

A FOR-PROFIT CHILDHOOD: THE EXPLOITATION OF KID
INFLUENCERS

by

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This thesis aims to answer the question, “Do children face harm when placed in the public eye as influencers, and if so, what are those harms?” The testimonies of 22 current and former child influencers are used to address this. An inductive thematic analysis of the testimonies identifies 11 recurring harms (i.e. abuse, harassment, exposure to pedophilia, grooming, etc.) that child influencers face. Two case studies are included to further embody the harms experienced and indicate exactly how and when harm occurs. This data identifies how often harm occurs and what those harms are. The argument concludes with proposed solutions to the issue at the platform, federal and individual level.

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Introduction

A group of children, aged 12-15, are filming a video for their friend Lev's YouTube channel. At 14 years old, Lev has over 1 million subscribers. While they're filming an introduction for his video, a police officer enters the scene and explains that a neighbor has filed a noise complaint. He begins to question Hunter, the cameraman. Hunter is also the only adult present on set. The children snicker and talk amongst themselves while the officer speaks to Hunter, until the officer suddenly grabs one of the children and reprimands him for talking back to him. 13-year-old Piper steps forward to defend Lev, only for the officer to yell at her to "shut up." Piper is Lev's girlfriend, and the video is being filmed at her home.

The officer asks Lev where his parents are, to which he replies that he is "a legal 18," and is not required to have a parent present. The officer then turns him around and handcuffs him as all of his friends watch. The children begin to sob, begging the officer to let their friend go.

The children console each other, with the older children running to comfort the younger ones. One young girl collapses to the floor, hyperventilating and screaming, "I can't, I can't!" Hunter yells at the children to calm down and stop crying as they look to him for reassurance.

The children run outside to the driveway where a police car is parked. Lev sits in the back seat, still handcuffed and sobbing behind a barred window. The officer tells the children that Lev has a warrant out for his arrest, and will be taken to the police station. The vehicle then backs out of the driveway and drives down the street before circling the block and returning to the house, where the inconsolable children are still outside. The footage switches to the officer's body camera, where he is heard saying, "Don't break character."

The officer gets out of the car, claiming that he left his ticket book at the house, and that if someone retrieves it, he will let Lev go. One child runs to the backyard and grabs it. He hands

it to the officer and says, “I’m shaking.” “Who’s shaking?” asks the officer, and the chorus of children reply, “everyone!”

He removes Lev’s handcuffs before forcibly grabbing Piper’s arm and pulling her toward the car, yelling “Do you want to get arrested too?” Piper screams in protest as her friends run to her side. One boy steps up to the cop and calmly says, “I’m sorry sir, but she hasn’t done anything wrong.” Lev then jumps in and says, “No. I’ve done something wrong. I pranked you guys!”

The children all yell and rejoice as someone releases confetti. “It’s always hard pranking kids because you don’t know how emotional they’re going to get, but I’m like eh hh they’ll grow up eventually,” says the officer, who is not an actual officer at all, but a “Complete Uniformed Police Actor.”

To conclude the video, the children all stand in front of the cop car, but many of them are still visibly shaken. One covers his face to hide the fact that he is still crying.

Off-camera, this child called his mother and asked to be picked up. When she arrived, she confronted Piper’s mother, furious that she wasn’t informed about the prank ahead of time. After much yelling back-and-forth, the child and his mother stormed out. This additional context was provided in a documentary released five years after the prank occurred.

Rigo Obezo, the actor/officer present that day, filmed the aftermath of the prank with his body camera and uploaded the raw, unedited footage to his personal YouTube channel. The footage depicts the following events.

Following the prank, Tiffany, Piper’s mother (and the one responsible for hiring Obezo), greets him. She whispers something to his partner, Lena, and she responds, alarmed, “They didn’t know about it?” Based on the context, it becomes clear that “they” are the parents of the

children who were involved in the prank. Tiffany replies in a hushed tone, “Well no, because they’re the ones who tell their kids.” It seems that Tiffany is implying that if she were to tell the children’s parents about the prank ahead of time, they might relay the message to their kids, which would make the children’s reactions less authentic for the camera. Obezo and his partner are clearly taken aback by this. “Oh, okay. I see. That’s fine then,” says Lena, her voice drenched in anxiety.

After taking photos for the video’s thumbnail, Obezo says he’ll go inside to say goodbye to the kids. Lena interrupts him, chiming in, “...And to say sorry for traumatizing them.” They enter the living room where Hunter (the aforementioned cameraman), Tiffany and Piper are discussing the child and mother who had argued with them moments earlier. Hunter is on the phone, clearly frustrated, and can be heard saying, “They all just peaced out, they said bye and then left.”

The argument gets more heated as they discuss how upset some of the children were, and which ones cried. Then Tiffany says, “Piper, I don’t want them in the Squad anymore, they’re done.” “Tiffany, stop,” Hunter chimes in, but Tiffany roars back, “You didn’t hear the way she spoke to me!” At this point, Piper and Lev are still in the room. Hunter can be heard saying, “Well, yes because you didn’t give a warning or something, there should be a warning.” “I can’t warn her, she tells her kid everything. She told her kid about my \$30,000 trip to Hawaii,” retorts Tiffany.

Obezo walks over to Lena. “Should we go?” she asks in a whisper. Obezo enters the backyard to ensure he hasn’t left anything, and even with the door shut, Tiffany and Hunter can be heard screaming at each other while Piper and another child sit together in the yard. When he reenters the living room, Lena is at the door, and whispers with urgency, “I think we should

probably go.” They say a quick goodbye, and Tiffany and Hunter look up briefly to offer a lame farewell before returning to their screaming match. The video ends as they return to their car.

Obezo replied to many of the understandably concerned comments on this video. In one reply, he says, “Yes it was very uncomfortable for my partner and I to witness this little outburst from Tiffany. It was Tiffany who made the threat to throw someone out because they stood up to her. This certainly was not the last time I witnessed Tiffany snapping and yelling at people.”

Obezo’s body camera footage provides insight into part of the world of family vlogging and child influencing that audiences aren’t typically allowed to see. Public-facing content is normally edited and filtered to perfection, but this is one of the few authentic views we get of this dynamic. Placing a child in the public eye—whether that be through family vlogging, child influencing or posting about a child on a blog or social media—in order to achieve monetary gain or virality, puts them in harm’s way. In the most extreme of circumstances, children can be the victims of physical and emotional abuse, but all children who have an online presence face the risk of identity theft, exposure to online predators, social difficulties, and struggles with identity.

Here, I aim to answer the question, “Do children face harm when placed in the public eye as influencers, and if so, what are those harms?” To define an answer, I will outline the concerns scholars have addressed regarding children who exist in the public eye, and provide examples via the personal testimonies shared by current and former child influencers of the harms children face. I will also be drawing on the embodied experiences of one particular family vlogging channel and one child influencer. Based on these testimonies, there are multiple harms. I want to bring attention to the children who have already suffered the harms outlined by scholars and encourage change in this industry.

Literature Review

The literature about this topic highlights the current state of the child influencing industry. First, I will highlight the definitions of important niche terminology. Many of the terms used in the literature and across the child influencing landscape are new and have been coined to specifically define behaviors in this rapidly developing industry, so establishing clear definitions of these terms early on is important. Then, I will outline the potential harms that children face online as stated by media and psychology scholars. To conclude, I will summarize the role the law plays in the field. There are many legislative protections that exist in support of child performers, including actors, models and musicians, but they haven't yet been updated to include child influencers. By describing the protections some child performers enjoy, it becomes evident how lawless and unregulated the current child influencing industry is.

Definitions and the Child Influencing Landscape

"Kidfluencers," are defined by MiKayla B. Jayroe as, "children who have been posted online on different social media platforms generating large numbers of viewers and followers, often earning money for sponsored content" (2023). These kidfluencers are often born out of the process of "sharenting," or "the practice of parents over sharing information related to their children on social media" (Nottingham, 2019). Another dimension of this lucrative industry is "commercial sharenting," which is "when parents overshare photos and other data about their children on social media for commercial gain" (Fineman, 2022).

Content featuring children is one of the most popular video genres on YouTube. One study by the Pew Research Institute found that videos featuring children under the age of 13 "received an average of 297,574 views compared with an average of 97,081 views for those that did not" (van Kessel et al., n.d.).

Negative Impacts of Family Vlogging and Child Influencing

Privacy Harms and Consent

Scholar Bridie E. Hamilton outlines a list of “Salient Characteristics of Privacy Violations” that regularly occur in child-centered content. Some of the content features Hamilton outlines include filming that occurs on a predictable schedule over a prolonged period; “work that is indistinguishable from play;” “filming embarrassing, personal, confidential, or intimate conversations;” “revealing intimate details about the child’s identity, developmental, or intellectual capacity;” and “homeschooling, frequent relocating” (Hamilton, 2023). While this list is not comprehensive, it demonstrates just how much a child’s privacy is invaded when they have an online presence.

Details that are shared online about a child may seem small initially, but they add up over time. “‘Sharenting’ can result in the identification of a child’s home or school, reveal what a child looks like, their birthday and their likes and dislikes (Kumar, 2019)” (Nottingham, 2019).

Privacy invasions often continue offline as well. “The experience of Lorenzo Greer, a child YouTube star, highlights this. While on a trip with his class, Lorenzo’s teachers had to step in to protect him from a crowd of teenagers who recognized him and began trying to take a selfie with him. In an interview, Lorenzo explained that this occurrence was not a single isolated event, elaborating that ‘[i]t first happened when I was seven and in town with my family . . . I was like, ‘Whaaat?’ Sometimes, Dad takes me out of situations if it’s overwhelming. I only go to the park if there are zero kids there.’ Kidfluencers can easily find themselves helplessly exposed to the public after generating a large following” (Jayroe, 2023). In this example, Greer’s online presence prevents him from socializing with children in real life at a playground like other kids his age because of the fear that he may be recognized in public.

Oftentimes, privacy violations result in children losing control over how they are portrayed online. Camille Laude says, “One of the main effects of being a child featured in family vlogs is the loss of control over one’s own image and identity. Children who are constantly filmed and exposed to millions of strangers may not have a say in how they are portrayed or what aspects of their lives are shared” (Laude, 2024).

This raises the question of consent, and whether or not children are able to give true informed consent to being filmed and posted online. Camille Laude says, “Children of family vloggers face two significant barriers to providing genuine consent. The first obstacle is ensuring that children have an age-appropriate understanding of what participating in family vlogging entails, which is a key element of informed consent. Second, the children may not have a real choice to say no” (Laude, 2024). Many children are never given the opportunity to deny giving consent. They are posted online from the moment they are born, and by the time they are old enough to understand the repercussions of having an online presence, there are already hundreds of hours’ worth of content featuring their likeness plastered on the internet.

Safety Harms and Concerns

Violating a child’s privacy online often puts their safety at risk. “Potential risks include identity theft resulting from the leaking of private, identifiable information; bullying from the child’s peers; possession and misuse of photographs by strangers, including for sexual or political motives; and even kidnapping by sexual predators” (Amon et al., 2022).

Children online are subject to a specific type of identity theft, called “digital kidnapping,” in which “hackers will ‘kidnap’ a photo of a child or baby off a public social media account. They will post these photos in their own accounts, using the picture-perfect moments to create a fantasy world of their own. They may use this fake world to help them create an imaginary

escape, or to draw traffic to their own public accounts” (Health Care Family Credit Union, n.d.). It's a new issue that is becoming increasingly more prominent: “In a UK report, Barclays suggested that by 2030, ‘sharenting’ will account for two thirds of identity fraud (Coughlan, 2018). Information exposed about a child when they are young might be recorded and stored until the child is an adult, when fraudsters could open accounts using the details they have collected” (Nottingham, 2019).

When given an online platform, children are also at risk of being identified by sexual predators. “Pedophile rings can ‘exploit’ recommendation algorithms and monopolize the comments sections of kid-featured posts, ‘leaving lewd responses and exchanging links to child pornography.’ One parent shared a picture of her potty training twins online, only to discover that the photo had been modified and spread on a pedophile website” (Fineman, 2022). The type and accessibility of content posted “where children are presented in their most physical[ly] and mental[ly] vulnerable state” (Ali & Coronado, 2023) often lends itself to pedophiles and fetishists.

Pedophilia runs rampant in the comments section of child-centered content as well. In a content analysis of the comments child models receive on their Instagram posts, 8.8% were inappropriate, meaning the comment was flirtatious, intimate or romantic in nature. 1.8% of the comments were explicitly sexual, and 25.5% were complimentary of the child’s appearance. In an analysis of the profiles that wrote these comments, it was found that 62.2% of comments were posted by men, while only 5% were posted by females. The gender of the other 32.8% of profiles was unidentifiable (Shadid, 2023).

Mental Health Harms and Concerns

Child influencing poses a significant threat to children's mental health and wellbeing. Internet child shaming, or "situations where parents post on social media (usually in the form of a video) to embarrass and humiliate their child in order to punish them" (Nottingham, 2019), contributes greatly to a child influencer's deteriorating mental health. Not only does this action directly humiliate the child, but it also puts the child at risk of experiencing bullying at the hands of their peers or by online viewers (Nottingham, 2019).

Child influencers often feel immense pressure to perform for the camera, which can lead to "a distorted sense of self, anxiety, and the blurring of boundaries between private and public life" (Laude, 2024). Additionally, these children may feel a need to meet the expectations of their parents, their audience and society's beauty standards, which further contributes to anxiety and may introduce body image issues (Laude, 2024).

Another major mental health concern for children online is confusion in developing their sense of self and identity. "The development of identity is heavily impacted by an online presence. In correlation with sharenting, the formation of an identity on social media is dictated by what parents choose to post about their children" (Ali & Coronado, 2023). When children are given a "character" to play online, even if that character is based on themselves, it makes it difficult for them to separate their own identity from their character's identity.

In addition to their identity, child influencers may have a hard time identifying with their own age after having to act and behave as older and more mature on camera. "These kids who are pushed into acting older than they are, even if its just crushes, dating, making out, whatever it is, it violates their innocence on that side, and it's hard to get them back to where they need to be in their regular daily lives." said Dr. Karen North, a communications professor at USC

Annenberg. “It’s like they’re stuck between two worlds, and they don’t know which one’s right or which one’s normal” (Davidson & Rosher, 2025).

Legal Background

The current legal landscape for the child influencing industry is constantly changing, and the line is often blurry regarding whether the laws in place apply to child influencers or not.

Below is an outline of the current legal protections for child performers, followed by the few child influencer-specific legislation that has been passed, and the legislations that are currently proposed.

1. Fair Labor Standards Act and Child Performer Exemptions – “In 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act ("FLSA") was passed, and with it the first national policy protecting minors from unsafe or oppressive labor. The Act set an eighteen-year minimum age of employment, stating that, "employment in any occupation found and declared by the Secretary of Labor to be particularly hazardous for the employment of minors of such age or detrimental to their health or well-being," would no longer be permitted” (Pacht-Friedman, 2021). When this act was passed, an exemption known as the “Shirley Temple Exception” was made for “any child employed as an actor or performer in motion pictures or theatrical productions, or in radio or television productions.”
2. Coogan Laws - “After a successful career, best known for roles in Charlie Chaplin films, Jackie Coogan reached the age of majority and learned that his parents had spent most of his earnings from his child acting career. Coogan sued his parents but was unable to prevail because at the time, the money that a child earned belonged to his parents” (Saragoza, 2019). In 1939, California was the first state to enact a Coogan Law. “Currently, California, New York, Illinois, Louisiana and New Mexico require the establishment of Coogan accounts (i.e., blocked trust accounts and trust accounts). These states ensure child actors or performers have some of the money they earn held for them in a trust” (Laude, 2024). Currently, child influencers are not included in the types of labor that are protected by Coogan Laws.
3. Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) – “In 1998, Congress enacted the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act ("COPPA") to regulate unfair and deceptive acts and practices in connection with the collection and use of personal information from and about children on the Internet” (Saragoza, 2019). While this law aims to protect children from exploitation, it only applies to children who are viewing content, not child creators. Websites cannot collect data from children

without parental consent, however it does not govern what parents choose to share about their children online.

4. Illinois Child Labor Law – On July 1, 2024, Illinois became the first state to amend its child labor laws to include stipulations about financial protections for child influencers and family vloggers.
5. Washington State House Bill 1627 – “An act Relating to protecting the interests of minor children featured on for-profit family vlogs” (Protecting the Interests of Minor Children, 2023). This bill was proposed in Washington State in 2023 and has yet to be passed or denied. If passed, the bill would require children of family vloggers to be compensated appropriately.

Methods

I will refer to personal testimonies to demonstrate the harms that real children have already faced at the hands of child influencing and family vlogging. Personal testimonies allow for the conversation to shift from hypothetical ramifications and harms to concrete evidence based on true happenings children have experienced. The 22 testimonies I analyzed have been shared by people who were placed in the public eye online and are now adults and anonymously by children who are still in the public eye. Some testimonies were shared personally by the influencers in books, documentaries, journalistic articles, or online posts, while others are shared in legal documents.

Testimony	Source
Piper Rockelle	<i>Bad Influence: The Dark Side of Kidfluencing</i> documentary and “CLAIRE E. and REESE E., minors by and through their guardian ad litem, Ashley Anne-Rock Smith; Plaintiffs, vs. TIFFANY ROCKELLE SMITH, an individual; HUNTER HILL, an individual; PIPER ROCKELLE INC.” lawsuit
Sawyer Sharbino	<i>Bad Influence: The Dark Side of Kidfluencing</i> documentary and “CLAIRE E. and REESE E., minors by and through their guardian ad litem, Ashley Anne-Rock Smith; Plaintiffs, vs. TIFFANY ROCKELLE SMITH, an individual; HUNTER HILL, an individual; PIPER ROCKELLE INC.” lawsuit

Donlad Daugher	“CLAIRE E. and REESE E., minors by and through their guardian ad litem, Ashley Anne-Rock Smith; Plaintiffs, vs. TIFFANY ROCKELLE SMITH, an individual; HUNTER HILL, an individual; PIPER ROCKELLE INC.” lawsuit
Ayden Mekus	“CLAIRE E. and REESE E., minors by and through their guardian ad litem, Ashley Anne-Rock Smith; Plaintiffs, vs. TIFFANY ROCKELLE SMITH, an individual; HUNTER HILL, an individual; PIPER ROCKELLE INC.” lawsuit
Connor Cain	<i>Bad Influence: The Dark Side of Kidfluencing</i> documentary and “CLAIRE E. and REESE E., minors by and through their guardian ad litem, Ashley Anne-Rock Smith; Plaintiffs, vs. TIFFANY ROCKELLE SMITH, an individual; HUNTER HILL, an individual; PIPER ROCKELLE INC.” lawsuit
Hayden Haas	“CLAIRE E. and REESE E., minors by and through their guardian ad litem, Ashley Anne-Rock Smith; Plaintiffs, vs. TIFFANY ROCKELLE SMITH, an individual; HUNTER HILL, an individual; PIPER ROCKELLE INC.” lawsuit

Walker Bryant	<i>Bad Influence: The Dark Side of Kidfluencing</i> documentary and “CLAIRE E. and REESE E., minors by and through their guardian ad litem, Ashley Anne-Rock Smith; Plaintiffs, vs. TIFFANY ROCKELLE SMITH, an individual; HUNTER HILL, an individual; PIPER ROCKELLE INC.” lawsuit
Sophie Fergi	<i>Bad Influence: The Dark Side of Kidfluencing</i> documentary and “CLAIRE E. and REESE E., minors by and through their guardian ad litem, Ashley Anne-Rock Smith; Plaintiffs, vs. TIFFANY ROCKELLE SMITH, an individual; HUNTER HILL, an individual; PIPER ROCKELLE INC.” lawsuit
Claire Rock-Smith	<i>Bad Influence: The Dark Side of Kidfluencing</i> documentary and “CLAIRE E. and REESE E., minors by and through their guardian ad litem, Ashley Anne-Rock Smith; Plaintiffs, vs. TIFFANY ROCKELLE SMITH, an individual; HUNTER HILL, an individual; PIPER ROCKELLE INC.” lawsuit

Reese Rock-Smith	<i>Bad Influence: The Dark Side of Kidfluencing</i> documentary and “CLAIRE E. and REESE E., minors by and through their guardian ad litem, Ashley Anne-Rock Smith; Plaintiffs, vs. TIFFANY ROCKELLE SMITH, an individual; HUNTER HILL, an individual; PIPER ROCKELLE INC.” lawsuit
Symonne Harrison	“CLAIRE E. and REESE E., minors by and through their guardian ad litem, Ashley Anne-Rock Smith; Plaintiffs, vs. TIFFANY ROCKELLE SMITH, an individual; HUNTER HILL, an individual; PIPER ROCKELLE INC.” lawsuit
Corrine Joy	<i>Bad Influence: The Dark Side of Kidfluencing</i> documentary and “CLAIRE E. and REESE E., minors by and through their guardian ad litem, Ashley Anne-Rock Smith; Plaintiffs, vs. TIFFANY ROCKELLE SMITH, an individual; HUNTER HILL, an individual; PIPER ROCKELLE INC.” lawsuit
Addison	Now deleted Tik Tok video: @womanlover75, #fyp
Anonymous (Caroline)	Tik Tok video: @caroline_easom, This is hands down the most important video I’ve ever made. Please listen. #familyvlog #fyp #letter #anonymous #story

Leta Armstrong	NPR Weekend Edition Sunday: “Featuring kids is good business for influencer parents, but at the cost of their future” by Ayesha Rascoe
Anonymous (Lou)	NPR Weekend Edition Sunday: “Featuring kids is good business for influencer parents, but at the cost of their future” by Ayesha Rascoe
Shari Franke	<i>Devil in the Family: The Fall of Ruby Franke</i> documentary, <i>The House of My Mother: A Daughter’s Quest for Freedom</i> by Shari Franke
Chad Franke	<i>Devil in the Family: The Fall of Ruby Franke</i> documentary, <i>The House of My Mother: A Daughter’s Quest for Freedom</i> by Shari Franke
Jacqueline de Jong	New York Times article: “She Was a Child Instagram Influencer. Her Fans Were Grown Men.” By Jennifer Valentino-DeVries and Michael H. Keller
Anonymous (Vanessa)	Cosmopolitan Magazine article: “The Real Cost of Being a Parent Influencer’s Kid” by Fortesa Latifi
Anonymous (Claire)	Teen Vogue Article: “Influencer Parents and The Kids Who Had Their Childhood Made Into Content” by Fortesa Latifi

Cam Barrett	Teen Vogue Article: “Influencer Parents and The Kids Who Had Their Childhood Made Into Content” by Fortesa Latifi, Tik Tok video: @softscorpio, wanted to share this with you guys because i wouldnt have been able to do this without all of your support ❤️ #softscorpio #familyvloggers #familyvlog #kidsarenotcontent
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Table 1 Provides a list of the testimonies being used for this analysis and the sources they were retrieved from.

I am conducting an inductive thematic analysis. I chose to do an inductive analysis because a framework doesn’t exist yet that outlines the harms these children experience. Existing literature suggests some of the harms that may occur, but in an abstract, hypothetical way, rather than pulling from personal stories or experiences as I chose to do. Additionally, I felt that an inductive analysis would better equip me to answer the second half of my research question, “What are the harms that child influencers experience?” I coded the testimonies for 11 recurring themes using Zotero, a citation management software. I read through all of the testimonies prior to coding any of them to gain an understanding of the general themes being discussed. Then, I combed through each testimony multiple times, coding for shared experiences.

I decided that an incident of harm could be coded as a theme if it occurred in more than one testimony. Some testimonies provided accounts of individual children’s experiences within the same environment (i.e. the 12 children involved in the Piper Rockelle case and both Franke siblings). To ensure fairness in the coding process, if one harm occurred within one of these related testimonies, at least one other occurrence of that harm needed to appear in an unrelated testimony from a child that was not part of the related group. For example, if three children from

the Piper Rockelle case experienced abuse, then at least one other child uninvolved in the Piper Rockelle case would also need to have reported experiencing abuse in order for that theme to be considered recurring. This way, the argument cannot be made that abuse was only a consequence of the environment surrounding the Piper Rockelle case because it occurred in at least two entirely isolated incidences where the only common factor is the presence of child influencing.

To some, it might seem that only two separate occurrences of a harm is not substantial enough to be considered recurring, which might be true for other variables in other fields of study. In this case, however, the harms being measured include child abuse, grooming, harassment, and financial neglect. Given the gravity of these issues, the threshold for how many instances are needed to be considered recurring is significantly lower. Even a small number of corroborating testimonies is significant and sufficient enough to suggest a pattern of recurring harm that warrants critical attention.

These themes are intended to be representative of the child influencer experience based on shared happenings discussed in these testimonies. The table below clearly defines each code and exemplifies how I classified each theme.

Code	Definition	Determining Factors
Exploitation	Labor or activity exploitation is causing or requiring an individual to engage in work or any activity which is improper, illegal, demeaning, or against the reasonable and rational wishes of the individual <i>(Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation, n.d.)</i>	Any use of the term exploitation, or mentions of doing demeaning work against one's will for someone else's financial gain
Exposure to pedophilia	Pedophilia is defined as a sexual interest in prepubescent children (Seto, 2009)	Mentions of content ending up on pedophilic forums and adult men expressing sexual or romantic attraction toward underage children

Mental Health Harms	Patterns or changes in thinking, feeling or behaving that causes distress or gets in the way of being able to act. Mental health conditions in children are most often defined as delays or changes in thinking, behaviors, social skills or control over emotions. (<i>Worried about Your Child's Mental Health?</i>, n.d.)	Mentions of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation or behavioral changes
Grooming	Grooming is when a person builds a relationship with a child, young person or an adult who's at risk so they can abuse them and manipulate them into doing things (<i>Grooming</i>, n.d.)	Requires relationship element to differ from exposure to pedophilia; i.e. repeated contact or sending gifts

Coercion/Power Imbalance	Threats of serious harm to or physical restraint against any person; any scheme, plan, or pattern intended to cause a person to believe that failure to perform an act would result in serious harm to or physical restraint against any person <i>(Definition: Coercion from 18 USC § 1591(e)(2) LII / Legal Information Institute, n.d.)</i>	Any mentions of a child being forced to do or say things that make them uncomfortable by an adult. Often includes the adult threatening the child with the idea that the entire family will lose their income if the child doesn't perform
Loss of Autonomy	When you lack autonomy, you're more controlled by what others do, think, and feel, and adapt accordingly. <i>(Lack of Autonomy, 2016)</i>	Any mention of a child who was not given a choice in regards to what content was posted or whether or not they wanted to participate in making content

Loss of opportunities	A claim for loss of opportunity can arise in consequence of a contractual breach, negligence, personal injury, or misleading and deceptive conduct where the wrong results in the loss of a chance to profit, gain or benefit. (<i>What is a Loss of Opportunity?</i> , 2022)	Any mentions of losing a job, being removed from school, or a fear of those situations or similar happening as a result of having an online presence.
Abuse/harassment	Harassment is unwanted, uninvited, and unwelcome and causes annoyance, alarm, or substantial emotional distress (<i>Harass</i>, 2022) Abuse is inappropriate treatment of an individual. It includes physical, psychological, emotional and sexual abuse (<i>Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation</i>, n.d.)	Any instance of physical, sexual, verbal or psychological abuse or harassment endured in the context of filming and posting content

Lack of Compensation	A situation where the payment or reward given for work, services, or losses is not sufficient, fair, or adequate to meet the needs or expectations of the recipient (<i>No Compensation</i> , 2025)	Any mention of financial harm a child experienced, i.e. not receiving adequate (or any) pay
Humiliation	A human rights perspective interprets humiliation as a form of violence that constitutes a violation of an individual's rights and dignity (Kannsra, 2023)	Mentions of shame, embarrassment or mortification in regard to specific content posted
Role Confusion	a psychological state where an individual experiences uncertainty or conflict about their social roles and expectations (<i>Role Confusion</i> , n.d.)	Mentions of “blurred lines” between content versus family bonding, parent versus boss, and family versus business

Table 2 Defines the themes being coded for and exemplifies the rationale behind them.

I have chosen two testimonies to utilize as case studies. I feel that the coding and inductive thematic analysis will allow me to gather quantitative data, which can then be used in visualizations, but these children are more than just numbers. What they've experienced cannot simply be summarized by a bar graph. By highlighting some of these children's specific stories, I aim to tell a more well-rounded story and demonstrate how these recurring themes I've coded for manifest themselves within specific contexts. I chose these specific case studies for two reasons. First, each of these cases have received ample news and media coverage. Both cases have been the subject of recent documentaries, and the subject of the first case also wrote a book detailing her experience. This allows for a very full, robust account of the happenings the victims experienced. Secondly, these case studies both involve multiple child victims. This allows for more inferences to be made about the harms these children experienced due to the larger sample size.

Case Study #1: Shari and Chad Franke

Shari and Chad Franke were 12 and 10 years old, respectively, when their mother, Ruby, decided to start a family vlogging YouTube channel in 2015. The channel was affectionately called 8Passengers, a reference to their family's six children and two parents. Ruby decided to start vlogging as a means of evangelizing their faith, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (otherwise known as the Mormon church). "In my church, we're encouraged to document our lives meticulously," wrote Shari, "creating a road map for future generations to understand their roots, and it seemed as though the internet was just an extension of that, another way in which to do the Lord's work." Within months of starting the YouTube channel, a video entitled

“The Making of Eve” was uploaded. The video detailed the birth of their sixth child, Eve. Her first moments alive were shared publicly online, which marks a major loss of autonomy.

Ruby’s parenting style was strict and militaristic. Some of her most controversial parenting moments included telling her nine-year-old daughter that she wasn’t allowed to go home sick from school unless she had thrown up twice and, when her 6-year-old daughter forgot to pack her lunch, refusing to bring her one, saying, “It’s Eve’s responsibility to pack a lunch in the morning... so the natural outcome is she’ll have to go hungry” (@utahvloggersyas, 2022). These moments were met with mixed reactions, with many people indicating their discomfort with her parenting style. One comment read “8 Passengers more like 6 prisoners.” Another read “This upsets me so much she’s LITERALLY psychologically abusing her family.”

For many years, these were the only issues the channel faced, but as their channel grew, so did Ruby’s expectations. She demanded perfection in their videos, and would threaten the children with physical abuse if they couldn’t deliver. Descriptions of these instances were coded as coercion/power imbalance. One night, after Chad refused to film for a video, Shari, “helped clean his blood off the walls” following abuse from Ruby (Lambert, 2025). This marks one of many instances of abuse/harassment in this case study.

“Chad was like a shaken-up bottle of Mentos and Coke, incapable of restraint,” said Shari. “He was like a force of nature, constantly pushing boundaries and testing limits.” (Franke, 2025, p.89). As his behavior reached a breaking point, he was expelled from his private school. He was sent to the Anasazi Foundation’s outdoor therapy program—a two-month hike through the Arizona desert where other “troubled teens” learn to cook, build shelter, and navigate the wilderness on their own while undergoing behavioral therapy (*Anasazi Wilderness Programs Therapy for Boys and Girls*, n.d.). Following his stay at Anasazi, the Frankes started following a

family counseling practice through a company called Connexions. Founded by counselor and life coach Jodi Hildebrandt, “The core teachings of Connexions is that for a person to achieve true “connection” with another human being, they must not be in ‘distortion.’” (*Jodi Hildebrandt Information and Reviews - Jodi Hildebrandt*, 2020). The Franke family dove headfirst into her teachings, despite Shari’s concerns about Jodi’s credibility. “...the more I Googled Jodi Hildebrandt, the more concerned I became. It was like falling down a rabbit hole lined with red flags” (Franke, 2025, p. 99) recounted Shari. Soon, Ruby and her husband, Kevin, began facilitating Connexions workshops. As Ruby became more invested in the program, her and Jodi became inseparable. Ruby often mentioned Connexions in her vlogs and even featured Jodi numerous times, encouraging her viewers to also join the program.

8Passengers peaked in popularity in 2019 when they surpassed 2,000,000 subscribers. At this time, Shari realized just how detrimental influencing was on her mental health and wellbeing. “I ping-ponged between trying to understand my mother’s coldness toward me and the public comments tearing me down,” recalled Shari. “The result was a new feeling. A sort of emptiness I’d never experienced before. Hopelessness. Self-loathing. And sometimes, a desire to just... end it all” (Franke, 2025, pp. 63-64). This accounts for an instance of mental health harms. She also describes being so used to acting a certain way for the camera that she had forgotten how to act authentically. She recalls an interaction with her mother during a trip to the doctor’s office when she was sick with mononucleosis: “The video cut to me at urgent care. Visibly weak and exhausted, I tried to smile for the camera. Years of conditioning had taught me to always be pleasant, always be amiable for Ruby, no matter how crappy I felt—at that point, I think I was running a temperature of 102. But for once, smiles weren’t what Ruby wanted. ‘You can’t smile while you’re in the insta-care, Shari!’ Ruby chided, her voice a mixture of

playfulness and command. ‘You’re supposed to look like you’re on your deathbed.’ I complied instantly, feigning death with a touch of theatricality that I knew would please her. Whatever she wanted” (Franke, 2025, p. 83). This description is counted as another instance of lost autonomy.

In 2022, Ruby started homeschooling her children, prioritizing faith and ‘Connexions’ family-building practices. Early that year, Ruby posted a vlog where Chad revealed that his bedroom had been taken away as a punishment, and that he had been sleeping on a bean bag chair for eight months. This marked the beginning of the end for 8Passengers. Loyal fans turned on Ruby, calling her a child abuser. Petitions started circulating that plead for Child Protective Services to open an investigation against her.

Meanwhile, Shari faced problems of her own. She had befriended an older, married man at church and started working for him as a social media assistant. After a few months of this arrangement, however, he began making inappropriate comments and gestures toward her. She had confided in him about her family problems before, and he knew how vulnerable she was, especially when it came to submitting to authority. He used that to manipulate her into doing inappropriate and sexual acts with him. “He had my number the first time we met—he knew I’d been trained to fall in line, to never make waves,” Shari explained. “And because I had let him get close, because I had spilled my guts to him about the mind games and power trips that passed for love in my family, he knew just which buttons to push” (Franke, 2025, p. 188). This relationship indicates an instance of grooming and coercion/power imbalance.

Ruby quit the vlog in 2022 and deleted all of their videos. She changed the name of the YouTube channel to Moms of Truth – Jodi and Ruby. This channel was accompanied by a private Facebook group where parents could ask for advice about tackling issues with their children. Ruby’s militaristic parenting style coupled with Jodi’s “no nonsense” philosophy

resulted in some very controversial advice, including one video where Ruby explains that she didn't get her youngest two children Christmas presents because she felt they were behaving selfishly, and made them watch all of their other siblings open gifts on Christmas morning (@utah.vloggers, 2021). This was coded as another instance of abuse/harassment.

Privately, Kevin and Chad were "invited" by Jodi and Ruby to leave the Franke home to work on their "selfishness" (Franke, 2025, p. 201). They were not allowed to contact any members of the family. Shari even attended the same university that Kevin worked at, but her attempts to contact him were met with silence. At this time, rumors flew on Reddit about Kevin and Chad's whereabouts. Shari, seeing these rumors online, reached out to her mother, who promptly told her that she was not living "in truth," and that she was also not welcome to contact any members of her family.

Over the coming months, Shari received multiple calls from neighbors explaining that the children were left home alone for multiple days, and that Ruby was nowhere to be found. Shari repeatedly called CPS to report the issue, but upon inspecting the house and seeing that the children were safe and the house was clean, they were unable to open a case.

In August 2023, the second-youngest Franke child, Russell, appeared on the doorstep of a man's home. The interaction was captured via the man's doorbell camera. When the homeowner opened his door, Russell asked to be taken to the nearest police station. He was wearing a button-up shirt and boxer shorts, with no shoes. In the footage, he is visibly emaciated and has duct tape around his ankles and wrists (Lambert, 2025).

After calling the authorities, police officers entered Jodi's home, where Russell indicated he had come from. Inside of a safe room located in the basement, Eve, the youngest Franke child, sat on the floor of a dark closet. Her head was shaved, and she was emaciated and

wounded similarly to Russell. Eve and Russell's conditions were counted as instances of abuse/harassment.

Jodi and Ruby were both arrested for suspicion of child abuse on August 30, 2023. In February 2024, they were both charged with four counts of aggravated child abuse.

Since the arrest, Shari has been outspoken about her experiences growing up on camera. She wrote a book, *The House of my Mother*, in which she detailed the traumas she endured. In February 2025, a documentary entitled *Devil in the Family: The Fall of Ruby Franke* was released on Hulu and featured interviews with Shari, Chad, and their father, Kevin. Shari has also been an advocate for legislative protections for child influencers.

This case study demonstrates the horrors that children endure when their lives are publicized. The need to perform constantly takes a toll on children and their wellbeing, especially when physical abuse is used as a reinforcer.

Case Study #2: Piper Rockelle

Piper Rockelle is a 17-year-old girl, originally from Canton, Georgia. Piper grew up competing in beauty pageants, but when she was eight, she began amassing a following on Musical.ly, Tik Tok's predecessor. Seeing her success, Piper's mom, Tiffany, started to post videos of her on YouTube. The spunk and poise that made her so successful in the pageant world continued to benefit her on YouTube. Once Piper was nine, she and Tiffany moved to Los Angeles in pursuit of more opportunities.

She landed the starring role in *Mani*, a children's YouTube show about a male nanny, in 2017. Piper spent a year on the production until Tiffany, convinced that another actress was getting more screentime than Piper, abruptly stormed onto the set and removed her while verbally accosting cast and crew members.

After leaving *Mani*, Tiffany and Piper dove headfirst into social media. A new “character” was introduced to Piper’s videos: Hunter, Piper’s 20-year-old “older brother.” In videos, Hunter was always introduced as Piper’s older brother, but behind the scenes, Hunter was actually Tiffany’s new boyfriend. Hunter had a presence on-camera, but off-camera as well. He filmed all of Piper’s videos, edited them, created thumbnails and uploaded them to Piper’s channel.

As Piper’s channel grew, she began collaborating with other child creators, which started gaining traction quickly. To capitalize on this, “The Squad” was born, an everchanging cast of child creators who appeared alongside Piper in her videos. Hunter managed the individual YouTube channels of every Squad member and built a cohesive branding and editing style across each child’s channel. No matter how many other children were included in The Squad, though, it was clear that Piper was the star. The videos posted to her channel outperformed the other kids’

by miles. On the other children's channels, videos featuring Piper did significantly better than those that didn't. The Squad was built to enhance Piper's career, not dilute it.

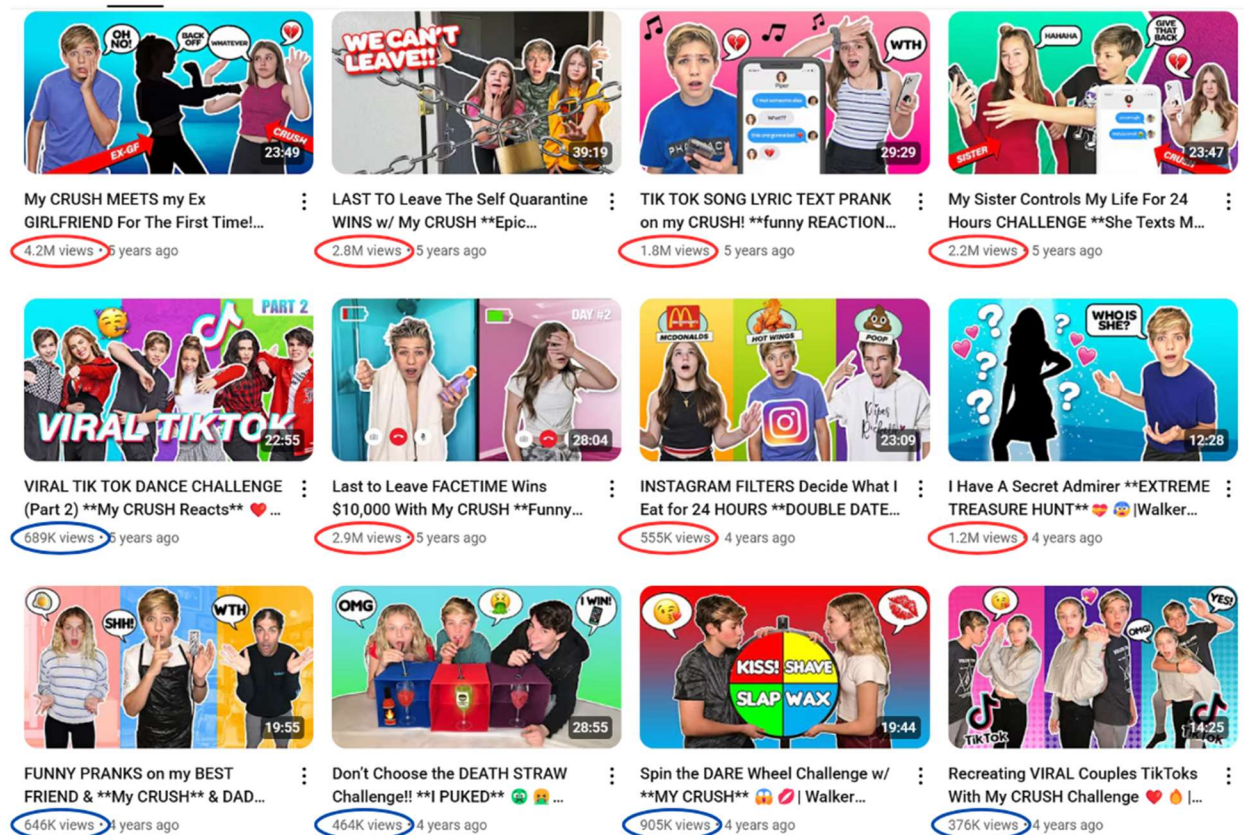


Figure 1 Photo taken from Walker Bryant's YouTube channel. Red circles indicate the view count of a video that features Piper in the thumbnail, blue circles indicate the view count of a video that does not feature Piper in the thumbnail.

Tiffany ensured that Piper remained the star of the Squad by exploiting her. One mom was tasked with being the Squad's stylist, and upon bringing clothes home, Tiffany would yell, "Piper's sluttier. Get her sluttier clothes. She needs to show more" (Davidson & Rosher, 2025). Tiffany demanded that the children and Piper, specifically, look a specific way in video thumbnails. She would tell the thumbnail designer to "give the girls bigger boobs, smaller waist, make her butt bigger, make her thighs bigger, make the guys' muscles bigger. Sex sells, make it sexy" (Davidson & Rosher, 2025). These account for multiple instances of exploitation.

Tiffany's willingness to exploit Piper's looks for videos became more apparent after a "fan" named Megan entered the picture and began sending Piper and Tiffany extravagant gifts. "Megan poses as a girl online who's a Piper Rockelle fan, has all the pictures of Piper. Tiffany said, 'He likes pictures of Piper. He's her stalker. You can get stuff too if you send him pictures. It's nothing bad, it's just extra pictures from photoshoots. But he's a pervert.'" said another Squad member's mother (Davidson & Rosher, 2025). A former Squad member recalls accompanying Tiffany on a trip to the post office: "She had a bag, and she pulled out what looked like Piper's underwear. I asked her, 'Why are you shipping those out?' and she said that old men like to smell them" (Davidson & Rosher, 2025). Incidents like these demonstrate Tiffany's desperate need for Piper to be the most successful member of the Squad, regardless of the sacrifices it takes to get there. Tiffany's actions were coded as exploitation and exposure to pedophilia.

The Squad's content typically revolved around pranks, challenges, dares, and, by far the most popular genre, crushes. Crush content is "when you put a boy and a girl together on YouTube. They either like each other or pretend to like each other, and for some reason it resonates so well" (Davidson & Rosher, 2025). About the resonance of this type of content, author Taylor Lorenz said, "It's incredibly popular because it's viral content that elicits a strong reaction, so it gets lots of views and shares. Kids like to watch it; kids like to see other kids be surprised or scared or have these deep emotions" (Davidson & Rosher, 2025).

Once Tiffany discovered how successful crush content could be, she ensured that every Squad member was paired with a crush (or, in Piper's case, two). "It's just really awkward and embarrassing, you know? And I didn't like her at the time," said a former Squad member about

filming crush content. “Whether she liked me or not, I’m sure it was awful for her too” (Davidson & Rosher, 2025). This Squad member’s confession was coded as humiliation.

As The Squad skyrocketed in popularity, Piper, Tiffany and Hunter moved in with Squad member and former *Mani* castmate Sophie Fergi and her mother into a large house in the Hollywood Hills. Complete with a guest house, pool, and massive backyard, it became the central filming location for all of The Squad’s videos.

While The Squad’s numbers were soaring, the children’s wellbeing was plummeting. The same volatility that Tiffany exhibited when she pulled Piper off the set of *Mani* a year prior was now being directed toward the children in the form of verbal abuse. Some of Tiffany’s behaviors also placed the children in uncomfortable situations. “Tiffany would direct us to pose certain ways, to be hugging a certain way in a clip to get these clicks and to get these likes. Off-camera it was even more sexual. She was asking us when we were gonna do *more* than kissing” said Sophie, who was only 12 years old at the time. “We don’t want to be doing these things that you’re telling us to do. It’s weird” (Davidson & Rosher, 2025). In a behind-the-scenes clip, Tiffany can be heard directing the kids to “flirt with the camera” as each crush pairing wears wedding dresses and suits. These instances were coded as exploitation and exposure to pedophilia.

Tiffany found ways to insert her own opinions into Piper’s videos, including with the addition of a new character: Frank the Pug. “Frank the Pug is Tiffany holding the dog, saying these things in a weird voice,” said a former Squad member. “He would bully you, he would degrade you. He would say things that Tiffany probably couldn’t get away with saying in her normal voice” (Davidson & Rosher, 2025). In one video, Tiffany holds Frank up to a child’s face

and says, “Do you like when I lick your ear? Does it distract you?” in a sensual, suggestive tone (Davidson & Rosher, 2025). This was coded as harassment.

Aside from Tiffany’s reign of terror, the children’s filming schedules were grueling. Children would arrive to Piper’s home at 11 a.m. and often weren’t allowed to leave until after midnight. “I would go to sleep for like 2 to 3 hours, get up around like six, seven-ish and do school, close my tablet, and then get ready to film, and then do it over again. And this was every day of the week. We did not get a break at all,” said Sophie. (Davidson & Rosher, 2025). On a typical day, they would film 10-15 YouTube videos along with Tik Tok videos and Instagram photos. Many of the children would start their online schoolwork at 6 a.m. to ensure it got completed. Tiffany had pulled Piper from all schooling at this point.

Soon, The Squad was popular enough that they were going on tours around the country. As The Squad gained popularity and financial prowess, internal tensions rose. Squad members began leaving quickly, silently being removed from videos without explanation. Upon leaving The Squad, though, their performance metrics subsequently tanked. It was known that videos without Piper in the thumbnail performed worse than others, but this was different. Hunter had always talked about having the “secret sauce” when it came to understanding and manipulating YouTube’s algorithm, and attributed it heavily to The Squad’s success. He made it clear that while he knew how to make videos perform well, he also knew how to sabotage them, too. He would report videos as violent or explicit and embed them into porn websites so that they were no longer eligible for ad revenue. This also stopped the YouTube algorithm from recommending the videos to children, meaning their primary audience wasn’t seeing their videos.

Once multiple former Squad members noticed this pattern, they sought legal counsel. A lawsuit was filed on January 12, 2022, CLAIRE E. and REESE E., minors by and through their

guardian ad litem, Ashley Anne-Rock Smith; Plaintiffs, vs. TIFFANY ROCKELLE SMITH, an individual; HUNTER HILL, an individual; PIPER ROCKELLE INC.

11 former Squad members are listed as plaintiffs on the case, and each one is suing for damages resulting from a violation of the state of California's and the common law right to publicity, unjust enrichment, intentional interference with contractual relations, intentional interference with prospective economic advantage, civil conspiracy, sexual battery, battery, intentional infliction of emotional distress, and violation of the California Business and Professional Code's unfair competition clause.

Following the lawsuit, YouTube demonetized her channel, meaning her videos were no longer eligible for ad revenue. Her main source of income was destroyed overnight. Since having her channel demonetized, Piper only posts once a month, a huge detour from her previous 5-days-per-week schedule. Now, she posts more frequently on monetized platforms like Instagram, Snapchat and Tik Tok. She also has a presence on a new platform, called BrandArmy. BrandArmy is a paid subscription-based platform where creators can post exclusive content.

The photos and videos Piper shares on BrandArmy are provocative. She often wears bathing suits or lingerie while posing suggestively. BrandArmy allows creators 13 years or older to post on the platform, but subscribers must be at least 18 years old. Piper's audience skews younger and is primarily made up of teen and tween girls, meaning that her own target demographic isn't able to view this exclusive content. Based on the age restriction and the fact that BrandArmy's user-base is 79.93% male (*Brandarmy.Com Traffic Analytics, Ranking & Audience [March 2025] | Similarweb*, n.d.), it can be inferred that Piper's content is being viewed by an older, male-majority audience, despite the fact that she is still only 17 years old.

Results

Based on these testimonies and case studies, I was able to gather numerical, quantitative data about how often children experience these harms. First, I counted the number of harms each child experienced based on their testimonies. That list is as follows:

1. Piper Rockelle – 12 (5 abuse/harassment, 2 mental health harm, 3 exploitation, 2 coercion/power imbalance, 2 exposure to pedophilia)
2. Sawyer Sharbino – 4 (1 compensation, 1 loss of autonomy, 2 coercion/power imbalance)
3. Donlad Dougher – 1 (1 compensation)
4. Ayden Mekus – 2 (1 compensation, 1 abuse/harassment)
5. Connor Cain – 3 (1 compensation, 1 mental health harms, 1 abuse/harassment)
6. Hayden Haas – 2 (1 compensation, 1 abuse/harassment)
7. Walker Bryant – 2 (1 abuse/harassment, 1 coercion)
8. Sophie Fergi – 12 (1 compensation, 3 abuse/harassment, 2 grooming, 3 coercion/power imbalance, 1 exploitation, 1 mental health harms, 1 humiliation)
9. Claire Rock-Smith – 6 (1 compensation, 1 abuse/harassment, 1 grooming, 1 coercion/power imbalance, 1 mental health harm, 1 humiliation)
10. Reese Rock-Smith – 2 (1 abuse/harassment, 1 humiliation)
11. Symonne Harrison – 1 (1 compensation)
12. Corinne Joy – 7 (4 abuse/harassment, 2 grooming, 1 humiliation)
13. Addison – 2 (1 mental health harm, 1 coercion/power imbalance)
14. Anonymous (Caroline) – 5 (1 role confusion, 1 exposure to pedophilia, 2 loss of autonomy, 1 loss of privacy)
15. Leta Armstrong – 2 (1 loss of autonomy, 1 loss of opportunities)
16. Anonymous (Lou) – 8 (1 loss of opportunities, 1 mental health harm, 1 loss of privacy, 1 loss of autonomy, 2 grooming, 1 sexual harassment, 1 exposure to pedophilia, 1 role confusion)

17. Shari Franke – 49 (11 exploitation, 6 humiliation, 3 coercion/power imbalance, 8 loss of autonomy, 1 exposure to pedophilia, 2 loss of privacy, 4 role confusion, 8 compensation, 3 mental health harms, 2 grooming, 1 loss of opportunities)
18. Chad Franke – 3 (1 coercion, 1 abuse/harassment, 1 loss of autonomy)
19. Jacqueline de Jong – 9 (5 exposure to pedophilia, 1 abuse/harassment, 2 exploitation, 1 mental health harm)
20. Anonymous (Vanessa) – 10 (1 compensation, 3 exploitation, 1 coercion, 4 humiliation, 1 role confusion)
21. Anonymous (Claire) – 5 (3 loss of autonomy, 2 compensation, 1 coercion, 1 role confusion)
22. Cam Barrett – 5 (1 exposure to pedophilia, 1 mental health harm, 2 loss of autonomy, 1 humiliation)

After identifying the amount of each type of harm each child experienced, I then tallied the total count of the occurrences of each harm, then inputted them into a bar chart.

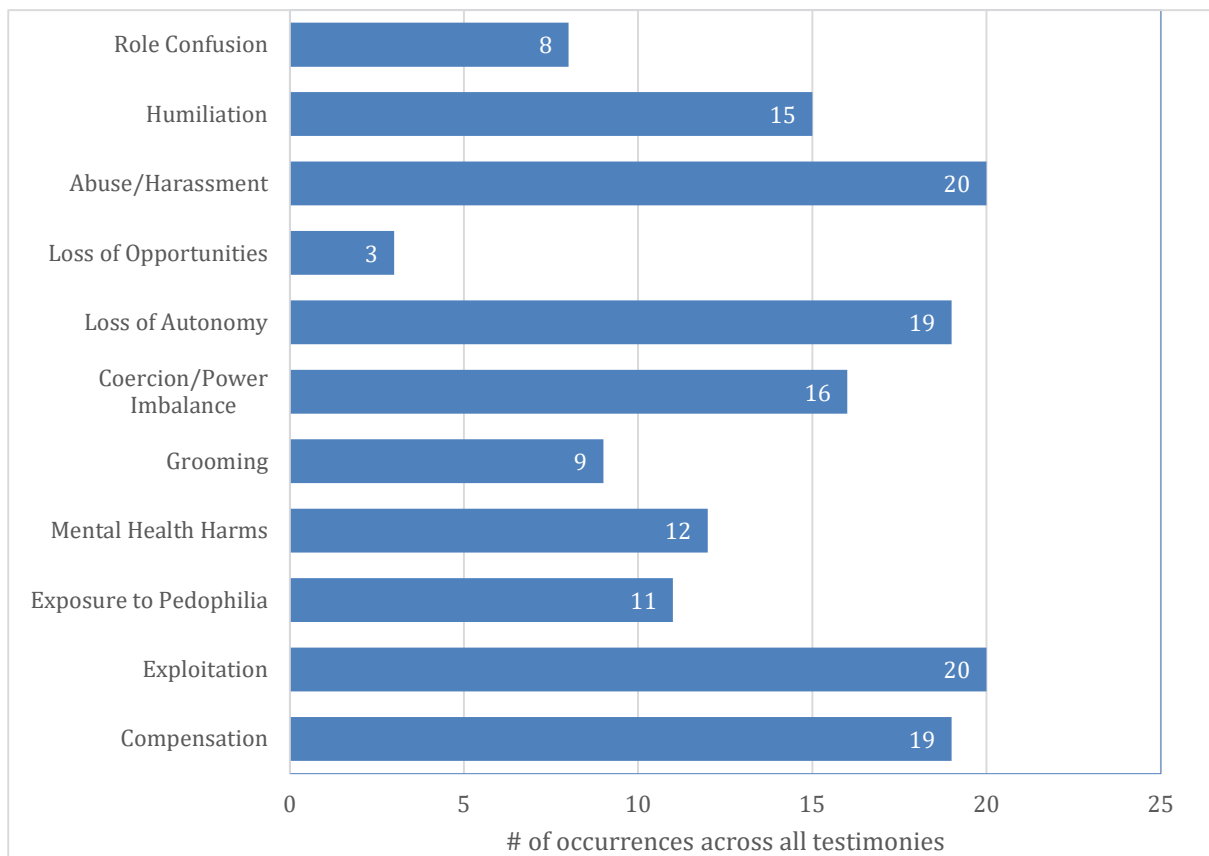


Figure 2 is a bar chart indicating how many times each harm occurred across all of the testimonies.

The following chart indicates the percentage of testimonies that identified each harm:

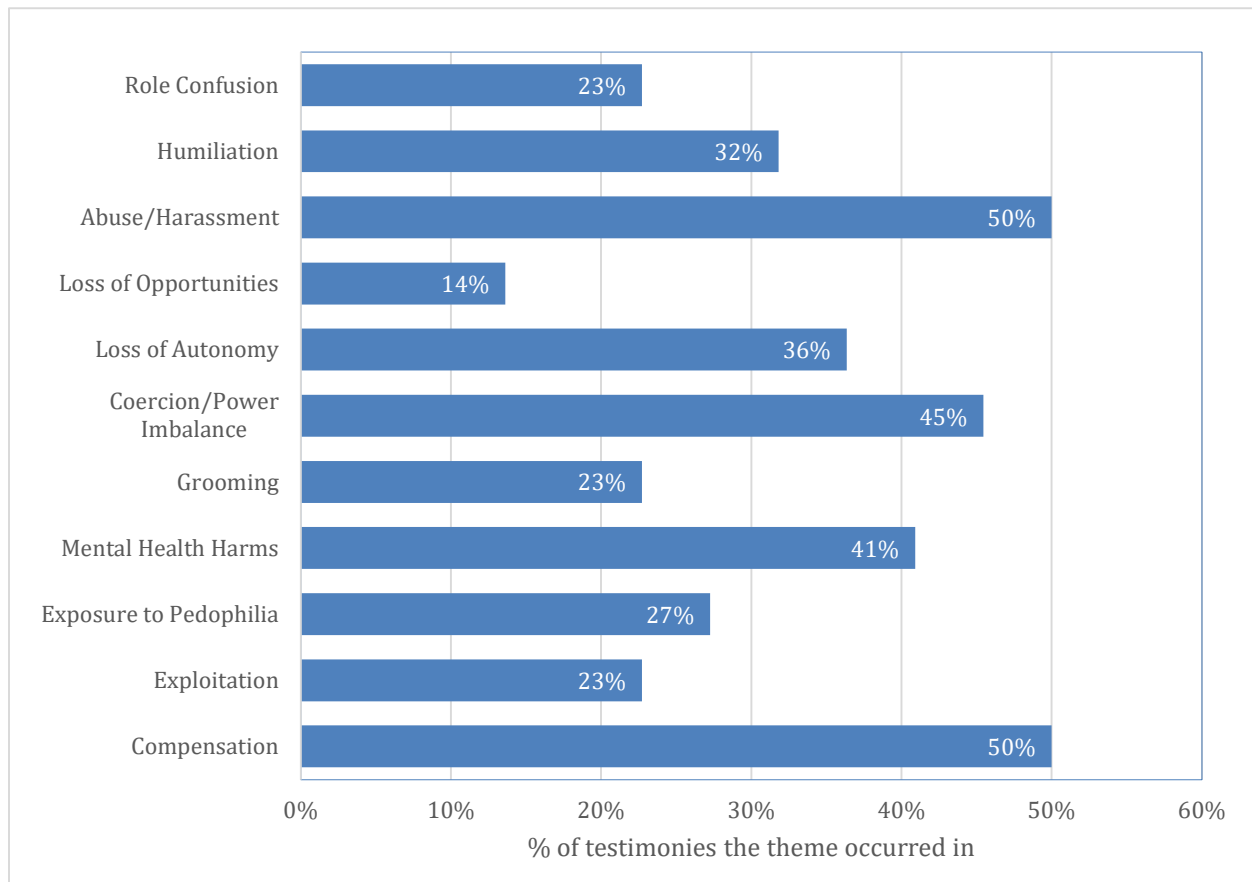


Figure 3 is a bar chart depicting the percentage of testimonies each harm occurred in.

Discussion

Limitations

It's important to acknowledge the limitations of my research before I begin discussing my findings. First and foremost, this dataset is not representative of all child influencers. This data is exclusively based on the experiences of individuals who felt compelled to share their stories. Additionally, many current and former child influencers likely don't have the freedom to speak out for fear of abuse, loss of income or publicity. Considering these factors, a voluntary response bias is certainly possible in this dataset.

Furthermore, the length of each testimony varies widely. For example, Shari Franke's testimonies span a full-length novel, documentary series and court testimonies while Donlad Dougher and Walker Bryant only received singular bullet points in a 147-page lawsuit. As a result, there's an uneven representation of data. Much of the data is skewed according to Shari's experiences and dilutes the experiences of individuals like Donlad and Walker.

In addition to some of this data being skewed, it's also worth noting that harm cannot accurately or appropriately be quantified. Not all types of harms bear the same weight on the victims, and each harm may impact each individual differently. The purpose of assigning quantitative values to these harms is not to compare them, but rather to showcase just how often they occur in child influencing situations.

Finally, it's important to acknowledge that the children's testimonies are exclusively based on their personal experiences. Because many of these harms occurred behind the scenes, there is no concrete evidence that supports their stories, meaning that nearly all of the allegations pointed at others are alleged. Additionally, one testimony cannot even begin to capture multiple

years of harm, so while the testimonies provide insight into each child's experiences, they are not all-encompassing.

Summary of Findings

This data ultimately helps me to answer my research question: Do children face harm when placed in the public eye as influencers, and if so, what are those harms? It's abundantly clear that children experience harms when working as influencers. Of every testimony I reviewed, every single one indicated the presence of at least one type of harm. Additionally, by coding these testimonies, I was able to identify the harms that occurred most frequently in this data set.

Abuse/harassment and issues of unfair compensation each occurred in half of the testimonies. Feelings of coercion as a result of a power imbalance were mentioned in 45% of the testimonies. Harms related to poor mental health occurred in 41% of the testimonies. Feelings of lost autonomy were mentioned in 36% of the testimonies, while feelings of humiliation were mentioned in 32% and exposure to pedophiles online were mentioned in 27%. Instances of exploitation, confusion about the parent/manager role and exposure to grooming each occurred in 23% of the testimonies. Finally, 14% of testimonies mentioned lost opportunities as a result of being in the public eye.

This list is not exhaustive of all of the harms child influencers face, but it provides insight into the harms that just a fraction of them have experienced.

Concerns

The prevalence of abuse/harassment within these testimonies is extremely concerning. Half of the testimonies indicated the presence of some type of abuse or harassment. In the context of those testimonies, all of the abuse or harassment occurred while the content being

made was still earning money. This means that this abuse was further incentivized by the brands that were sponsoring content, and by the platform hosting the content because they were still providing income to the abuser.

Issues of compensation were also mentioned in half of the testimonies, and occurred nearly as many times as abuse and harassment. In these testimonies, issues of compensation meant that the child was not paid appropriately, or at all, for their labor. This is frustrating because for other child performers, the Coogan Law is in place to prevent this from happening, but because that protection does not extend to child influencers, they're forced to financially suffer.

Steps Toward a Solution

When asked how the child influencing industry could be regulated, Dr. Karen North was stumped: "I don't know how you could ever do it, and I would love to be wrong, but I don't know how you could figure out a way to regulate or to send a monitor into somebody's backyard or living room while the mom and dad are shooting pictures of the kid. I flat-out don't think it's possible" (Rosher & Davidson, 2025). As tough as it is to admit, she's likely correct. Without contracts in place and labor organizations like OSHA monitoring a production, there's really no way to effectively protect child influencers with the current system. Instead of trying to make child influencing "safer" by implementing laws, regulations and rules, it may be more effective to disincentivize parents from wanting to share their kids online in the first place.

In the Shari and Chad Franke case study, the vlogging stopped once they were deemed "cancelled" by the public and lost viewership and sponsorship opportunities. In the Piper Rockelle case study, once her channel was demonetized, she immediately began posting significantly less. In Piper's case, she turned to other platforms to make up for that lost income,

but what if the incentive of monetary gain was never present in the first place? If the allure of six-figure monthly paychecks was no longer a potential reward of exploiting a child online, parents likely wouldn't view it as a viable opportunity. There are two ways this could be done: regulation at the platform level, or instating new legislation.

Platforms like YouTube, Tik Tok and Instagram all offer monetization to users who reach certain popularity thresholds. "Social media monetization refers to the potential to generate revenue via a blog, other forms of content, or any other mode of online presence. Affiliate programs, e-commerce, hosting premium content, advertising, and other revenue-generating activities are all examples of monetization" (*What Is Monetization?*, n.d.). YouTube's AdSense program allows creators to get paid by placing advertisements before, during and after their videos. For every advertisement someone watches throughout the duration of the video, the creator gets a percentage of that revenue. Tik Tok and Instagram pay popular users by paying them a dividend of the app's total revenue in order to incentivize users to continue posting regularly (Yu, 2024). Additionally, many users on all platforms will often take part in paid sponsorships, where a brand will pay the user directly in exchange for an advertisement made by the creator themselves built into the video.

Allowing creators to earn an income from social media isn't inherently bad or dangerous, but it can incentivize unhealthy practices like child influencing. A simple solution to this problem would be to revoke the opportunity for monetization from content that primarily features a child or children. If children were passionate about making content, there's no need to restrict them from doing so, it just would no longer be profit-driven. Brand sponsorships and partnerships could still be rewarded, but with the caveat that it would either need to take place on a proper set that adheres to FLSA Child Labor Laws or, if it were to take place at home, a

representative would need to be present for the duration of the shoot to ensure that safe practices were used.

A Pew Research study found that YouTube content featuring children is significantly more popular than other types of content, and typically receives three times the number of views that a video without a child does (van Kessel et al., n.d.). The majority of YouTube's revenue comes from advertising. If YouTube were to no longer monetize child-starring content, it would lose the opportunity to place advertisements on all of those videos, which would cause a significant decline in its revenue. There hasn't been similar research into whether content featuring children was more popular on Instagram and Tik Tok, however, these platforms also make the majority of their profit from advertising. Demonetizing an entire genre of content would disincentivize thousands of users from posting, which leads to more financial loss. Ultimately, it's this reason that has prevented platforms from taking a step like this. Instead, these companies wait until the public puts pressure on them to take any action, which is exactly how Piper Rockelle's channel finally got demonetized.

The other potential solution to the problem of putting child influencers at risk of harm is the legislative route. Bills like the Illinois Child Labor Law and Washington State House Bill 1627 are a great step in the right direction, but state-by-state protections aren't enough.

The California Coogan Law was amended on January 1, 2025 to include child influencers, stating that parents needed to set aside 30% of their child's earnings in a blocked trust. While this was a monumental step for child influencer protections, many families of child influencers, including the LaBrant Family, Brittany Xavier and Cecily Bauchmann, are now being accused of moving their families away from California to evade this law (Latifi, 2025). While changes at the state level are setting strong precedents, the parents that are committed

enough to their child's influencing career to willingly exploit and abuse them will certainly be willing to move to another state to avoid regulation. The best way to prevent this from happening is by implementing a federal solution.

A proposed solution from many scholars, including Jessica Pacht-Friedman, involves getting the Coogan Law passed through Congress and codifying it federally as part of the Fair Labor Standards Act. Attempts have been made previously to amend the FLSA to include federal protections for child performers, but have failed (2022). Author Taylor Lorenz has spoken about how difficult it has been to enact any sort of social media legislation or regulation over the last decade because a majority of lawmakers are over seventy years old. They don't understand it, nor take it seriously, so ultimately, nothing gets done. "For them to try to regulate the industry, it's like a chimpanzee trying to solve a Rubik's Cube" says Lorenz. "I mean, frankly, that's probably more likely" (Davidson & Rosher, 2025). Unfortunately, it's unlikely that any sort of federal legislation would be passed under current circumstances until our current lawmakers are replaced by ones that are more competent regarding the online world.

Conclusion

The child influencing industry is not one that will be, or can be, reformed overnight. As more current and former influencers speak out about their experiences and advocate for protections and regulations, the likelihood of change increases significantly. Until lawmakers and platform executives take action to protect these children, there are things that viewers can do to disincentivize online child exploitation.

First, it's imperative to avoid watching and interacting with content that features children, particularly when it's posted by their parent. Even just by watching these videos, let alone liking, sharing, and commenting on them, the parent profits. If viewership and engagement decreases significantly, so does their pay, which could keep them from creating content with the child.

Additionally, if a viewer does see a video featuring a child who seems to be uncomfortable, scared or upset, YouTube allows viewers to report the video for child abuse. YouTube defines child abuse as “content that includes sexual, predatory or abusive communications toward minors.” This definition is loose, which means that more videos can fall into this category. When someone reports a video, YouTube reviews it and typically demonetizes the video, meaning the user won't profit off of it anymore.

Finally, raising awareness and bringing attention to the harm children are facing in this industry can further encourage change. Documentaries like *Devil in the Family: The Fall of Ruby Franke* and *Bad Influence: The Dark Side of Kidfluencing* generated amazing conversations about this industry and the ethical concerns it creates. If more media can be created and released about the issue, it can garner attention from more people and, hopefully, lawmakers.

The epidemic of children being independently exploited online is not one that would have existed at the turn of the century, but it's not a brand-new concept. Child performers have faced

exploitation throughout history. Jackie Coogan and Shirley Temple were denied pay and safe working conditions in the 1930s, and as recently as the 1990s child celebrities like Drew Barrymore and Amanda Bynes were overworked and paraded across red carpets and tabloid covers. Both of these issues were the result of new, unregulated forms of media arising before the law could catch up and put protections in place. These problems were both fixed with the inception of the Coogan Law and an increase in personal stories and testimonies about harmful experiences these child actors had during the peak of their stardom, respectively. It took pressure from those who were victims of the broken system for any change to be made. The child influencing epidemic can likely be solved similarly, it will just require time for the law to catch up.

New media is constantly evolving and changing. Oftentimes, it can feel like the digital wild west: unregulated and free of rules, guidelines or expectations. Unfortunately, protections and rules won't be put in place without a reason. Lawmakers and platform executives alike will only take action when pressure is applied on them from victims and the public. The legal landscape will catch up eventually, but it's up to the public to speed that process up.

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