now leave. It*  
10 *weighs heavy on my mind. I often think what I would do if I didn't have all this.*  
11 *Nobody knows that at night I think about how this is all too much.*  
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17 Participants also shared the tendency to feel isolated despite having thousands of  
18 followers. This linked back to fears of being vulnerable and always keeping  
19 conversations at surface-level. Sarah spoke about the importance of 'checking in'  
20 and really paying attention to her thoughts and mood regularly. One way they do this  
21 is by posting a weekly poll asking followers how they are feeling. At the end of the  
22 day, the user then shares how their followers are feeling on average. They also  
23 reflect on their mood and share anything that may have impacted them that day.  
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30 Another area of concern that all the interviewees spoke about was in regard to  
31 comments received on their social media platforms. They shared the importance of  
32 receiving positive comments from the public. However, they also shared the  
33 struggles of coping with the negative comments. It was often in the comment  
34 sections that the kidfluencers found threats, insults and outright hurtful messages  
35 from the public. Several participants highlighted that these comments were normally  
36 to do with the quality of their content, or addressing frustrations over the money and  
37 deals kidfluencers make with brands. There was also confusion over how to deal with  
38 these hurtful comments. Some mentioned that their parents had shielded them from  
39 such comments, discouraging them from reading any comments online, while others  
40 spoke about lodging complaints to Instagram and YouTube. Both platforms were  
41 considered to be good at responding, although they were not always effective in  
42 resolving the issues raised. For example, on Instagram, participants could report  
43 someone for creating a fake profile using their pictures, after which Instagram would  
44 conduct their investigations and shut down the fake profile. However, Instagram has  
45 no effective way of stopping the same people or others from creating further fake  
46 accounts. Also, Instagram gives users the option to disable comments on their posts  
47 as well as to delete offensive or inappropriate comments. However, where comments  
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3 are enabled, users have no specific way of preventing other users from making  
4 hurting comments. Thus, even when users manage to delete abusive comments, the  
5 kidfluencers' mental wellbeing has already been impacted.  
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## 10 Discussion

11 It is important to note that research shows engagement with social media can have  
12 positive benefits for children in many ways (OFCOM, 2023; American Psychological  
13 Association, 2023; The US Surgeon General's Advisory, 2023). However, the  
14 accounts of participants above showed that being a kidfluencer led to various  
15 negative experiences for participants. This included issues such as the significant  
16 amount of time spent creating content, missing education, feeling unsafe online  
17 emotionally and physically, an inability to maintain friendships, pressure to increase  
18 their profile, and a negative effect on mental health and well-being. For at least one  
19 of these factors, missing education, there is a wealth of research that shows it has a  
20 detrimental effect on the welfare of individuals, such as multiple social, educational  
21 and lifelong socioeconomic disadvantages (John et al., 2022). More specific to this  
22 context, Shabahang et al., (2022) have identified that an elevated desire to be a  
23 social media influencer amongst young people is linked to a tendency to place less  
24 value on education. In many countries, the right to education has been enshrined in  
25 law for a long time, and this right is buttressed with compulsory school attendance  
26 laws, which were specifically implemented to stop the exploitation of children in the  
27 workplace. So in this regard, where such legislation exists, the case might be made  
28 that there is no need for further legislation, as is the case in most countries.  
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44 However, the need for further legislation/regulation should be considered in the  
45 context of the other issues identified in the research, particularly as the negative  
46 effects of such factors have been identified previously. For instance, increased time  
47 spent on social media platforms has been shown to have negative causal effects on  
48 the behaviour of early adolescents, as well as reduced reading time (Li et al., 2024).  
49 Riehm et al., (2019) have identified that adolescents who spend more than three  
50 hours per day on social media may be at heightened risk for mental health problems,  
51 and particularly prone to internalising problems. Rutter et al., (2021) identified that  
52 social media use is associated with higher levels of loneliness, which relates to the  
53 inability to maintain friendship experienced by participants. Li et al. (2022) have  
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3 detailed how social media has facilitated cyberbullying as a new form of bullying,  
4 which has led to adolescents particularly feeling unsafe online. Alutaybi et al., (2020)  
5 have identified the fear of 'missing out' (FOMO) for social media users can relate to a  
6 fear of missing the ability to keep followers, which can lead to anxiety, interrupted  
7 sleep, lack of concentration and dependence on social media to generate  
8 gratification. In this sense, it is arguable that some of these negative experiences  
9 met the threshold for abuse, emotional abuse and online abuse and harm as defined  
10 by the NSPCC (2018), the leading children's charity in the UK.  
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18 A key point to note is that, while legislators' focus has to a large extent been on the  
19 negative financial effects of being a kidfluencer, in terms of the potential for financial  
20 abuse, this was not something that was evident in the research. Instead, the negative  
21 effects of kidfluencing occurred primarily through social harms, which suggests that  
22 any legislation would need to focus on these rather than financial abuse. To return to  
23 the discussion on children's agency above, the above interviews suggest that being a  
24 kidfluencer circumscribes childhood as relating to thin agency, wherein it was evident  
25 that being a kidfluencer led to decisions and everyday actions that are carried out  
26 within highly restrictive contexts.  
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34 Another key point about these harms is that it is the nature of the social media and  
35 social influencing that is the intrinsic cause of harm to kidfluencers. A key feature of  
36 social media is the use of algorithms that facilitate users spending as much time as  
37 possible on platforms (Fetter et al., 2023), as this is how they are monetised. For  
38 kidfluencers, this means creating content as often as possible to ensure their  
39 followers either do not stop viewing or switch to an alternative kidfluencer. This  
40 system is associated with the harms of spending a significant amount of time creating  
41 content, missing education, and pressure to increase their profile. Another key point  
42 about social media is that it encourages the sharing of as much information as  
43 possible, as this is important to its core mission of monetisation. Users are actively  
44 encouraged to share as much information as possible, in order to engender a feeling  
45 of source credibility with their users (Balaban and Mustăţea, 2019). These  
46 expectations have been shown to present threats in regard to how safe kidfluencers  
47 feel both online and physically.  
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## Conclusions

The dynamics of kidfluencing, then, mean that their exposure to these harms is likely to impact on them in ways that are far more intensive than experienced by other young people. By their very nature, kidfluencers are required to engage with social media in more intense and diverse ways than the average social media user, and so their experiences are also likely to be more intense and diverse. This means that while general laws concerned with limiting social media harms may be appropriate for general social media users, the nature of kidfluencing suggests that such general laws would give limited protection of kidfluencers.

Overall, it becomes clear that kidfluencing has the potential to change the experiences of childhood and also experiences of transitioning from childhood into adulthood. While not all of these issues affected all participants, these are nonetheless significant issues and suggest a need for laws that deal with the unique nature of kidfluencers' lifestyles.

Although this study is based on a small sample of participants who were willing to share their sensitive experiences and dilemmas, it provides a rather unique insight into the hidden world behind the screen presentations of kidfluencers, and suggests several important implications for future policy. Firstly, due to the rising concerns surrounding the psychological effects of kidfluencing, there is an urgent need to develop targeted interventions aimed at educating parents about the possible implications of kidfluencing. In particular, there needs to be a focus on informing parents on both the positive and negative consequences of exposure that their children will experience when signing them up or posting videos and pictures of them. Parents need a greater understanding of the difficulty in maintaining privacy once specific images and videos have been posted online. This could include the specific issues identified in this research of the work-life balance, impact on education, online and offline safety, maintenance of friendships, the hierarchy of influencing and mental health and wellbeing. A reasonable approach to achieve this could be for social media platforms to create an informative interactive video for parents to watch before making accounts for their children aged thirteen and below. This same video could also be sent out to parents of kidfluencers. Promoting media

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3 literacy for children to learn how to self-regulate sponsored content on social media  
4 could also be helpful as a harm prevention strategy.  
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8 The limitations of this project are that all participants were above the age of eighteen.  
9 Therefore, their contributions reflect upon their past, rather than speaking about their  
10 recent experiences which can lead to retrospective bias. With this in mind, a  
11 potentially fruitful avenue for future research would be to listen to the voice of current  
12 kidfluencers, despite the considerable difficulties of access. Ethical considerations  
13 and the likely barriers presented by parents and commercial concerns are likely to  
14 prevent such research happening, but we should not just stand by with a 'what can  
15 you do in the face of corporate interests' mindset, but seek to regulate kidfluencing,  
16 as per the recent initiatives in France.  
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**Table I. Anonymised Profile of Research Participants**

Participant	Profile				
	Current Age	Age at start of Kidfluencing	Location	Number of Followers/ Subscribers	Social media Channels used
1 Zac	23	12	United Kingdom	546 945	Instagram & YouTube
2 Samantha	25	15	United Kingdom	7069	Instagram
3 Susan	19	9	Spain	121 000	Instagram
4 Chris	20	13	Canada	34 200	Instagram & TikTok
5 Lily	19	12	Zimbabwe	26 100	Instagram, YouTube & TikTok
6 Julie	21	10	Uganda	9450	Instagram
7 Mark	22	11	Italy	47 600	Instagram & Facebook
8 Joe	25	15	India	9300	Instagram
9 Millie	21	10	Kenya	48 300	Instagram
10 Katie	20	8	USA	236 000	YouTube