

## **The Power of the Influencer in the Age of Digital Child Hood**

### **-An Analysis of Dimensions and Risks-**

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#### **Abstract:**

**This article examines the phenomenon of digital influencers and their growing role in shaping children's awareness, culture, and behaviors in the age of digital childhood. Social media platforms have become spaces where children spend a significant portion of their time, influenced by carefully designed content targeting them through subtle persuasion and attraction techniques. The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach that integrates sociological, psychological, and media literature. It aims to explore the dimensions of this phenomenon from multiple perspectives: the Social, Psychological, Ethical and Value-based, and legal dimensions. The article also presents a set of practical recommendations directed at families, schools, legislators, and digital platforms, with the goal of strengthening the child's digital protection system.**

**Keywords: Digital Influencer, Digital Childhood, Social Media Platforms, Child Digital Protection, Digital Socialization**

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|

## **Introduction:**

In the first decade of the third millennium, the world witnessed an unprecedented transformation in the structure of human communication. We moved from the era of traditional one-way media to an era of interactive, participatory media, where every user has become both a publisher and a content creator.

Amid this radical transformation, the phenomenon of the “digital influencer” has emerged as a new model of opinion leadership and cultural icon-making. Its impact extends beyond digital platforms to penetrate deeply into the daily lives of individuals and communities; Perhaps the most concerning aspect of this phenomenon is the expansion of influencers’ power toward the most vulnerable segment of society: children. Global statistics reveal that three-quarters of children under the age of 13 have active accounts on social media platforms, despite restrictive policies. They consume influencer content at rates exceeding those of traditional media combined.

These data points provide a crucial entry point to understanding how children absorb values, behaviors, and consumption patterns through what appears to be a voluntary and free relationship, but is in fact a structured influence governed by the logic of the attention economy and digital marketing strategies.

Based on this central issue, this article seeks to dissect the phenomenon of influencer power within the context of digital childhood through multiple analytical levels, aiming to answer a key question:

- **How does the digital influencer reshape childhood in the digital age, and what are the hidden risks of this invisible power?**

## **I. Conceptual Foundations:**

### **1. The Concept of the Digital Influencer:**

In contemporary academic literature, a digital influencer is defined as a person who possesses a documented ability to influence the behaviors, decisions, and attitudes of their audience through online platforms, relying on credibility, engaging content, and high interaction rates (Freberg et al (2011)).

Unlike traditional media celebrities, digital influencers are characterized by a key feature: their perceived closeness to followers. They create what is known as a parasocial relationship, giving the illusion of personal familiarity and trust. Influencers are categorized based on their follower base, ranging from nano-

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|

influencers (fewer than 10,000 followers) to mega-influencers (over one million followers). However, recent studies indicate that actual influence is often inversely related to audience size, explaining the shift of major marketing companies toward micro- and mid-level influencers.

## **2. The Concept of Digital Childhood**

Digital childhood refers to a stage of human development in which a child's life experience is deeply intertwined with digital environments, tools, and cultures.

According to “**Prensky**” (2001), today's children are “digital natives”, meaning they are born into a technological environment and interact with it naturally rather than through learning.

However, this optimistic description conceals complex challenges. The ability to use technology does not necessarily imply the ability to understand or critically evaluate it. A child who skillfully navigates social media may still be highly vulnerable to persuasive and manipulative techniques embedded in digital content.

## **II. Theoretical Framework: Usage and Influence Theories:**

This article draws on an integrated set of academic theories:

- 2. Social Learning Theory (Bandura):** Explains how children learn behaviors through observation and imitation.
- 3. Uses and Gratifications Theory:** Highlights the motivations behind digital content consumption.
- 4.** Content shapes perceptions and beliefs over time.

## **III. Dimensions of Influencer Power on Children:**

### **1. The Social Dimension:**

The social power of influencers is built on several pillars:

- Most notably the illusion of social intimacy;
- Influencers use direct communication styles and daily-life sharing to break psychological barriers with children;
- Additionally, the phenomenon of peer social validation encourages children to imitate what appears socially accepted in their digital environment. A 2021 study by Common Sense Media found that 53% of children aged 8–12 consider social media influencers as role models, even more than teachers or family members-reflecting a major shift in socialization references.

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|

## **2. The Psychological Dimension:**

Psychologically, influencers act as an emotional reference point for children, shaping their self-worth and standards of success and attractiveness.

-This occurs through three main mechanisms:

- 1) **Upward social comparison:** Leading to feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem.
- 2) **Identity identification:** Children imitate influencers' language, lifestyle, and values.
- 3) **Emotional dependency:** Some children develop attachment-like relationships with influencers.

Studies link heavy exposure to influencer content with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and body image dissatisfaction (Fardouly & Vartanian (2015)).

## **3. Value and Cultural Power:**

The value system represents the deepest level of influence exerted by digital influencers on children, as digital content reshapes priorities and reorganizes values within the developing consciousness of the child. Among the most prominent values promoted by influencers, either implicitly or explicitly are:

- **Consumer culture:** Most content encourage acquisition and display, packaging its message in the form of entertainment and seemingly sincere recommendations.
- **Immediacy and instant gratification:** Platforms reinforce a culture of immediate satisfaction, which hinders the development of patience and the ability to delay rewards—both of which are essential psychological competencies.
- **The culture of easy fame:** The rapid success of influencers instills in children the belief that fame and wealth are attainable paths that do not necessarily require academic effort or professional specialization.
- **Body and beauty modeling:** Beauty and fashion content contributes to the construction of standardized aesthetic norms that impose significant psychological pressure on children and plant the seeds of body image disorders.

## **4. Economic Power - Hidden Marketing:**

The phenomenon of digital influencers in the context of digital childhood cannot be fully understood without a critical examination of its underlying economic drivers, the influencer marketing industry was valued at over\$21

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|

**billion globally in 2024**, with children aged 6 to 14 representing a highly significant target group due to their ability to influence family purchasing decisions.

Marketing companies employ advanced techniques to reach children through influencers, most notably:

- Native advertising (embedded within content)
- Undisclosed paid endorsements
- Loyalty programs and promotional gifts
- Psychological pressure linked to social conformity

These techniques constitute what is known as “hidden persuasion,” which children find extremely difficult to distinguish from authentic and spontaneous content.

#### **IV. Underlying Risks – A Diagnostic Analysis:**

##### **1. Cognitive and Developmental Risks:**

Researchers in developmental psychology indicate that excessive consumption of negative digital content during childhood leads to a range of serious cognitive consequences. Most notably, it weakens critical thinking skills as a result of becoming accustomed to receiving information passively without questioning or verification.

Researchers also observe a decline in attention span and a reduced capacity for deep concentration. In addition, creativity and imagination are weakened due to engagement with pre-packaged, standardized content that deprives the child of opportunities for independent meaning-making.

##### **2. Socialization Risks:**

From a social perspective, intensive digital content consumption reduces children’s opportunities for real-life social interaction, thereby hindering the acquisition of essential social skills such as negotiation, conflict resolution, reading body language, and emotional empathy.

This results in a generation of children who are proficient in digital interaction but struggle to build deep, meaningful human relationships in real life.

Furthermore, there is a growing risk of normalization of hostile discourse and cyberbullying, which children frequently encounter in influencer-related interaction spaces. This exposure contributes to the perception of such behaviors as socially acceptable and normal.

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|

### **3. Mental Health Risks:**

A study published in “JAMA Pediatrics” (2022) found that children who spend more than three hours daily consuming social media content exhibit significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression, as well as lower self-esteem—at rates more than double those of their peers who limit such usage.

#### **- Observed psychological risks include:**

Sleep disturbances caused by nighttime use of digital devices Digital addiction, accompanied by withdrawal symptoms when deprived of devices

- Fomo (Fear of Missing Out), which generates persistent social anxiety
- Digital fatigue, leaving the child mentally exhausted despite the absence of physical activity

### **4. Exploitation and Digital Safety Risks:**

The interactive environments surrounding influencers constitute a highly vulnerable security space. Open interaction, particularly in comment sections, exposes children to harmful content, hate speech, and contact attempts by individuals posing as fans. Moreover, engagement with influencers contributes to the erosion of children’s privacy boundaries, as they learn to share personal details and experiences as a normalized and socially rewarded behavior.

## **V. Types of Influencers Targeting Children and Their Classification**

### **1. Edutainment Influencers:**

This category represents the positive side of the influencer phenomenon. These influencers produce content that combines education with entertainment in an engaging manner, making knowledge more accessible to children and encouraging exploration. Prominent examples include channels focused on science, mathematics, and creative arts.

However, overemphasizing the entertainment aspect at the expense of scientific accuracy can pose risks, even within this generally positive category.

### **2. Lifestyle and Consumption Influencers:**

This category is the most widespread and influential among children. Influencers in this group present their daily lives in an idealized and embellished manner, promoting specific consumer lifestyles related to clothing, food, and entertainment products. Children consume this content without realizing that what

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|

they are watching is, in reality, carefully crafted marketing material disguised as authenticity and spontaneity.

### **3. Kid Influencers:**

This category raises highly complex ethical and legal concerns. Very young children appear on digital platforms as content creators, often under the direction of their parents. This phenomenon is often viewed as an exploitation of childhood innocence for commercial purposes. Additionally, it may negatively affect the development of the child influencer, who is deprived of a natural childhood experience.

Reports indicate that some of the most popular child-oriented YouTube channels are managed by children as young as eight or nine years old, generating millions of dollars through commercial partnerships.

### **4. Gaming Influencers:**

Electronic gaming content represents one of the most powerful channels for attracting children—particularly boys. Many gaming influencers have evolved into cultural figures whose influence rivals that of sports celebrities.

The risks associated with this category lie in the indirect promotion of games that are not age-appropriate for younger audiences, as well as in reinforcing a culture of in-game spending through In-App Purchases, which may encourage excessive consumption behaviors among children.

## **➤ The Legal and Regulatory Framework for Protecting Children from Influencers**

### **1. International Legislative Framework:**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) provides the most comprehensive international legal framework for the digital protection of children, particularly Articles 17 and 34, which obligate State Parties to adopt preventive measures to shield children from harmful content and commercial exploitation.

At the European level, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has imposed stricter controls on the targeting of children through advertising. In addition, the United Kingdom enacted the AgeAppropriate Design Code, which requires digital platforms to design child-friendly user experiences by default.

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|

## **2. Legislative Gaps in the Arab Context:**

*A review of legislative frameworks in Arab countries generally reveals a clear deficiency in addressing the emerging challenges posed by the digital content economy. Most laws regulating cybercrime and child online protection focus primarily on issues such as sexual exploitation and online harassment.*

*However, they largely overlook—or inadequately address—the phenomenon of hidden commercial influence targeting children through digital platforms. Some countries, such as the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, represent partial exceptions, having taken relatively more advanced legislative steps in this area.*

## **3. Responsibility of Digital Platforms:**

Major digital platforms are increasingly facing growing legislative and public pressure to uphold their social responsibility toward child users. In response, some platforms have implemented measures such as:

- Restricting advertisements targeted at minors
- Requiring influencers to disclose paid content
- Creating child-specific modes with limited interaction features

However, these measures remain largely insufficient and, in many cases, lack binding enforcement, limiting their overall effectiveness in ensuring adequate protection for children.

### **▪ Protection Mechanisms – Toward an Integrated Strategy:**

#### **✓ The Role of the Family: Digital Media Education:**

The family bears the primary and most crucial responsibility in protecting children from the influence of digital influencers. This protection should not rely on restriction and prohibition—whose effectiveness has proven limited—but rather on what is known as Active Media Mediation, which involves conscious and engaged parental presence in the child’s digital experience.

-Practical mechanisms in this context include:

1. Establishing open and regular dialogue about the content the child consumes, without premature judgment that might shut down communication.
2. Developing the child’s critical thinking toward digital content by asking analytical questions such as: Why was this content created? Who benefits from It?

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|

3. Setting well-considered time and quality limits for screen use, while providing enriching alternative activities that satisfy the child's curiosity and need for entertainment.
4. Empowering the child to report any disturbing content without fear of punishment or criticism.

✓ **The Role of the School: Digital Literacy:**

Educational institutions bear a parallel responsibility in preparing the younger generation to critically engage with digital content. This requires integrating Media and Information Literacy into formal curricula, training children to distinguish between informative and promotional content, and teaching them concepts related to digital privacy and user rights.

Additionally, strengthening authentic cultural identity serves as a natural protective shield against external influences.

✓ **The Role of Policymakers and Legislators:**

Addressing this phenomenon effectively requires proactive legislative intervention, including:

- Enacting explicit laws that require influencers to fully disclose commercial content directed at children
- Regulating the types of products that may be promoted to children through digital platforms
- Establishing specialized regulatory bodies to monitor and evaluate digital content targeting minors
- Extending legal protections to child influencers, similar to labor laws governing child participation in the entertainment industry
- Addressing this phenomenon effectively requires robust legislative intervention, including the enactment of explicit laws that oblige influencers to fully disclose commercial content directed at children.
- Restricting the types of products that may be promoted by influencers within digital spaces accessible to minors.
- establishing specialized regulatory bodies responsible for monitoring and evaluating digital content targeting children,
- subjecting child influencers to legal protections comparable to those provided under labor laws governing child participation in the entertainment industry.

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|

### ✓ **Influencers’ Self-Responsibility:**

The ethical dimension of responsibility cannot be overlooked, as influencers who target child audiences bear a significant moral obligation.

This responsibility requires them to ensure transparency in disclosing the commercial nature of their content, to provide material that is appropriate for the age groups they address, and to promote positive messages that enhance children’s healthy self-image rather than fostering feelings of inadequacy.

### **- Conclusion – Toward a Safe and Resilient Digital Childhood:**

The phenomenon of influencer power in the age of digital childhood is not merely a technical issue that can be addressed through monitoring applications or digital filters. Rather, it is a deeply rooted social, cultural, and psychological phenomenon that requires a comprehensive approach mobilizing all relevant stakeholders: the family, the school, legislators, digital platforms, civil society, and the influencers themselves.

What makes this issue even more urgent is that children growing up in today’s intensive digital environment are not necessarily passive victims. With the right tools, skills, and support, they can become conscious and critical digital actors.

This represents the true challenge of the digital childhood era for our societies: not to close the digital door in front of children, but to prepare them to enter it with open eyes, a critical mind, and a strong identity.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes that research in this field is still in its early academic stages, and that the phenomenon continues to evolve, requiring continuous monitoring, evaluation, and reassessment. Ultimately, effective protection of the digital child depends on society’s ability to strike a delicate balance between embracing the benefits of the digital revolution and safeguarding against its hidden risks.

### **- Recommendations:**

Based on the foregoing analysis and critical examination, this article recommends the following:

1. Integrating “Digital Security and Media Literacy” as a formal subject within school curricula at the primary and middle education levels.
2. Establishing specialized national observatories to monitor and periodically evaluate digital content directed at children according to scientific and ethical standards.
3. Enacting legislation that requires digital platforms to implement effective age
4. verification mechanisms and to ensure the protection of minors’ personal data.

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|

5. Launching sustainable training programs for parents, enabling them to practice effective active media mediation with their children.
6. Encouraging specialized academic research on the relationship between Arab children and digital influencers, and assessing its impact through rigorous methodological tools.
7. Developing binding ethical codes of conduct for influencers targeting child audiences, in consultation with experts in child psychology, and in sociology of family and childhood.

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