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## PRE-SCHOOL STARS ON YOUTUBE

### Child Microcelebrities, Commercially Viable Biographies, and Interactions with Technology

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#### **Introduction**

Some of the most watched pre-schoolers today are young children of viral video fame, family influencer units, and micro-microcelebrities. While children of viral video fame may stumble into public popularity by accident or chance (Abidin, 2018a), children in family influencer units gain fame from being consistently exposed to the public as part of their parents' production of content that heavily centres on domestic life (Abidin, 2017), and children who are micro-microcelebrities are intentionally groomed by their microcelebrity mothers to become commodities and human billboards from birth (Abidin, 2015). As social-media-famous children whose public visibility in digital spaces is not only intentionally prolific but deliberately commercial, such pre-schoolers are unwittingly subject to having their biographies video-recorded and textually documented for hundreds of thousands of followers. Often, their digital estates also portray the children interacting with different devices and technology, with varying degrees of digital literacy and self-awareness. Although most of this production is managed and curated by parents of such young semi-public figures, other factors in the ecology shape parental choices, such as corporate pressures from influencer management agencies and sponsoring clients, and audience pressures from followers who request or demand specific content.

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. Existing child labour laws in the entertainment industry, such as the Entertainment Work Permit (Department of Industrial Relations, 2013) and the Californian Coogan Law (Screen Actors Guild, 2015), stipulate protection of under-12s in the mainstream media industries such as film, television, and music. National guidelines, such as Singapore's Protection of Underaged Workers governed by the Ministry of Manpower, seem to focus on industrial work taken up outside the domestic space of the home (Ministry of Manpower, 2014). 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 child microcelebrities are relatively obscured.

This chapter aims to open a conversation regarding children's rights in the influencer industry by scrutinising how a group of such pre-schoolers, originating from different fame histories, interact with the camera as a stand-in for an audience. Through a content analysis of their audio-visual content on YouTube, this chapter will observe how the pre-schoolers handle devices, address the camera, and interact with their parents on film as modes of emoting and exercising their willingness to participate in filming and technology use.

### **Commercially Viable Biographies on YouTube**

YouTube is a celebrated space of 'vernacular creativity', where users create and share content "as a means of social networking" and as an everyday culture (Burgess & Green, 2013, pp. 25–6). However, the rise of social media influencers has meant that many YouTubers are now intentionally generating content as a commercial practice, with the intention of pursuing remuneration. Even though beginners and aspirants often engage in the 'aspirational labour' of producing content without compensation, in the belief that they will experience their 'big break' and be able to monetise their content in the foreseeable future (Duffy, 2015), this route from obscurity to fame to commerce is not always readily available to everyone. Aspirants often work hard to transit from being a mere public 'face' into becoming a sustained persona that is recognisable on the internet, and later an internet celebrity who can monetise their fame (Abidin, 2018a, pp. 44–52).

For many pre-school stars on YouTube, accumulating monetisable fame often involves parent-managers who conscientiously monitor, groom, and curate a biographical narrative that can later be monetised. This requires parents to engage in 'sharenting', or the sharing of "information about themselves and their children online" (Blum-Ross & Livingston, 2017, p. 110), albeit with a higher commercial agenda. Although everyday parents have been known to use wearable devices to track their children, as an act of 'intimate surveillance' that is usually a "purposeful and routinely well-intentioned surveillance of young people by parents" (Leaver, 2015, p. 153), such young children have "no direct self-representational agency" (Leaver, 2017, p. 2). As such, unlike other child-centred parenting blogs which are useful feminist interventions to value domestic labour or resist the societal pressures and ideal constructions of 'good' motherhood (Lopez, 2009; Orton-Johnson, 2017), constructing commercially viable biographies of children on YouTube can potentially be exploitative as children are framed "to maximize advertorial potential" (Abidin, 2017). This chapter conceptualises the construction of such pre-school internet celebrities' 'commercially viable biographies' as the calculated public documentation of young children's everyday lives and especially developmental milestones, whether staged or in situ, solicited through a sustained agenda of practices to simulate situations and stimulate their reactions, with the intention to cultivate a monetisable profile.

Despite the range of social media on which child microcelebrities proliferate, this chapter focusses on YouTube as it has emerged as a central site of concern regarding children's wellbeing online, given a growing number of children who turn to the platform over television (Shmuel, 2018).

First, since 2017, there has been an explosion of age-inappropriate disturbing content tagged with child-oriented search terms that can even be viewed with YouTube's "family-friendly restricted mode enabled" (Orphanides, 2018). These include popular children's cartoons remixed into knock-off editions to contain violence, pornography, sexualisation, and suicide (Bridle, 2017; Buzzi, 2011). Although YouTube has made some efforts to moderate such content and restrict their monetisation (Hern, 2017), progress has been slow as the platform largely depends on "flagging by viewers to drive official review" (Bridle, 2018).

Second, YouTube influencers and YouTube targeted ads have been marketing contentious messages to children. One of YouTube's top stars, Jake Paul, who claims his target audience is "children between the ages of 8 and 16", has promoted digital betting company Mystery Brand's

online gambling service to young viewers (Jennings, 2019). YouTube has also been accused of violating the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act by collecting the personal data of child users without parental consent and serving them targeted commercials for child products and services alongside 'kid-oriented videos' (*Washington Post*, 2018).

Third, YouTube influencers have been exploiting children in their content production. Family influencer units on YouTube have come under fire for child abuse, as they subject their children to 'pranks' as fodder for viewers, such as US YouTube channel DaddyOFive which was profiting between USD\$200,000–350,000 annually from the emotional distress of their children filmed on camera (Leaver & Abidin, 2017). Viral kid reaction videos are becoming more lucrative and may drive up the demand for more staged set-ups, but such child microcelebrities are not covered by traditional workplace standards that historically protected child stars in the mainstream media industries from exploitation (Abidin, 2015).

Finally, the rise of child influencers on YouTube evidence the importance of paying close attention to such young YouTubers online. Child influencers are quickly rising through the ranks, especially in the genre of 'unboxing' videos (Marsh, 2015), with the likes of seven-year-old Ryan Toys Review topping the Forbes list of the highest paid YouTubers of 2018 (Robehmed & Berg, 2018). Since launching in March 2015, Ryan has accumulated over 17 million followers and 26 billion views (Berg, 2018) via videos in which he unboxes and plays with toys or tries out food products with "earnest and enthusiastic commentary" guided by his parents off-screen (Lynch, 2018). Ryan now owns "40 international licensing deals to use his image" and has his own toy line and TV show (Shamsian, 2019).

Against this backdrop of the variety of child microcelebrities on YouTube, this chapter focusses on three case studies of internet-famous children on YouTube who are derived from different fame origins (i.e., viral video fame, family influencer units, and micro-microcelebrities) and hail from different cultural ecologies (i.e., South Korea, USA, Singapore), to survey the landscape of pre-schoolers with commercially viable biographies on YouTube.

## **Context and Methodology**

The case studies were selected from three different projects looking at internet-famous children in the South Korean popular culture industry (Abidin, 2018b), influencer mothers and the proximate microcelebrification of their children (Abidin, 2015), and family influencer units and their ethical practices (Abidin, 2017). Based on existing data from long-term digital ethnography projects, a sample of six videos was purposively selected for content analysis. Specifically, they were analysed for interactions between the child and the parent, the child and the object of focus (i.e., a toy, a craft paper, a mobile phone), and the child and the camera. These video snippets were studied in relation to the spoken dialogue and closed captions or textual narration if applicable, and contextualised alongside reactions from the comments section of the YouTube posts. Readings of these interactions were also cross-referenced with more extensive discussions of these children's wellbeing on various social media platforms and online forums. The specific snippets discussed in this chapter were chosen to demonstrate the wide variety of practices among child stars on YouTube. As such, the interpretations here are informed by a deeper and longer awareness of where and how these YouTube channels are situated in the internet celebrity economy.

Ye Bin (born in 2011), of the channel 'Baby Yebin', is from South Korea and has been on YouTube since 2014. She is a viral internet celebrity who eventually parlayed her fame into a sustained influencer presence. Ye Bin rose to fame after her 'stranger danger' video – in which her mother queries her reactions on various scenarios (for instance, accepting ice cream from a stranger or going out with a stranger) – went viral internationally (Ye Bin, 2014). Since then, the videos feature Ye Bin's developmental milestones and recreational activities.

Eliana (born in 2008), of the channel ‘realitychangers’, is from the USA and has been on YouTube since 2010. She is a member of a family influencer unit that initially began with her father Jorge and older sister Alexia. The family produces weekly vlogs of their domestic life and videos of their home-made covers of popular songs. Although Eliana initially began with cameos and was included in a handful of videos, she formally took part in the channel’s cover song in 2013 (realitychangers, 2013) and became a staple in their family influencer unit after that.

Dash (born in 2013), of the channels ‘Clicknetwork’ and ‘Xiaxue’, is from Singapore and has been on YouTube since 2013. He is a second-generation microcelebrity born to a prominent influencer Xiaxue, who has been on several social media blogs since the mid-2000s. Although Xiaxue originally began as a lifestyle influencer and helmed her own YouTube series ‘Xiaxue’s Guide to Life’ on the aggregate content channel Clicknetwork, she began to expand into the parenting genre after giving birth to Dash by intensively curating his social media presence from conception.

As a result of their different genealogies to YouTube fame, the pre-schoolers exhibit varying digital literacies in their engagement with the camera, varying awareness of audiences in their conversations on camera, and changing interactions with their parents in front of the camera, which will be summarised and analysed in the next section. This chapter builds on recent research on how content featuring social media child stars in commercial YouTube activities can be better regulated (Craig & Cunningham, 2017), how they merge play and commerce via mimetic production (Nicoll & Nansen, 2018), and how they expand their brand as they grow up online (Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Diz, 2016). Unlike prior studies on how young children are learning to use devices such as tablets (Hourcade et al., 2015), how young children are engaged in digital literacy practices when they watch YouTube videos (Marsh, 2015), and how children develop technical identities from engaging on YouTube (Lange, 2014), this chapter focusses on pre-school-aged child YouTube celebrities, and how their different fame origins must be contextualised, to understand the varying degrees to which their parent-managers engage with them and acknowledge their agency on camera.

## **Child Microcelebrities’ Interactions with Technology**

### ***Ye Bin***

Ye Bin’s videos are filmed by her mother, but there is often very little parental dialogue apart from Q&A videos in which Ye Bin is being quizzed. The videos usually begin with Ye Bin in situ, without any introduction or orientation for the viewer, and the clip usually records the moment she becomes aware of the camera filming her, before she decides whether to change her composure and engage with the lens or ignore the lens to resume her activity as if unwatched.

In one compilation of videos (Ye Bin, 2015), Ye Bin is filmed getting out of bed. She pushes her fringe away from her eyes and notices the camera. Immediately, she throws her arms onto the cushion on her bed, then reaches towards her mother to bat the camera out of her hands. The camera falls onto the bed as her mother asks, “Stop filming?” As the mother moves the camera back onto Ye Bin and awaits her response, Ye Bin pauses for a moment, then looks to her mother and pushes her palm on the lens, forcing the camera back down onto the bed again. In this brief struggle, the camera catches another glimpse of Ye Bin looking displeased and waving her palms in front of the lens. The clip then ends abruptly, to signify that the mother has honoured Ye Bin’s decision to refuse being filmed. Another clip in this compilation featured Ye Bin singing a nursery rhyme when she notices that her mother is filming her. Ye Bin then turns her head slightly to face the camera, looks directly into the lens, and she completes the rest of the song with dance moves, in agreement with the filming. These two examples showcase the

range of Ye Bin's gestural decisions when choosing how to respond to the camera, which are peppered throughout the videos on her channel.

In a second video (Ye Bin, 2016), Ye Bin is seen interacting with a variety of selfie filters, such as blowing digital bubbles or shifting her face in the frame so that a machine can 'apply' makeup on her. Ye Bin reacts enthusiastically to the filter's interactive displays through smiles, giggles, and repeated gestures and facial movements to solicit the same stimulations. It is evident that the video is a screen recording of the smartphone, and Ye Bin's mother is partially seen and sometimes in the shadows right beside her, presumably holding up the smartphone in front of Ye Bin since both of the latter's arms are in the frame. Such videos show Ye Bin taking the initiative to interact with technology, and demonstrating some independence as she learns to navigate the selfie filters through trial and error.

Across the videos on her channel, Ye Bin can be seen expressing on camera her desire to continue or refuse being filmed, and her mother correspondingly honours her agency. In one video, her mother had uploaded a video she apparently found on her smartphone in which Ye Bin had unknowingly recorded herself, presumably without parental supervision. Comments in the (now deleted) video praised Ye Bin for being able to pick up technical skills so quickly and at such a young age, in all likelihood from modelling her mother. The videos in which she is seen interacting with selfie filters, various smartphone apps, and the phone, evidence the processes through which she is figuring out and learning to navigate new technology. In general, the parental involvement in Ye Bin's videos is low and only to the extent of managing the technical aspects of filming behind the scenes; otherwise, Ye Bin is recorded primarily in her 'own habitat', exhibiting her own personality, and the camera is often positioned as a 'fly on the wall'.

### ***Eliana***

Eliana is usually filmed with her father and sister, via a handheld camera mostly managed by her father, or via a camera on a tripod. In their cover videos, there is usually no introduction, and the trio go straight into a song. However, often appended at the end of such 'formal' covers is a blooper reel of behind-the-scenes snippets where Eliana is seen goofing around. In their life-style vlogs, Eliana's father usually begins with a quick introduction situating where they are, what activity the family is engaging in, and what they would like to chat about in the clip. Eliana and her sister are usually in the background and interjecting their father's vlogs with their own opinions and thoughts without prompt, or are occasionally introduced to the audience and invited to record on camera together.

In Eliana's debut cover video (realitychangers, 2013), she joins her father and older sister to sing the choruses and bridge of the song. Throughout the song her father strums the guitar while giving her affirmation when she sings by nodding, smiling, and flashing a thumbs-up at her. At one point when she appeared to be too serious and nervous while singing, her father sticks out his tongue to humour her and Eliana smiles in acknowledgement. At the end of the song, before the father finishes strumming the outro, Eliana exclaims: "we're done! Yay! But I did a good job. I singed . . .", then points out that she made a mistake while singing. Her father responds: "you guys did a great job. It's not supposed to be perfect. It's just . . . plain fun". Towards the end of the video a two-minute clip features Eliana goofing around, dancing, and singing a children's song, and her demeanour is markedly more casual and relaxed having completed the 'formal' cover. At the very end the father prompts everyone to wave goodbye to the camera, but Eliana has run outside of the frame. He calls out to her and points to a spot in front of the tripod where she has to stand, explaining that the camera films in a single direction and that she cannot be seen even though she is waving to the camera off-screen. Eliana is successfully coaxed and comes on screen to say goodbye.

In a second video (realitychangers, 2014), Eliana, her sister, and her father are lying on a bed recording via handheld camera. Her father initially focusses the lens on himself, but Eliana spots her partial face in the frame (possibly via the camera display screen) and cheekily makes funny faces to the camera lens. When her father notices this a few seconds later, he shifts the camera to include more of Eliana in the frame. Realising this, Eliana breaks out into more exaggerated funny faces. At one point she playfully obscures the camera lens with a piece of paper, to which her father says, “baby, stop. Don’t cover the camera”. Eliana turns her head to look at her father, as if in acknowledgement, then returns to making goofy faces on camera. Towards the end of the video, Eliana play-wrestles with her dad and accidentally kicks the camera out of her father’s hand. As the camera rolls onto the bed and then the floor, her father is heard exclaiming “Ah! Dropped the camera!”. He swiftly picks it up to wrap up the video, and Eliana wrestles to get into the camera frame again to bid her imagined audience goodbye.

Across the videos on her channel, Eliana engages in a mixture of ‘staged’ videos where she must behave and sing cover songs, and ‘casual’ videos where she is given the liberty to goof off on camera. The latter snippets have become known as ‘Eli cam’ to her viewers, as Eliana often dominates the camera lens and, in some instances, even handles the camera herself by ‘taking over’ the filming. In other videos, when she is in the background and is called to film, Eliana has opted out verbally or gesturally, choosing instead to continue the activity she is focussed on. Her father almost always obliges and leaves her be. Eliana displays a learned camera presence as ‘technical’ instructions (i.e., how to face the camera, where to point to the camera so as not to obscure the lens) given by her father in earlier videos are always elegantly displayed in her body language in later videos. In general, the parental involvement in Eliana’s videos is moderate as she is free to come and go into her father’s vlogs as she wishes, but there are many instances where her behaviour is clearly rehearsed for the more ‘formal’ song covers. Her experiences of growing up on camera include a host of technical (i.e., how to use the camera) and social (i.e., who her audience possibly is) literacies as instructed to her by her father and unassumingly caught on video in their casual conversations, and she appears to have absorbed such tacit knowledge by exhibiting confidence on screen.

### **Dash**

Dash is usually incorporated into his influencer mother’s mostly sponsored videos. By way of advertising the sponsored message, his mother interacts with him on camera while engaging in an activity using the sponsored product or service. When Dash was younger and needed assistance sitting in a single spot to be filmed, he was often seen being coaxed by the disembodied arms of his domestic helper from off-screen, or seemingly being bribed or distracted with food to stay in the frame. When Dash was slightly older, these gestural negotiations were managed by his mother, or he would be strapped into a baby highchair in order to stay in the frame. When he was learning to be verbal, his mother would occasionally further engage him in the content by prompting him to respond to their interactions with the product they are testing on camera (i.e., is this nice? Do you want?). He would reply meekly but rarely addresses the camera directly. At times, Dash would exclaim words and short phrases (i.e., Chocolate! Nice!), to which his mother usually swiftly acknowledges him, then attempts to weave this ‘intrusion’ back into the narrative script for the vlog.

In a video sponsored by printer brand Epson (Xiaxue, 2018), Dash’s mother attempts to bridge her promotional spiel with updates on her child’s growth milestones, explaining how their recreational activities have changed now that Dash is four and a half years old. They engage in handicrafts with paper cutouts printed by the printer featured on screen; then the scene cuts to another clip where the influencer mother promotes the product in detail. Dash returns later in the video and is seen completing spelling exercise sheets, presumably printed with the sponsored product, with the help of his mother. His mother is seen guiding his hand to retrieve the paper

from the printer and, when he fidgets, she places him front and centre of the camera by having him stand between her knees while she sits and ‘clenches’ him in place with her thighs. Subsequently, Dash is seen going off-camera, pressing his face against the lens in a close-up blurred image, and prancing around the couch behind his mother, uninterested in the activity.

In a second video on Xiaxue’s dedicated YouTube series (Clicknetwork, 2017), she works through a try-out/tutorial of novelty Japanese miniature home cooking by herself. After the 8-minute mark, she transits to include Dash in her video: “so now that everything is done, I’ve got Dash here with me, and to see whether I can trick him into eating it … now we’re going to see his reaction to the tiny little food”. Dash’s mother introduces him to the various foods she has made, asking which one he wants to try. He makes his selection and slowly reaches towards an item, but his arms are repeatedly held back or pushed back by his mother, who also shushes him when he interjects with verbal responses. Instead, Dash’s mother quizzes him on the names of the foods, and only after he correctly guesses them for the camera is he rewarded with the items he had selected. During the outro, Dash is noticeably uninterested in filming as he leans away from his mother, nears the edge of the frame, appears visibly restless, looks out of frame, and fidgets around. However, he is unable to extract himself this time as he is sat in a baby highchair. As his mother gives her closing words, she wraps her arms around Dash, brings him into the centre of the frame and closer to her, then waves her audience goodbye while Dash’s eyes are still focussed off-screen.

Across the videos featuring Dash on both channels, he is often seen being enticed by rewards for compliance to stay in the frame and continue filming. In some videos he is front and centre of the screen but not engaged with the filming despite his mother’s cajoling, choosing instead to fixate on his own activities. Dash very rarely makes eye contact with the camera or acknowledges it, perhaps because of his young age, but appears to be thrust in front of it nonetheless. In general, the parental involvement in Dash’s videos is extremely high, especially in front of the camera, where he is positioned to be in specific postures and prompted to respond in specific ways (e.g., verbally, gesturally, etc.). As many of these videos are sponsored collaborations, Dash’s appearances are often used to promote content even though it is not clear to audiences if he is formally or contractually engaged in the filming of the product.

### **Pre-School Stars on YouTube**

The videos discussed in this chapter feature three internet-native stars on YouTube when they are preschool-aged, between three and five. The children are seen interacting with technology *on* screen and technology *as* screen, through guidance from and negotiations with their parents. They exhibit different degrees of self-awareness with the camera, various levels of digital literacies as to how such devices and apps work, and a range of capacities to exert and emote their willingness to participate in filming and technology use, regardless of whether their parents honour it. Each case study features a child who is embedded in distinct YouTube ecologies. Ye Bin is of viral video fame and continues to be filmed in daily vlogs very casually; on YouTube her fame is primarily monetised through her channel’s embedded advertisements. Eliana is a child in a family influencer unit and engages in both staged videos displaying her talents as a singer and casual daily vlogs where she appears to be a regular kindergartener; on YouTube her fame is primarily monetised through her family’s influencer endorsements and advertisements. Dash is a micro-microcelebrity and features heavily in his influencer mother’s various sponsored contents; on YouTube his fame is primarily monetised through his mother’s extensive array of advertorials and partnerships with brands who use his likeness as their ambassador and model.

Taken as archetypes of their respective genres, these preschool stars demonstrate the nuance across the various models of child microcelebrities on YouTube, which contextualise and explain the different levels of parental intrusion into their children’s lives with (techniques

of) filming, and different intensities of parental acknowledgement of their children's exertion of agency regarding acceptance or refusal of technology: as Ye Bin sprang into fame from a viral video where she was known for her childlike innocence, she is still usually filmed in situ as an ordinary preschooler, and her videos often contain cues where she rejects being filmed through gestural responses; as Eliana was gradually introduced as a new member of a family influencer unit with musical talents, her videos comprise interactions with her father, with whom she actively negotiates the extent of her interest in being filmed through verbal and gestural responses; as Dash was groomed as a micro-microcelebrity from birth, his videos feature him at times positioned as a 'prop' to showcase various sponsored products, whether or not he seems to be interested in them.

This study of the front stage of child microcelebrity labour on YouTube serves as a foray into understanding the backstage operations of these prolific preschoolers. As access to contracts and the backstage of such labour is currently restricted, it is hoped that a focus on the end product and output will provide a better appreciation of how such preschool stars on YouTube are being performed, postured, and profited from online.

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