



People often ask me what it's like to be an anthropologist of digital cultures. Well-meaning conversationalists want to know what an 'Indiana Jones' of the 2020s would look like, while some have passed questioning remarks asking if all I do is 'be addicted to the internet'.

ARTICLE BY: PROF CRYSTAL ABIDIN

Child Influencers

How children have become entangled with social media commerce

I must confess that there are days when I enjoy handing out my 'go-to' analogy to these well-meaning enquiries. Indiana Jones is an archaeologist (also known as a 'physical anthropologist') who digs to unearth ancient artifacts in order to learn more about a civilisation. A social-cultural anthropologist, like me, weaves through in-person and virtual networks to uncover practices in, and beliefs about, digital worlds to

IMAGE: © Tanaphong Toochinda-Unsplash

Internet celebrities are generally media formats — anything that can be conveyed digitally — that *attain prominence and popularity native to the internet*

learn more about contemporary human cultures. The tactility of our craft may differ, but our goals are essentially the same – to understand society through a systematic study of cultural practice.

The similarities with the world of Indiana Jones does not end there. When I first began studying and theorising about how ‘internet famous’ people ‘do’



shame and humility in rather systematic ways, I never expected my deep dive into the scholarship to take me back to placenta burial rituals and communal systems of kinship and mores in far-away villages.¹

This disclosure is intended as persuasion – the social sciences *are* a science, albeit a humanistic one that often requires significant investment of the scholar in the milieu of the life-worlds we study.

The ‘addiction to the internet’, so to speak, is in reality a rigorous set of practices and principles guided by research-based methodology, grounded in the ethnographic commitment to immerse ourselves in the environment of the participants whom we study, to ‘see from where they stand’. One of the fields that I have devoted the last 15 years researching is the phenomenon of internet celebrity.

What is an internet celebrity anyway?

As I note in my book *Internet Celebrity*,^{2,3} at the most basic level, internet celebrities are generally media formats — anything that can be conveyed digitally — that *attain prominence and popularity native to the internet*. In

other words, the ‘origin story’ of their fame is based online.

Internet celebrities can be people who (unwittingly) lend their face to be the next meme, people who experience virality overnight (for good or bad reasons), or people who intentionally court fame then try to monetise it (successfully or not).

It is most useful to define internet celebrities by their *ability to hold high visibility*. In a very saturated network of

platforms and trends that are continuously vying for our attention, internet celebrities are able to cut through the noise and static of our already-saturated digital landscape, and navigate platform algorithms and filters to reach an already-sated online audience.

And this is a form of ‘visibility labour’ that can involve significant planning and work.⁴ But the nature and morality of this visibility is flexible – this high visibility can be attributed to fame or infamy, positive or negative attention, talent and skill or otherwise, and can be either sustained or transient, intentional or by happenstance, monetised or not.

It is at this juncture that an elite class of internet celebrities emerge, based on a combination of attributes about their visibility. Enter the ‘influencer’, a professional internet celebrity, who intentionally pursues online fame as a career or sustainable monetising opportunity, by curating visibility that is generally founded on positive attention, and some form of talent and skill to keep audiences hooked.

From influencers to child influencers

In 2008 I was first acquainted with one of the earliest iterations of influencers known as ‘commercial bloggers’ – people who blog and could earn an income from it. My longitudinal anthropological fieldwork comprised tens of



thousands of hours of traditional and digital participant observation, personal interviews and annual follow-ups with hundreds of industry insiders, and multilingual archival and press research across the Asia Pacific region. In a sense, I grew up alongside and together with many of these first-generation influencers.

The first cohort of young women I met with were in their late-teens to early-twenties, who were experimenting with selling used clothing on blog platforms like LiveJournal, Xanga, Blogspot, and the like. They would often model their wares by posting photographs of themselves out and about with friends, and this form of online diarising quickly evolved into popular sites where young women would ask

blogshop 'owners' and 'models' for lifestyle-related advice.^{5,6}

During this time, I also came to study mummy bloggers who began their blogging 'careers' as online diary-writers and trusted advice columnists, before being approached by various baby- and child-related brands to produce reviews and editorials of their products and services. While the reciprocity was initially based on the exchange of complementary

ENTER THE 'INFLUENCER', A PROFESSIONAL INTERNET CELEBRITY, WHO INTENTIONALLY PURSUES ONLINE FAME AS A CAREER OR SUSTAINABLE MONETISING OPPORTUNITY

goods and services for a review, the market grew competitive very quickly and said mummy bloggers pivoted to monetising through paid brand endorsements, sponsorships, and partnerships.

As a young scholar, I had the privilege of immersing myself in this world, even visiting the homes of such mummy bloggers to witness the arduous task of coordinating toddlers and kindergarteners for photo opportunities.^{7,8}



Artist impression of a meet-and-greet at a child influencer's first birthday.

Artist: Ardine Keyla. Commissioned: Crystal Abidin

But it was when the first cohort of young influencers began transiting through life stages – including navigating teen pregnancies – that my intrigue with child internet celebrities intensified.

In these surprise birth announcements, the celebrity of the would-be child began as viral sonograms of foetuses, circulating among the fast-accumulating fandom of 'the bump'. These opportunities were also soft launches for influencers to announce both the new social media handle for their unborn child that was already 'reserved' across platforms, and also the new dedicated hashtag to track the progress of their pregnancy.⁹

In my research, the first of these 'second generation influencers' emerged in 2013, and by 2015, it was becoming a norm for influencer mums (and their followers) to brainstorm combinations of first and middle names for their children with the aim of curating a unique hashtag that tracks

their pregnancy, and later on, the life of their children on social media.

The mid-2010s also saw the beginnings of fan meet-and-greets for child influencers. It was not uncommon for these events to be held in partnership with various sponsors and brands, presenting opportunities for advertising for anything from venue rental and party decor to catering and children's apparel.

One such example in my research was a ticketed event in commemoration of a child influencer's 1st birthday, which saw long lines of adults in the queue for a photo opportunity with the toddler in a shopping mall. The child was strapped into a baby highchair, positioned in between their influencer mum and a rotating crowd of adult fans, and surrounded by a throng of event photographers.

The vlog recording the day's events revealed brief snippets of the toddler's hesitance, with their torso often leaning away from the crowd of strangers, and

arms reaching towards their mum to seek assurance. Yet, the discourse at such events, and indeed in the comment sections of the vlogs, was usually starstruck and celebratory.

As young female influencers transited into the parenting genre, and mummy bloggers expanded to various platforms and content formats, there was an explosion of video content featuring cohorts of young child influencers. And while babies and young toddlers might have been easier to posture for a video frame, the playfulness of kindergarteners often required more persuasion strategies. My longitudinal digital ethnography on child influencers spanning a decade pointed to some subtle but telling snapshots of body language that became points of concern.

Wriggly toddlers are seen being held down to mum's lap or hugged tightly so as to remain featured in a sponsored video, and the resistance of escaping kindergarteners was overcome by being clenched between mum's thighs so the child remained in the center of the frame.¹⁰

And yet, so successful was the genre of child influencers that everyday ordinary parents also began diarising and vlogging their everyday domesticities for a chance to pivot into monetisation opportunities. The field of family influencers was flourishing rapidly.

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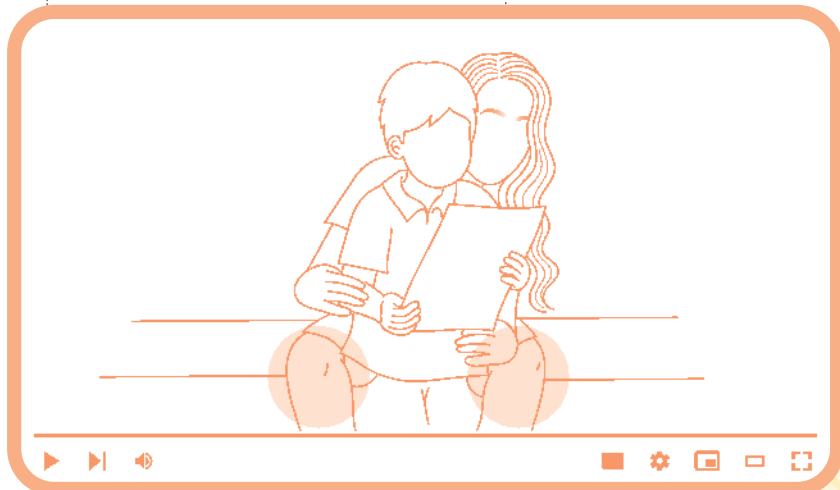
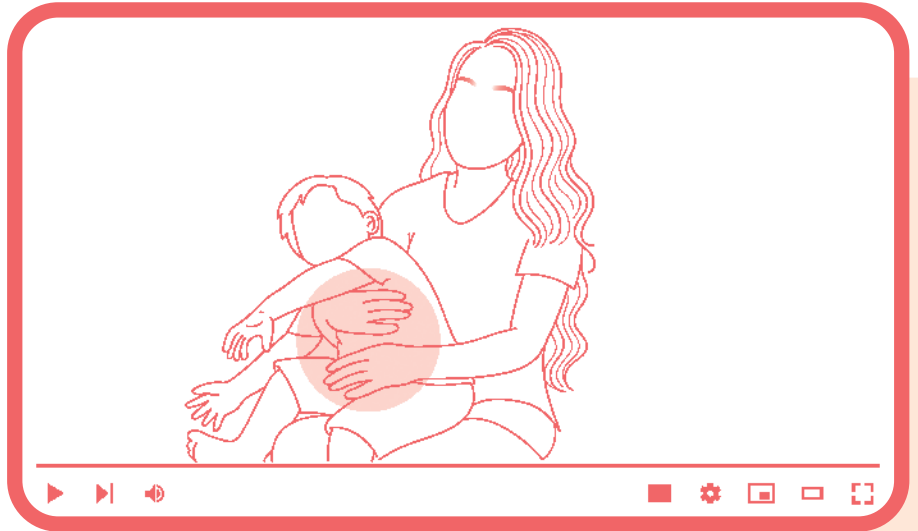
Pushback and surveillance from followers

It wasn't long before the previously celebratory tone around child influencers was interrupted by the most efficient watchdogs in the industry – the followers.

Across dozens of online fora, fans and anti-fans came together to 'analyse' child influencer videos frame-by-frame, 'scrutinise' enlarged versions of screen-grabs, and 'corroborate' storylines and perspectives across multiple platforms and fandom communities. They were among the most ardent detectives of child, parenting, and family influencer faux pas, exerting pressure and demanding accountability from the grassroots.

Some family influencers appeared to be responsive. On YouTube in particular, I followed networks of family influencer channels who appeared to acknowledge the concerns of followers who feared that young children were being 'forced to film'. There was a new wave of parents who strategically deployed both 'anchor' and 'filler' content to assuage worries.

'Anchor' content was their primary genre, like parenting tutorials, singing covers,



Artist impressions of body language to keep a child in the frame of a YouTube video.

Artist: Arline Keyla. Commissioned: Crystal Abidin

‘Calibrated amateurism’, where the influencers work hard to produce a contrived form of authenticity, by deploying the aesthetic of an amateur

and short comedic skits. These were produced with more care and effort, utilising higher-end equipment such as moving image recorders, audio mixers, lighting, and props, and were published on a regular schedule. ‘Filler’ content was the b-side, like bloopers, lifestyle vlogs, or direct responses to fan mail.

Paradoxically, these were intentionally crafted and edited to give the impression of being spontaneous, raw, and unfiltered, aimed at allowing followers to feel they have entered the intimate space of ‘behind-the-scenes’ with the family, albeit one that is (not so secretly) curated.

This was a demonstration of ‘calibrated amateurism’¹¹, where the influencers work hard to produce a contrived form of authenticity, by deploying the aesthetic of an amateur, whether or not they really are amateurs by status or practice. For instance, end-video bloopers were spliced in as snapshots of how much ‘fun’ these young children were having during the filming process, and daily vlogs sometimes featured ‘parenting moments’ where the disciplining of a child was ‘conveniently’ captured by a camera that happened to still be rolling.

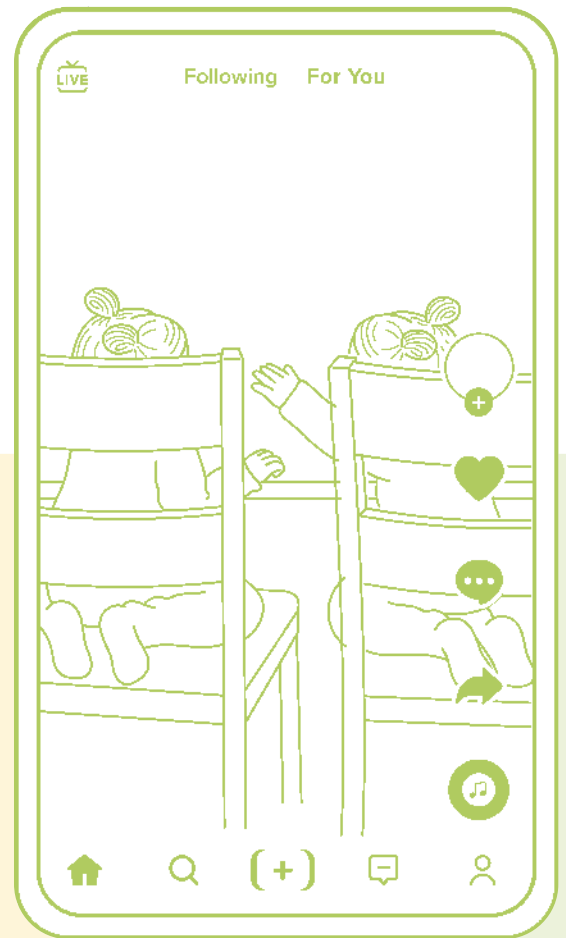
In reality, these opportunities were often used by family influencers to pre-emptively dispel concerns from followers, and mitigate accusations that they were ‘exploiting’ their children.

On TikTok, some of the responses to

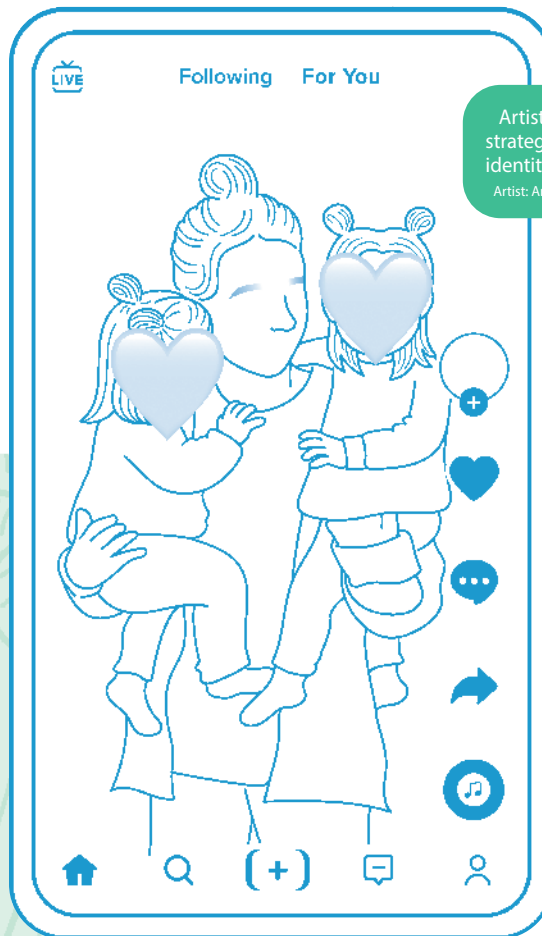
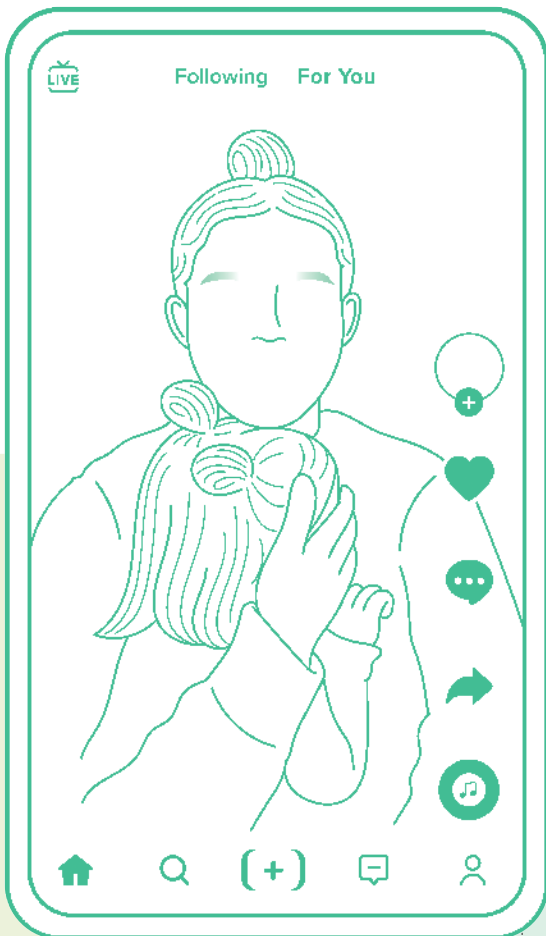
audience pushback were more direct and satisfying. Against the backdrop of prolonged self-isolation around the world during COVID-19, parents were expending unprecedented periods of time with their young children at home. During this season, many viral TikTok trends focused on young children and their quirks.

Parents documented their babies’ milestones with excruciating detail at a massive scale. This was in part as an act of communion and solidarity with others around the world who were struggling with parenting and work-from-home duties, and in part as part of the trend of ‘pandemic babies’.¹²

‘Pandemic babies’ is a popular group of audio memes that register the daily lives and milestones of the thousands and thousands of babies born during the lockdown. It functions also as an ‘inside joke’ that babies born during this time were exceptional, as they appeared to be hitting their milestones at a rapid pace. In all likelihood, these propositions can be explained by the increase in time spent both nurturing and documenting the child.



But it was during this time that conversations around the privacy and rights of the child were heightened on TikTok, as all at once at a massive scale globally, babies on the platform were turned into memes, ‘befriending’ each other in collaborations, and even having their likeness used in compromising ‘role-play’ content. TikTokers began calling out viral trends, challenges, and hashtags that were centred on children,



Artist impressions of strategies to conceal the facial identity of children on TikTok.

Artist: Ardine Keyla. Commissioned: Crystal Abidin

and invited parents to reconsider their practices.

A strong response was sighted from one of the biggest TikTok stars from the 'pandemic babies' cohort. A mum who had been documenting the first year of her twin girls' lives several times a day on TikTok suddenly pivoted in her content framing.

While she was most known for carrying both girls in her arms and

filming content with their faces clearly visible via her front-facing camera phone, one day a TikTok post showed a different angle featuring the girls from the back. The toddlers were seated on wooden chairs, and the backing of the chair conveniently obscured both their faces from the camera. Initial responses from the usual crowd of followers remarked on how much the girls had grown, and how they wanted to see their faces.

with their faces obscured, this time with mum superimposing emoji on the short video to conceal them from forehead to chin. By now, some angry fans were demanding an explanation for the sudden pivot. But it was clear from then on, that the influencer mum had decided to prioritise the safety and privacy of her young children in light of the changing discourse and pushback on TikTok.

Soon, another update days later showed the mum cradling one toddler in her arms with a hand covering her daughter's face. Some comments assumed that the toddler was being rocked to sleep for a nap, but others joked that the mum was 'withholding' her toddler's face to create suspense for the day. After all, seeing the faces of her twins was the highlight for many followers who made daily check-ins.

However, later in the month, yet another TikTok framed both girls

Babies on the platform were turned into memes, 'befriending' each other in collaborations, and even having their likeness used in compromising 'role-play' content

Young children were seen holding up burgers larger than their tiny faces...or plainly serving as ‘cute bait’ by modelling with goods unrelated to the age cohort, like tech devices

Through various commentaries and further TikTok posts, the influencer mum offered that she would no longer show her daughters’ faces as they were growing into their maturing and more ‘recognisable’ bodies.

As the child, parenting, and family influencer genres became increasingly lucrative, influencers from other genres who were not yet at this life stage also desired a slice of the pie. This saw the emergence of influencers who were roping in young nieces, nephews, and cousins into their content, to increase their opportunities with more diverse brand engagements. But evidenced by the pushback from followers in critical comments sections and viral social

media posts, these tie-ups were not always appropriate. Young children were seen holding up burgers larger than their tiny faces to advertise fast food restaurants, or plainly serving as ‘cute bait’ by modelling with goods unrelated to the age cohort, like tech devices and make-up.¹³

Worst still, the surveillance from watchful followers revealed troubling accusations of parents who were outrightly exploiting their children in their influencer engagements.¹⁴

On the ‘lower’ end of the spectrum, parents were called out for subjecting their children to pranks and viral challenges that were emotionally scarring or physically dangerous. On the ‘higher’

end of the spectrum, parents were found to withhold meals and rest until their children had filmed the planned content.

Where is the governance on child influencers?

As part of my remit as Director of the Influencer Ethnography Research Lab at Curtin University, we will soon be launching a report benchmarking the governance of influencers – and child influencers, in particular – in the Asia Pacific region.

Conducted over two years, our multi-lingual team surveyed government rules and regulations, industry best practice and guidelines, news articles and press archives to piece together a ‘stocktake’ of the current governance in place.

While I have previously studied the limitations of child labour laws in the traditional celebrity industry, like the Coogan Law in the USA,¹⁵ this survey is aimed specifically at the increasingly specialised industry of child, parenting, and family influencers, who are still in the midst of institutionalising in this region.

Here is a teaser: In one country, child and minor influencers were mostly prioritised in sections of legislation that defined their role as ‘workers’ and their paid labour as ‘work’, then pointed to their responsibilities as potential



IMAGE: © Lavi Perchik-Unsplash



taxpayers under their family unit.

In one country, legislation considered (child) influencers to be workers with rights, but only if they were registered or contracted to an influencer talent agency (or similar) and could have these rights enacted for them. At the time of writing, freelancers were excluded from these rights as there were no proper channels to oversee their work or institutionally enact the law.

THE GENERAL CONSENSUS IS THAT THE CHILD, PARENTING, AND FAMILY INFLUENCERS ARE HERE TO STAY, AND BOUND TO EXPAND EXPONENTIALLY

In one country, children and labour rights were discussed only in the context of family businesses, such as running a restaurant or a home-based business, but there was not yet any applicable legislation for when the family business is in the influencer industry.

While further governance is being developed in the Asia Pacific region, some influencer agencies have stepped in to mitigate issues and enhance the wellbeing of child influencers. Among the industry

insiders whom I have interviewed over the years, the general consensus is that the child, parenting, and family influencers are here to stay, and bound to expand exponentially.

Most of the talent managers believe that it is optimistic to push for the sudden and complete eradication of children and minors from the industry, and fear that any harsh new regulations might only encourage a 'black market' of 'under the table' business engagements.

Instead, these agencies are offering educational courses and training to parents of (aspiring) child influencers, and parent and family influencer units. These cover 'parent-as-manager' training, information on how to formally

IMAGE: © Steven Libralon-Unsplash



Some family influencer units now insist on 'no show' clauses that allow them to pull out from an engagement at late notice if their young child happens to change their mind

register themselves as a business, how to manage tax declarations and advertising disclosures, and some advice on how to make the content creation experience an educational and/or enjoyable experience for the child.

But take this optimism as caution, as these are often boutique and

supplementary offerings, and there is not yet a systematic way to dispense such training at scale throughout the industry.

As an ethnographer who has been studying the field for some time, the rare glimmer of hope for me comes from the initiatives undertaken by influencers themselves. Some of the influencers I have interviewed throughout the years have constructed their own ethos and principles around how to manage children in the industry. These insights are also forthcoming in a series of papers on vernacular and grassroots strategies in the child influencer industry.

One self-professed 'mumager' (mum as manager) confessed that one of the trickiest parts of her job is persuading her now primary-school aged children to dress in coordinated 'family outfits' when she needs to snap content for Instagram. Her children exploded into the

limelight when they first appeared on a reality TV show at ages 4 and 6. Seven years on, and their internet celebrity has continued in child influencer and family influencer brand partnerships.

In her extensive list of self-curated guidelines, she asserts that content creation for influencer activity is now limited to one day per weekend, so that her children can cultivate an established routine and healthy mindset for work. She noted her spouse, who only makes very occasional appearances in their influencer content, has become more agreeable with their influencer engagements as it is no longer 'spilling over' into all aspects of life. (For the record, the children have since agreed to the weekly 'dress-up day', and the activity has been redefined as a family bonding experience)

Several mumagers recounted to me their criteria when considering whether to accept a brand partnership. Is the product or service specifically for the children's market? Are the brand's values coherent with their own? Are the PR liaison officers of the brand personable, or parents themselves? The list is long, and the vetting process is often an iterative and corroborative labour across a growing network of parents who are becoming savvy about their rights.

As a result, some mumagers are partnering with agencies and managers to negotiate



Artist impression of family outfit coordination on Instagram.

Artist: Ardine Keyla. Commissioned: Crystal Abidin

new benchmarks in their contractual obligations to clients. Some family influencer units now insist on 'no show' clauses that allow them to pull out from an engagement at late notice if their young child happens to change their mind about participation, with the agreement that they will make up for it in pre-contracted ways.

This shields influencers from the previously applied penalties imposed by brands, which saw parents literally forcing their unwilling (and often wailing) children to 'show up' at events regardless of their emotional state. To prioritise the fun in taking part in these influencer engagements, other family influencers are insisting upon 'pairings', where brands must hire them collectively for partnerships, so that the children from both families have each other for company while the parents can share the load of administration, content curation, and also child care.

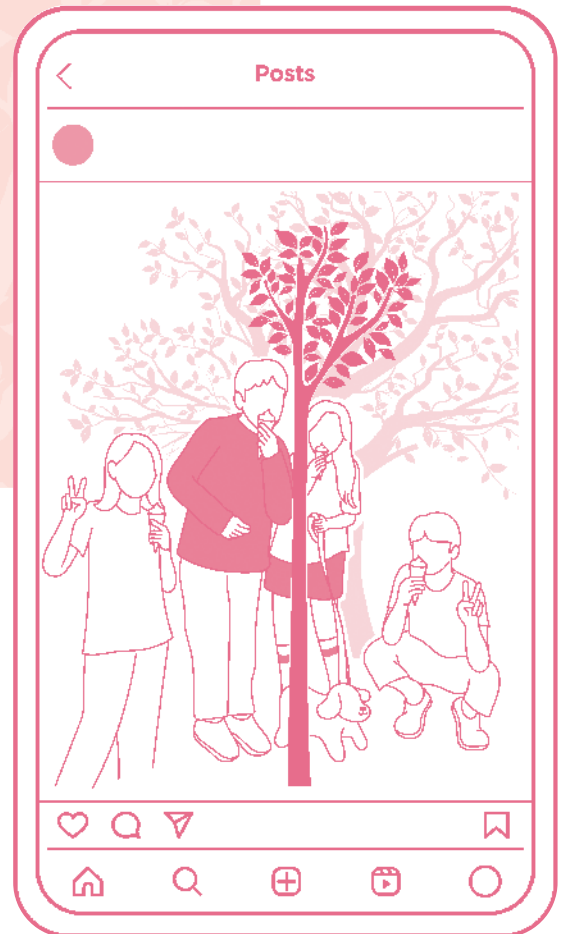
At the end of the day, the governance over the child influencer industry is most effective as a lattice comprising government legislation and regulations, industry and platform guidelines and recommendations, influencer initiatives and self-policing, and grassroots pressures.¹⁶

Governments and industry may move a lot more slowly in enacting change, but their reach is much more

Artist impression of two pairs of siblings in a 'family influencer pair' at events.

Artist: Ardine Keyla. Commissioned: Crystal Abidin

systematic and comprehensive. Influencers and grassroots surveillance are highly responsive and reactive, but their practice and implementation can be haphazard or arbitrary. But as a collective, one part of the lattice can fill in the gaps while others are in limbo, pushing for continuous change in an industry that is only set to grow.¹⁷



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Please Note: Photos used in this article are stock images and do not represent any of the children referred to in the piece.

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