



The Commodification of Family Life: Child Protection and Ethical Dilemmas in Content Marketing

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of family vlogging and influencer culture has positioned children as central figures in monetised social media content, raising urgent ethical and child protection concerns. This study critically investigates how children are represented and utilised in family-oriented YouTube content, with particular attention to issues of consent, privacy, and exploitation. Employing netnography within an interpretive qualitative framework, the analysis draws on approximately 50 publicly available YouTube videos across five family vlogging channels observed between December 2024 and July 2025. Findings reveal four key patterns: idealisation of family life, normalisation of child visibility, moral concern from audiences, and uncertainty toward commercialisation. These dynamics reflect a troubling convergence of parental agency, algorithmic monetisation, and audience demand that systematically undermines children's autonomy. Situated within the Sri Lankan context, where limited regulatory oversight and cultural norms of parental authority intensify these vulnerabilities, the study argues that existing legal and ethical frameworks are insufficient. It proposes a child-centred digital ethics framework structured around evolving consent, transparency, income protection, and cultural sensitivity, and calls for updated digital child protection policies and transparent platform governance.

Keywords: Child Protection, Content Marketing, Social Media, Digital Ethics, Influencer Culture, Kidfluencers, Sri Lanka

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the global media landscape has undergone an unprecedented transformation driven by the rise of social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok (Abidin, 2025). These platforms have democratised content production, blurred the boundaries between producers and consumers, and enabled new forms of entrepreneurship grounded in personal narrative and domestic life (Peng et al., 2025). Among the most consequential developments within this digital ecology is the rise of family vlogging: content creators who document parenting experiences, family milestones, and children's lives for global audiences (Li et al., 2025). For many families, these activities have become a significant livelihood strategy, generating income through advertising revenue, brand sponsorships, and merchandise sales (Piramanayagam et al., 2025).

The ethical stakes of this phenomenon are substantial. When children's images, emotions, and personal experiences are systematically commodified for audience consumption, serious questions arise about agency, consent, privacy, and exploitation (Clark & Jno-Charles, 2025; Shomai et al., 2024). Yet despite growing academic interest in influencer culture and digital ethics, children's welfare within monetised social media spaces remains underexplored, particularly in Global South contexts such as Sri Lanka, where limited regulatory infrastructure and cultural norms around parental authority create compounding vulnerabilities.

This paper addresses that gap directly. Drawing on a netnographic analysis of publicly available YouTube content, it examines how children are represented in family digital narratives, how audiences engage with child-inclusive content, and what ethical challenges arise from the intersection of domestic intimacy and

digital commerce. The study is guided by three research objectives: (1) to explore how children are represented and engaged in family-oriented digital content; (2) to identify the ethical challenges arising from the monetisation of child-inclusive content, including issues of consent, privacy, and agency; and (3) to assess the adequacy of existing child protection frameworks, with particular attention to the Sri Lankan context.

The significance of this research lies in its attempt to bridge marketing ethics and child protection discourse. By situating the analysis within both global and local frameworks, the study offers a nuanced understanding of how digital capitalism intersects with family life and childhood and proposes a child-centred digital ethics framework to guide policy and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on children's participation in social media spans digital media, marketing ethics, childhood sociology, and law. This review synthesises existing debates across four thematic areas and concludes by identifying the specific gaps that this study is designed to address.

Influencer Culture and the Rise of Family Vlogging

The growth of social media has produced what Craig & Cunningham (2017) term the "creator economy": a decentralised media system in which individuals monetise personal expression and everyday life. Within this ecosystem, the influencer has become a central cultural figure who leverages social media presence to shape audience attitudes and consumer behaviours (Abidin, 2017; Fan et al., 2023). Family vloggers represent a distinct sub-category, occupying a hybrid space between entertainment, lifestyle branding, and documentary realism (Shomai et al., 2024).

Accordingly, the monetisation of family life through digital platforms exemplifies

what Duffy & Pooley (2019) described as the strategic curation of emotions and relationships for profit. For family vloggers, authenticity is their most commercially valuable currency: the more "real" a family appears, the stronger the audience's emotional investment and the higher the content's advertising revenue potential (Van den Abeele et al., 2025). Children are especially significant in this economy, lending credibility, emotional resonance, and relatability that audiences crave (Clark & Jno-Charles, 2025; Shomai et al., 2024).

Therefore, children became the centre of the narrative economy of family vlogging. Their spontaneity, humour, and emotional openness are not incidental to content success but function as deliberate strategies for enhancing audience engagement and brand appeal (Li et al., 2025; Van den Abeele et al., 2025). Research on YouTube's algorithmic culture consistently shows that videos featuring children attract higher engagement metrics, translating directly into advertising revenue (Bishop, 2019). This has given rise to child-centred genres, including toy unboxing, family challenges, and day-in-the-life vlogs, that systematically blur the boundaries between play, family bonding, and commercial persuasion (Clark & Jno-Charles, 2025; Marôpo et al., 2020).

However, understanding what distinguishes family vlogging from other influencer formats is crucial in setting the scope of this study. Basically, the difference in reliance on domestic intimacy as a commercial resource by family vloggers (Abidin, 2017). Van den Abeele et al. (2025) describe this as "calibrated authenticity": a carefully managed performance of realness designed to sustain audience trust. Children's unscripted moments become the substance of this authenticity, positioning them not as incidental participants but as core assets within the

family's digital brand (Shomai et al., 2024). This framing is critical to the ethical analysis that follows.

This commercialisation of intimacy raises deep ethical concerns. Unlike child actors in traditional media, children featured in social media content are not protected by labour laws, working-hour limitations, or income safeguards (Shomai et al., 2024). Parents or guardians simultaneously act as producers, managers, and gatekeepers, concentrating authority in ways that can obscure conflicts of interest between financial incentives and child welfare (Clark & Jno-Charles, 2025). Digital platforms amplify these dynamics: algorithms reward emotionally engaging content, creating feedback loops in which children's visibility is directly tied to family income, normalising their commodification over time (Fan et al., 2023; Lange, 2007). Thus, further review of how these commercialisations intersect with labour would further strengthen this discussion, which is presented below.

Commercialisation of Intimacy and Digital Labour

The concept of digital labour provides a critical lens for understanding children's unrecognised contributions to family vlogging economies (Verdoodt et al., 2020). Children's activities on camera, whether playing, reacting, or performing, constitute forms of unpaid labour that generate substantial audience engagement and advertising revenue, yet remain invisible by virtue of their framing as play or family bonding (Clark & Jno-Charles, 2025; Lange, 2007). Kücklich's (2009) concept of "playbor" captures this ambiguity: activities presented as fun simultaneously produce economic value. As children are socialised into cultures of perpetual visibility, their emotional expression and self-presentation are shaped by the demands of both parents and audiences. These kidfluences demonstrate the characteristics of this

“playbor” (Li et al., 2025). These dynamics raise fundamental questions about children's autonomy, identity, and the long-term psychological consequences of growing up as digital content.

On the other hand, the concept of the commercialisation of intimacy (Abidin & Thompson, 2012) discusses how family vlogging transforms private life into a public spectacle making another emerging concern about the use of children as content. Social media encourages the display of personal relationships as a form of self-branding (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Duffy & Pooley, 2019), and family vloggers extend this by incorporating children into performances of domestic life, turning familial bonds into marketable content (Lange, 2007). Thus, this interplay between “playbor” and the loss of privacy of the children spotlights the importance of regulating the use of children in these social media platforms. This became further curtailed as this labour is mostly unpaid (Clark & Jno-Charles, 2025).

Furthermore, Abidin (2025) argues that influencers perform “relational labour”: cultivating emotional connections with followers through authenticity and intimacy. In family vlogs, this relational labour is distributed across family members, including children. The resulting dynamic, where mothers manage digital brands while simultaneously performing ideal caregiving, and children serve as emotional assets, hides the economic value of children's contributions (Hudders & Beuckels, 2024). Their emotional expressions and interactions become forms of unpaid digital labour that generate attention and profit without recognition or protection (Rees, 2025; Verdoodt et al., 2020).

Supporting this argument on the unpaid use of child labour, Fuchs (2014) highlight that social media platforms rely on user-generated content and unpaid affective

labour to sustain their profit models. In this context, children's digital visibility feeds what Clark & Jno-Charles (2025) identify as a triple exploitation: by parents who monetise content, by audiences who consume it, and by platforms that profit from advertising revenue. This structural dynamic, rather than individual parental failings, is the primary target of the ethical analysis this study undertakes.

Ethical and Child Protection Dilemmas

In this discussion on ethical issues, consent and agency became crucial. The issue of consent is central to ethical debates about children's digital participation. Young children lack the cognitive maturity to comprehend the implications of sustained online visibility, particularly the permanence of digital footprints (Clark & Jno-Charles, 2025). Even when parents act with protective intent, the power imbalance within the family structure makes genuinely informed consent impossible for young children (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). Children's participation in family vlogs, therefore, represents a form of proxy consent that authorises exposure without the child's meaningful understanding (Abidin, 2017). Over time, children are socialised into internalised surveillance, where performing for the camera becomes a normalised feature of daily life (Lange, 2007).

Moreover, privacy and data exploitation are becoming incremental with this intersection of consent and agency. For instance, family vloggers frequently share personal details about children, including names, schools, and locations, exposing them to risks of stalking, harassment, and identity exploitation (Shomai et al., 2024; Van den Abeele et al., 2025). Beyond these direct risks, platforms engage in datafication: extracting and monetising user data for targeted advertising. Children featured in videos generate data traces that feed predictive advertising

systems, transforming them into data subjects without consent (Clark & Jno-Charles, 2025). This dual exposure positions children at the crossroads of emotional and algorithmic exploitation.

This is notably leading to psychological implications, making this discussion essential. Continuous digital visibility may contribute to identity distortion, anxiety, and diminished autonomy (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Li et al., 2025). Research indicates that children prominently featured in vlogs often experience confusion between authentic self-expression and performative identity (Li et al., 2025), and public commentary, including instances of online bullying or sexualised responses, highlights the particular vulnerability of their digital representations (Clark & Jno-Charles, 2025; Hudders & Beuckels, 2024).

These critical aspects highlight the necessity of a regulatory framework. However, it was noted that there were significant regulatory gaps in this area of study. First and foremost, traditional child labour laws are ill-equipped for decentralised online production (Shomai et al., 2024). Although some of the platforms introduce certain regulations, such as YouTube's 2019 FTC settlement, which introduced stricter guidelines for child-directed content, enforcement remains inconsistent; creators regularly circumvent these policies by framing content as "family" rather than "child-directed" (Feijoo et al., 2024). In the absence of enforceable regulation, ethical responsibility falls largely on individual parents and self-regulatory platform mechanisms, creating conditions for systematic under-protection. However, the application of these concepts varies significantly across contexts, making it essential to focus specifically on the Global South, which is home to the largest population in the world. Despite this, there has been comparatively little attention given to these concerns. Therefore, the

following section will discuss the Global South aspect of this issue.

The Global South Perspective

The majority of existing scholarship on children and influencer culture is rooted in Western contexts (Clark & Jno-Charles, 2025; Shomai et al., 2024). However, digital participation unfolds differently in the Global South, where intersecting socio-economic pressures, cultural norms, and regulatory absences create distinct vulnerabilities (Mishra et al., 2024). Global South scholarship highlights the postcolonial dimensions of these dynamics, such as Western platforms extracting data and profit from users in economically vulnerable contexts (Bhatt, 2019). Children's inclusion in digital content thus reflects not only individual family decisions but broader structural inequalities within the global digital economy, making locally contextualised ethical frameworks an urgent necessity.

Traditional child protection and broadcasting regulations were designed for structured media industries and are ill-equipped for the decentralised, algorithmically governed world of social media (Shomai et al., 2024). However, there are rare legislative exceptions, such as the French Influencer Law of 2020, which grants underage influencers income protection and content removal rights (Aade & Goanta, 2025), demonstrate what is possible but remain the exception globally. Nevertheless, such an initiative in the global south is not noted. Additionally, the parent-child relationship and the autonomy of the kids in the global south create further changes to establish such regulatory frameworks (Feijoo et al., 2024).

Specifically, in Sri Lanka, social media platforms have rapidly become key avenues for income generation, and family-oriented content featuring children has grown substantially in popularity (Lakmal et al., 2019). Yet these

developments have occurred without corresponding ethical or policy frameworks (Bhatt, 2019). Existing media regulations do not extend to user-generated digital content, and public awareness of digital child protection remains limited. Cultural norms emphasising parental authority and collective identity make it difficult to challenge decisions about children's digital exposure (Gajjala, 2018), while the digital literacy divide in terms of platform literacy and privacy awareness creates additional asymmetries, which were noticed at an alarmingly low level (Lakmal et al., 2019).

Therefore, these challenges are intensified by limited policy development and weak institutional oversight. Existing media regulations administered by the Ministry of Mass Media do not extend to user-generated digital content, leaving issues of consent, privacy, and profit distribution largely unaddressed (Shandrasekaran & Kulatunga, 2023). Family content creation is increasingly viewed as a viable livelihood strategy amid constrained formal employment opportunities (Mishra et al., 2024), and cultural norms emphasising parental authority and collective family identity further complicate efforts to assert children's individual digital rights (Gajjala, 2018). These structural and cultural specificities underscore the need for context-sensitive ethical frameworks that can honour cultural diversity while upholding universal child rights principles.

Taken together, this literature identifies a clear pattern: children in family vlogs are positioned as emotional assets and data sources within a monetised ecosystem lacking adequate regulatory, ethical, or protective infrastructure. Two important gaps remain. First, most empirical studies examine audience behaviour or creator practices in isolation; few integrate both through sustained interpretive analysis. Second, the experience of kidfluencers in

Global South contexts, particularly South Asia, remains largely absent from the literature. The present study addresses these gaps by integrating netnographic analysis of both content and audience responses within the specific socio-cultural and regulatory context of Sri Lanka, moving toward the child-centred digital ethics approach advocated by Abidin (2025) and Shomai et al. (2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs netnography situated within an interpretive qualitative framework (Jones & Arnould, 2025). Netnography, as conceptualised by Kozinets (2015) explores online communities and social interactions through observation, participation, and contextual interpretation. This method is particularly suited to examining social media environments such as YouTube, where meanings are constructed through digital texts, visuals, and audience engagement. The choice of netnography reflects the aim to understand ethical dynamics surrounding children's digital participation as they unfold organically, rather than through controlled methods that isolate variables from context (Jones & Arnould, 2025).

Aligned with an interpretive paradigm, the study prioritises subjective meaning and the social construction of reality over generalisation or prediction. Operating from a constructivist epistemology, it acknowledges that knowledge about social media practices is co-produced by researchers, participants, and platform algorithms (Kozinets, 2015). Moreover, this study, in conducting the netnographic inquiry, scopes the study to make the methodological choices more rigorous and justified. Therefore, the following section under the methodology elaborates on design choices.

Platform and Site Selection

YouTube was selected as the primary platform for three reasons. First, it remains the most widely used video-sharing platform globally and is well-established in Sri Lanka as a site of family-oriented content creation. Second, its monetisation structure directly links engagement metrics, including views, likes, and comments, to financial gain, making it a productive site for studying the intersection of audience behaviour and commercialisation. Third, its public interface permits transparent observation of audience interactions, enabling ethically sound data collection without breaching privacy boundaries.

Sampling and Data Collection

Five family vlogging channels were purposively selected based on four criteria: (1) the presence of one or more children under 18 as recurring content; (2) regular uploads of at least two videos per month during the study period; (3) evidence of monetisation or sponsorship-based content; and (4) publicly available videos and comment sections. The sample includes channels ranging from micro-influencers (under 50,000 subscribers) to mid-tier creators (up to 500,000 subscribers). Channels were identified through YouTube's search and recommendation systems using terms related to Sri Lankan family vlogging; channels with primarily Sri Lankan audiences or creators were prioritised to anchor the analysis in the focal context, while channels from comparable South Asian contexts were included where they offered comparative analytical value.

The temporal scope spans December 2024 to July 2025. Approximately 50 videos were reviewed across the selected channels. The collected data includes content (consisting of videos, hashtags and descriptions), the viewer interactions (including links, comments, shares). During the data collection process,

systematic field notes documented the thematic and narrative structure of each video, frequency and context of children's appearances, tone of parental commentary, audience engagement patterns, and evidence of sponsorship or monetisation. For organising, storing, and analysing data, the NVivo software was used. Consistent with netnographic ethics (Kozinets, 2015) data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached within each thematic domain: that is, until additional videos and comment analysis yielded no substantively new patterns. Saturation across all four emergent themes was confirmed by the fourth channel, with the fifth channel serving as a confirmatory check.

Analytical Approach

Analysis followed a reflexive thematic approach drawing on Braun & Clarke (2019) six-phase model, adapted for digital ethnography (Jones & Arnould, 2025). The process began with familiarisation through repeated viewing and reading to identify recurring motifs and ethical indicators. Systematic coding of visual, verbal, and textual cues followed, with codes grouped into broader categories refined through cross-comparison guided by theoretical frameworks from child rights and digital labour scholarship. The final interpretive stage linked emergent patterns to conceptual lenses from media ethics, childhood studies, and digital capitalism.

To strengthen analytical rigour, triangulation was achieved by comparing evidence across three data sources: video content, viewer comments, and channel metadata, including subscriber counts and engagement rates. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout to document analytical decisions and the researcher's interpretive positionality. Contradictory and ambiguous cases were retained in the analysis rather than resolved prematurely, and coding was reviewed iteratively

across multiple analytical passes to reduce confirmatory bias.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was guided by digital research standards articulated by Kozinets (2015). The study does not disclose identifiable details such as channel names or video titles. All direct quotes from audience comments are paraphrased to preserve meaning while protecting user identities. The researcher's positionality as both a marketing scholar and observer within the same digital ecosystem was critically examined throughout the study. Reflexivity was central to maintaining sensitivity toward representations of children and avoiding voyeuristic or sensationalist interpretive tendencies.

Moreover, the study also acknowledges limitations and changes faced during the study, particularly in data collection and analysis. Reliance on publicly available data restricts access to creators' intentions and children's own perspectives. The children's own view, as well as the parents' own view on the content, may provide better triangulation opportunities. Ethical constraints prevented direct participant engagement, which would have enriched the understanding of family dynamics. As an interpretive study, findings inevitably reflect subjective viewpoints, though ongoing reflexivity was employed to minimise bias. Findings are context-specific and should be applied to other settings with appropriate caution.

FINDINGS

Analysis of YouTube family vlog content and associated audience comments yielded rich data on the dynamics between content monetisation, parental agency, audience perception, and the ethical treatment of children in digital spaces. Accordingly, the four main key themes emerged: (1) idealisation of family life and emotional engagement; (2) normalisation of child visibility; (3) moral

concern and critique of parental choices; and (4) ambivalence surrounding commercialisation. Furthermore, two cross-cutting patterns, concerning privacy and children's emotional labour, are addressed within the thematic discussion. Notably, culturally specific responses rooted in Sri Lankan norms of parental authority and family collectively formed a distinct analytical layer across all themes.

Idealisation of Family Life and Emotional Engagement

Audiences consistently responded to family vlog content with warmth and affection. Comments reflected a perception of family life as wholesome, aspirational, and emotionally uplifting. Children functioned as the primary affective anchors of these narratives:

"Your kids are the cutest! Watching them grow feels like watching my own nieces and nephews."

"Such a lovely bond between the parents and children. This is what real parenting looks like."

This phenomenon has evolved into a way for the best families and their children to socialise and a benchmark (Abidin, 2017). On one hand, these kid influencers are establishing their own standards of living while simultaneously shaping the societal norms for an ideal childhood (Rasmussen et al., 2022). This idealisation can create tension among viewers and within the content creators themselves (Li et al., 2025). A significant concern surrounding this tension is how these child influencers navigate their experiences and maintain their idealised social persona, which could potentially lead to negative consequences. For instance, the following quotation explains how the viewers perceived this idealised perfection.

"I know editing takes a lot of time, but everything here looks too perfect. Real families fight too sometimes."

This tension between idealisation and reality is analytically significant: it reveals how digital storytelling transforms domestic life into consumable spectacle, with children positioned as key emotional resources within a commercially driven narrative economy (Li et al., 2025). The construction is invisible to most viewers, who engage with the content as authentic rather than as a curated commercial product. Thus, this idealisation could cause for changing social acceptance of kids' behaviours and setting greater standards for them (Cronin et al., 2015).

Normalisation of Child Visibility

On the other hand, it's also noticed that a striking feature across all analysed channels was the normalisation of children's sustained public presence. Audiences frequently addressed children directly, commented on their developmental milestones, and expressed parasocial intimacy.

"Look how big Aiden has gotten! Can't believe he's starting school already."

"We miss seeing the kids! Please don't take such long breaks. They feel like part of our family."

These comments indicate that viewers perceive children not merely as family members but as public figures with implied obligations to their audiences. The parasocial bonds fostered through repeated exposure collapse the distinction between family intimacy and celebrity culture, generating a sense of audience entitlement to children's continued visibility (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). The ethical implications are significant: children become public entities whose privacy is subordinated to audience expectations. Thus, the health and safety of the kids became threatened. For instance, these kids were exposed to digital space from their birth to all the everyday activities, which reduces their privacy and space, which is essential for

kids in their developmental ages (Li et al., 2025).

Some viewers did register concern:

"It's sweet, but sometimes I worry about how much of their private life is online. They deserve some privacy, too."

However, such reflective responses remained rare. The broader pattern in the data was one of unreflective normalisation, suggesting that the ethical implications of children sustained digital visibility remain largely unexamined within public discourse, and that structural rather than audience-level interventions are required.

Moral Concern and Critique of Parental Choices

Amid predominantly positive responses, a notable minority of commenters raised moral and ethical concerns, focusing on the perceived exploitation of children and the blurring of parental and commercial roles (Clark & Jno-Charles, 2025):

"Do the kids even know they're being filmed all the time? It's not fair to use them for views"

"Children can't really consent at this age. Maybe wait until they're older to decide if they want to be public"

These critical voices frequently came from self-identified parents or educators, illustrating what Fitzpatrick (2011) terms ethical spectatorship: an audience's capacity to interrogate the moral dimensions of their own consumption. However, these critiques were consistently met with defensive responses from other community members, justifying the contents and their authenticity (Van den Abeele et al., 2025). For example, the following quotation explains how these justifications come from the audience.

"People always judge! If you don't like it, don't watch. They're great parents doing their best"

This polarisation is analytically important. The emotional attachments audiences develop toward influencer families create moral blind spots in which affection overrides ethical scrutiny. In other words, making the personal bound with these influencers rather than viewing them as a performance or content (Rasmussen et al., 2022). This dynamic underscores why audience self-regulation alone is insufficient for protecting children in digital spaces: structural governance mechanisms are required to supplement and formalise ethical responsibilities that voluntary community norms fail to sustain. Thus, scoping the vlogging from violating privacy became crucial.

Ambivalence Toward Commercialisation and Exploitation

A pervasive yet sensitive theme was audience contradiction regarding the commercialisation of family life. While many viewers celebrated creators' success, others expressed discomfort about sponsorships involving children:

"I'm happy for your success, but sometimes it feels like every video is an ad."

"If this were TV, there would be contracts and protections. Why is YouTube any different?"

This final comment is particularly significant as it clearly articulates the regulatory gap at the core of digital content for children. For example, at birth, the space became private and sensitive, and some of those are on screen. This lack of agency raises concerns about privacy during sensitive moments (Field note_12). As noted in the comments, traditional media often impose restrictions on broadcasting such private moments; however, this consideration is lacking in the digital context, where the audience

continues to engage with the content. This reinforces our previous highlight on the necessity of a structural regulatory framework. Additionally, numerous viewers specifically characterised children's on-screen activities as a form of labour.

"I hope these kids aren't forced to film when they don't feel like it. It's still work."

"These are family memories, but they're also business assets now. It's a strange world."

These responses indicate that segments of the viewing public are beginning to develop awareness of digital labour rights for children, though this awareness remains nascent and fragmented. The data do not suggest that audiences are prepared to hold creators or platforms accountable; rather, they articulate vague discomfort that, without structural mechanisms to channel it, dissipates without consequence. This was notably rooted in the viewers' emotional attachment to these contents and creators (Rasmussen et al., 2022). However, the claim on these children's entitlement to be considered as digital labour was not a popular narrative; rather, they were seen as a part of a family (Clark & Jno-Charles, 2025).

Privacy Breaches and Children's Emotional Labour

Reflecting on all four main themes discussed, there were two cross-cutting patterns. The first concerned inadvertent privacy exposure: viewers occasionally highlighted safety risks arising from the disclosure of personal details such as school uniforms, location cues, and daily routines:

"You probably shouldn't show their school uniforms or location. There are too many creeps online."

Simultaneously, other comments demonstrated a troubling normalisation of surveillance, with some viewers

attempting to identify the family's geographical location. For instance, the prestigious school admission, school sports, and other activities were mentioned as achievements, while putting these children in real danger when it comes to their safety (Field note_01). These interactions illustrate how the collapse of public and private boundaries in social media creates real safety vulnerabilities that platform comment moderation systems fail to address.

The second cross-cutting pattern concerned children's emotional labour. Moments of sadness, shyness, or frustration consistently attracted heightened engagement and sympathetic commentary:

"She's crying, but it's kind of cute. Kids have their moods too!"

"They're growing up learning that emotions are content. That's a heavy lesson for a child."

This latter comment captures the ethical paradox of family vlogging with unusual clarity: children's authentic emotional experiences are simultaneously celebrated as real and consumed as entertainment. For instance, the practised performance by kids was making the chance to appear authentic by the vloggers, suggesting that these children were actually not engaging with their free will (Field note_22). This constitutes an unacknowledged form of emotional labour, in which children's vulnerability becomes a narrative device that enhances algorithmic visibility and audience connection.

Cultural Contextualisation: Sri Lankan Perspectives

Sri Lankan audience responses provided a culturally specific layer of interpretation. Many commenters viewed parental control over children's digital participation as natural and unproblematic, reflecting established norms of parental authority and collective

identity as a family in the Sri Lankan collective culture:

"Parents know what's best for their kids. We grew up the same way, no harm in sharing their joy."

"It's their family, their decision. Why should outsiders interfere?"

In this disclosure, there is a notable intersection between what to disclose and what not to disclose. However, a subset expressed discomfort with what they perceived as overexposure, framing it as a symptom of cultural change driven by global digital norms:

"This is not how we used to raise children in our culture. Everything is public now."

"I worry we are copying Western habits too much. Kids need some privacy and respect."

These localised responses underscore a central argument of this study: digital ethics frameworks cannot be applied uniformly across cultural contexts. The negotiation between traditional parental authority and modern digital entrepreneurship is ongoing in Sri Lanka, and effective child protection must engage with rather than override these cultural dynamics. This does not imply cultural relativism; rather, it calls for policy and awareness initiatives designed with the specific socio-cultural context in mind.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a landscape in which children's digital participation is shaped simultaneously by audience demand, algorithmic incentivisation, and the commercial imperatives of family branding. Taken together, the four thematic patterns identified in the analysis point to a structural problem that exceeds the sum of individual parental decisions or audience responses: they indicate that the digital infrastructure through which family

content is produced, distributed, and consumed is organised in ways that systematically subordinate children's welfare to commercial gain. This section develops that argument by drawing the empirical threads together, situating them within the broader conceptual literature, and concluding with a child-centred digital ethics framework as a practical contribution to ongoing policy and scholarly debate.

Perhaps the most fundamental insight to emerge from the data is that children in family vlogs are not incidental participants in a domestic pastime that happens to be filmed. They function as core emotional assets within the logic of the influencer economy (Fan et al., 2023). Their spontaneity, vulnerability, and developmental unpredictability are precisely what generate the affective engagement that translates into views, followers, and advertising revenue. This is consistent with Abidin (2017) account of calibrated authenticity and extends the digital labour literature by demonstrating that the commodification of children's contributions operates not despite but because of their apparent naturalness. Because children's on-camera behaviour reads as unscripted, it produces a quality of emotional authenticity that adult influencer performance struggles to replicate. The economic value of this authenticity is substantial; the fact that it is generated by individuals who cannot meaningfully consent to its production and who receive no financial protection from its proceeds is the ethical core of the problem this study identifies.

Furthermore, the normalisation of child visibility identified across the data deepens this concern considerably. When audiences develop parasocial bonds with children, addressing them by name, tracking their developmental milestones, and expressing entitlement to their continued public presence, they contribute to a cultural environment in which

children's sustained exposure is treated as a given rather than as an ethical choice requiring justification (Rasmussen et al., 2022). This audience-level normalisation is not merely a social curiosity; it operates in productive tension with platform algorithms that amplify content generating the highest emotional engagement. The result is a feedback structure in which creators are structurally incentivised to maximise children's visible emotional range, and audiences are conditioned to expect and demand it, regardless of whether the children themselves would choose such exposure (Van den Abeele et al., 2025). The analytical implication is significant: normalisation is not simply an attitudinal problem amenable to awareness campaigns. It is embedded in the architecture of digital platforms and in the behavioural patterns of large-scale audiences, and it will not be dislodged without structural intervention.

The polarisation evident in audience responses to ethical critique reinforces this point. When viewers raised questions about consent, children's welfare, or the appropriateness of monetising intimate family moments, these concerns were systematically countered by community members whose emotional investment in the creator family overrode ethical reflection. What Fitzpatrick (2011) terms of ethical spectatorship, the capacity of audiences to interrogate the moral dimensions of their consumption was present but fragile, easily suppressed by the affective solidarity of fan communities. This finding has practical implications for how child protection in digital spaces is conceptualised. Policy approaches that rely primarily on audience self-regulation or community norms to protect children in family content are unlikely to succeed. The data suggest that affective loyalty to influencer families' functions as a near-systematic barrier to ethical accountability at the audience level. Structural governance mechanisms,

not voluntary community standards, are the appropriate locus of intervention.

The issue of consent is where these structural concerns are sharpest. The existing ethical framework governing children's participation in family social media content rests overwhelmingly on the assumption that parental authority constitutes adequate protection. Yet the data challenge this assumption on several grounds. The commercial incentives shaping content decisions, the algorithmic rewards for child-inclusive material, and the audience expectations fostered by sustained parasocial bonds all exert pressure on parental judgment that the consent framework does not acknowledge. Several commenters in the data articulated this problem with considerable clarity, observing that children cannot meaningfully authorise sustained digital exposure at the ages at which they are typically featured, and that the decision to participate should be revisited when they are old enough to exercise genuine agency. This reflects an emerging public ethical awareness that policy frameworks have yet to formalise. Blum-Ross & Livingstone (2017) scholarship on digital childhoods is instructive here: they emphasise children's evolving capacities for agency and argue for participatory frameworks that develop in step with those capacities, rather than frameworks that assign full authority to parents and consider the matter settled. A genuinely child-centred approach would build structural safeguards into the consent process itself, staged consent mechanisms that revisit participation as children develop cognitive and social maturity, combined with formal rights to content removal upon reaching adulthood. These are not exceptional demands; they are the minimum that the gravity of lifelong digital exposure warrants.

The role of platforms in sustaining these conditions requires explicit attention. The

commercial incentives driving children's digital visibility are not incidental to how platforms are designed; they are embedded within them. Algorithmic amplification of emotionally engaging content, the monetisation of view counts and engagement rates, and the persistent absence of enforceable age-specific protections collectively constitute what this study characterises as structural complicity in the exploitation of child participants. YouTube's post-FTC settlement reforms represent a meaningful step, but the data confirm that creators routinely circumvent these protections by categorising child-inclusive content as family rather than child-directed material, thereby avoiding the stricter advertising and data restrictions that apply to the latter (Feijoo et al., 2024). This pattern of regulatory evasion is not accidental; it reflects a rational response to the commercial incentives that platforms continue to provide. Meaningful child protection in this space, therefore, requires platforms to move beyond self-regulatory frameworks and accept binding obligations with respect to content featuring minors. These should include mandatory labelling of child-inclusive monetised content, restrictions on the use of data generated by children's digital traces for targeted advertising, and robust and consistently enforced comment moderation standards that prevent harmful audience interactions from reaching children's digital representations.

The Sri Lankan dimension of the findings introduces an additional layer of complexity that neither Western regulatory models nor generic global ethics frameworks adequately address. The data reveal a cultural context in which parental authority over children's public participation is widely regarded as natural, legitimate, and beyond external scrutiny. Norms of collective family identity and household economic solidarity mean that children's inclusion in content creation is often framed as a shared contribution to

family well-being rather than as a form of exploitation. This framing is not simply false consciousness to be corrected; it reflects genuine socio-economic pressures and deeply embedded cultural values that any effective ethics framework must engage with rather than dismiss. At the same time, the data also reveal a subset of Sri Lankan commenters who experienced discomfort with what they perceived as the cultural importation of Western digital habits, expressing concern that prevailing norms of child privacy and respect were being eroded by the logic of social media entrepreneurship. This internal cultural tension is analytically significant: it suggests that awareness of the ethical stakes of children's digital participation is present within Sri Lankan audiences, even if it is not yet the dominant frame. Policy and awareness initiatives designed for the Sri Lankan context should seek to strengthen and amplify these existing critical voices rather than introducing entirely external frameworks.

The absence of digital-specific child protection legislation in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lanka Press Council's jurisdictional limits with respect to user-generated content means that this internal ethical awareness currently has no formal institutional expression. Content creators, parents, and audiences operate within a regulatory vacuum in which ethical responsibility is entirely individualised and largely unenforced. The structural inequalities of the global digital economy compound this situation: Western platforms extract data and advertising revenue from Sri Lankan content featuring Sri Lankan children, applying profit models developed for high-regulation Western markets without extending the associated protections to Global South users. This postcolonial dimension of digital exploitation, identified by Bhatt (2019) and Gajjala (2018) among others, demands that child protection frameworks developed in response to Sri Lanka's specific context are not simply adapted

versions of European or North American models but are built through genuine consultation with local communities, civil society organisations, and policymakers.

Drawing these threads together, this study proposes a child-centred digital ethics framework as a conceptual scaffold for further collaborative development. The framework is structured around four principles, each grounded in the empirical findings. The first is informed and evolving consent: given that young children cannot provide meaningful consent for sustained digital exposure, regulatory frameworks should mandate staged consent mechanisms that revisit children's participation as they develop cognitive maturity and should establish formal rights to content removal upon reaching adulthood. The second is transparency and disclosure: creators featuring children in monetised content should be required to disclose the commercial nature of that content, the extent of children's involvement, and the arrangements for income allocation. Platform-level enforcement of transparent labelling is essential to make this disclosure meaningful rather than nominal. The third is income protection and labour recognition: children's emotional and performative contributions to family digital brands constitute a form of labour, and jurisdictions should mandate the protection of income generated by minors in trust until adulthood, building on the precedent of the French Influencer Law (Aade & Goanta, 2025) while adapting it to local economic and cultural conditions. The fourth is cultural sensitivity and contextual application: ethical frameworks must be developed with rather than imposed upon the communities they are intended to serve. In Sri Lanka and comparable South Asian contexts, this means involving local civil society organisations, religious institutions, and community representatives in awareness and advocacy work, and developing

regulatory mechanisms through participatory consultation rather than top-down legislative imposition.

This framework does not claim to resolve the ethical tensions that the study has identified. It is offered as a starting point for the kind of sustained, interdisciplinary, and cross-sectoral dialogue that the protection of children in digital spaces urgently requires. What the findings make clear is that neither parental goodwill, nor audience ethical awareness, nor platform self-regulation is sufficient on its own to address the structural conditions through which children's welfare is currently compromised in monetised family content. The challenge is systemic, and the response must be equally so.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka presents an instructive case for understanding how digital child protection challenges manifest in Global South settings. The absence of digital-specific child protection legislation, combined with the rapid growth of family content creation as a livelihood strategy and cultural norms that frame parental authority as paramount, creates conditions of heightened vulnerability. Three practical implications follow from the findings.

First, Sri Lanka's existing media regulatory architecture requires extension to cover user-generated digital content, including clear definitions of child-inclusive monetised content, mandatory disclosure requirements, and income protection mechanisms. Second, media literacy programmes targeting parents and content creators should be developed, addressing digital safety risks and ethical obligations around children's consent and privacy. Third, platforms operating in Sri Lanka should be required to enforce community guidelines around child-inclusive content with the same rigour applied in jurisdictions with stronger

regulatory frameworks; geographic location should not determine the standard of child protection applied.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

This study makes three substantive contributions to scholarship and practice at the intersection of digital media ethics, child protection, and content marketing.

First, it advances theoretical understanding by providing empirical insight into how audience dynamics, creator practices, and platform architectures collectively commodify childhood. By integrating netnographic analysis with digital labour and child rights frameworks, the study reveals the specific mechanisms through which domestic intimacy is transformed into commercial performance and children's emotional lives into economic resources. It extends existing scholarship on influencer culture (Abidin, 2017; Clark & Jno-Charles, 2025) by foregrounding the audience's active role in normalising and sustaining these dynamics, a dimension underexplored in prior work.

Second, the study makes a methodological contribution by demonstrating the utility of netnography for investigating ethical questions in digital family spaces. The approach enables context-rich interpretation of the practices, discourses, and tensions that shape children's online participation without requiring access to private family dynamics, offering a replicable model for future research in comparable settings.

Third, by situating the analysis within the Sri Lankan context and proposing a child-centred digital ethics framework, the study contributes to decolonising perspectives on digital media ethics. It demonstrates that effective child protection in the digital age requires frameworks simultaneously grounded in universal rights principles and sensitive to the socio-cultural

specificities of non-Western contexts. This has direct implications for policymakers, platforms, educational institutions, and civil society organisations working on digital child protection in the Global South.

CONCLUSION

The participation of children in monetised social media content represents a critical ethical and social challenge in the contemporary digital landscape. As this study has demonstrated, children within family vlogging cultures occupy the roles of emotional assets, digital labourers, and data subjects simultaneously, within an ecosystem that lacks adequate regulatory, ethical, or protective infrastructure. Analysis of YouTube audience responses reveals that while public awareness of these ethical concerns is growing, it remains fragmented and insufficient to drive meaningful protective change without structural intervention.

Existing child protection frameworks are ill-equipped to manage the complexities of digital content creation, particularly in contexts such as Sri Lanka, where limited regulatory oversight, economic pressures, and cultural norms around parental authority create compounding vulnerabilities. The child-centred digital ethics framework proposed in this study, centred on evolving consent, transparency, income protection, and cultural sensitivity, offers a practical starting point for collaborative reform across policy, platform governance, and civil society domains.

Ultimately, this research calls for a reorientation in how digital family storytelling is conceptualised: not as a private entrepreneurial choice, but as a practice with public ethical dimensions that affect children's rights, welfare, and futures. Social media platforms, policymakers, educators, and digital communities must work together to ensure that children's participation in online

spaces is guided by respect, transparency, and accountability, so that digital family content becomes not merely a tool for entertainment or income, but a space of ethical responsibility and care.

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