

Wild Child, Fame Game, Cash Dash: Genres of Celebrity Childhoods in Social Media Economies

Crystal Abidin

It has been more than a decade since internet celebrities began professionalizing and monetizing their craft on social media. As pioneer users grow up and progress through their life course on the internet alongside new users who foray into increasingly domestic and private forms of content production, young children are proliferating across an emerging genre of celebrity childhoods that are native to social media. This paper reviews the historical and socio-cultural variety of internet celebrity childhoods in the age of creative content production, and offers a typology and vocabulary for understanding how social media economies are birthing a new generation of child stars. It considers the trajectory of how some fetuses, babies, toddlers, young children, and pre-teens are subjected to having their everyday lives and developmental milestones curated and amplified by intimate others or professional corporations to sizable viewerships on social media, raking in lucrative advertorial fees and endorsement deals, while literally growing up on the internet. At present, contract stipulations and guidelines between child Influencers and agencies or clients are guarded under legal confidentiality, or obscured to preempt cultural backlash and scrutiny. As such, despite their high visibility on social media and lucrative biographies that are archived to accumulate brand longevity on YouTube, the actual working conditions and contractual obligations of such celebrity childhoods are relatively obscured. Hence, the paper also deliberates over public secrets of such social media-famous children's working conditions, including their contractual obligations, parental negotiations of privacy and publicness, the development of regulation policies in their industry, and concerns around the exploitation and agency of this cohort of internet celebrities. Types of celebrity childhoods discussed in this paper include branded fetus, children in viral videos, memes, micro-microcelebrities, child Influencers, and digital poster children.