

CHILDREN WORKING ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS: THE PHENOMENON OF KIDFLUENCING

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Abstract

With the rise of digital platforms, children's online visibility has created new economic benefits and risks. The concept of "kidfluencer" (child influencer) represents a new form of child labor, where children become productive assets in the economic relationships between families, platforms, and advertisers. The use of children as content creators on social media platforms, mostly under parental control, presents itself as the modern digital exploitation of traditional child labor. The phenomenon of kidfluencer, where children perform in content production processes directed or directly controlled by their parents, take part in brand collaborations, and assume a commercial identity, has led to multi-layered debates in the context of child labor, child employment, privacy, developmental risks, and legal protection. The literature defines kidfluencerism as "the new face of child labor"; there is broad consensus that children are being monetized in the digital environment, exposed to privacy violations, and at increased risk of long-term psychosocial problems. In this context, factors such as children aged 0–13 being developmentally incapable of giving informed consent, their personal data being displayed in public by their parents, and their digital footprints becoming permanent, point to a new form of exploitation that constitutes a comprehensive violation of children's rights.

This study aims to analyse the phenomenon of children active on digital platforms, particularly the concept of kidfluencerism, from an academic perspective and to highlight the fundamental ethical and legal problems that this situation raises. By addressing kidfluencerism within the framework of social policy, children's rights, and digital labour theories, it aims to comprehensively examine the social, legal, and ethical problems that this phenomenon creates both in Turkey and internationally.

Keywords: Child Labor, Kidfluencer, Social Media, Advertisement

1. Introduction

With the advancement of internet technologies today, digital platforms have become easily accessible spaces for both consumers and organizations; this has made online communities and influencers important stakeholders for brands. Brands gain a competitive advantage through influencer collaborations, and digital word-of-mouth marketing is increasingly being used as a strategic tool. In this process, influencers are also transforming their own content and interaction practices in order to maintain and strengthen their influence over their followers (Altar Yavuz & Yilmaz, 2019: 180). This situation has given rise to the phenomenon of “child influencers” or kidfluencers, a term that is becoming increasingly established in the literature. Kidfluencerism refers to children creating economic value through brand collaborations, product promotions, and advertising revenue by producing content on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (Abidin, 2018). This new form of work demonstrates the changing structure of traditional child labor, expanding children's online creativity on the one hand, while on the other hand increasing their working hours, privacy violations, negative psychological effects, and turning children into an economic commodity.

Child labor is one of the oldest social phenomena in human history and was known as a natural part of the family production unit before the industrial revolution. With the industrial revolution, child labor underwent a radical change and was employed in factories as a low-cost, easily controllable labor force. Since the 1980s, with globalization and neoliberal economic policies, children from poor families have continued to participate in the workforce in the fight against economic inequality. Child workers, particularly in agriculture, manufacturing, and services, continue to be present on digital platforms, which have become widespread with technological developments.

Today, these children, known as kidfluencers, do not merely produce entertainment content; they collaborate with brands, generate advertising revenue, and participate in professional content production processes managed by their families. In this way, children become famous on the internet, while also becoming a source of income for their families (Gözen & Saldırdak, 2023:117). The phenomenon of kidfluencerism, which represents the commercialization of childhood, highlights the transformation of labor relations within the family and the exploitation of emotional labor. Parents' methods of persuasion, such as insistence and the use of rewards and punishments to exert emotional pressure, can have psychological and social effects on children. The International Labor Organization (ILO), in its 2019 report, states that child labor on digital platforms has not yet been measured but is a rapidly growing field.

Behind children's economic activities derived from media opportunities on digital platforms lie numerous problems, including the violation of children's privacy, issues of consent and ethics, deprivation of children's rights, and the commercialization of the concept of "childhood" by families or advertisers. In this context, this study approaches kidfluencerhood as a new form of child labor in the digital economy. It aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of the concept's emergence, economic functioning, risks, international regulations, and legal gaps in Turkey. Thus, it seeks to clarify the social policy requirements for protecting children working on digital platforms.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Phenomenon of Kidfluencer

With the development of new communication technologies, the concept of labor has also undergone a significant transformation; as production processes have become digitalized, labor has increasingly taken on an invisible, fragmented, and data-driven structure. This transformation has brought discussions of digital labor to the forefront and has given rise to a new labor regime in which economic value is created through users' online activities. The concept of digital labor refers to labor that contributes to production and service processes through information and communication technologies, and is used particularly in the context of social media, online workspaces, and the platform economy. Activities such as content production, interaction management, and data production on social media platforms point to a digital capitalist model in which users participate in labor for free or without security. One of the most vulnerable aspects of this model is the phenomenon of kidfluencerism, where children are positioned as content producers. Children become involved in digital labor processes under family guidance or algorithmic visibility pressure, failing to receive compensation for their labor while also being positioned in an insecure working environment from legal and ethical perspectives. Thus, the digitalized labor structure reveals new forms of child labor, making kidfluencerism a current and critical extension of digital labor discussions.

The concept of influencer is used for people who are able to generate interest in a particular topic, product or service through social media posts and who have the capacity to influence the purchasing behavior of potential consumers, especially through their recommendations (Oxford Learners Dictionaries, 2025). Influencers create economic value through brand promotions, product placement and content production, and in this process they produce digital labor. The concept of "kidfluencer" is derived from the combination of the words 'kid' and "influencer" to refer to children who influence large audiences by producing content on the internet and has

become established in the literature as such. In this conceptual framework, kidfluencers are defined as child content producers who have a high number of followers on social media platforms, gain visibility with the content they produce, and earn income mostly through sponsored posts (Masterson, 2020: 6).

The concept of kidfluencer is a term that can be expressed as child phenomenon or child influence. In the literature, it is possible to come across expressions such as “child influencers who have large followings on social media, produce posts containing advertising through sponsored links, product placement, and brand collaborations, and thus earn money.” While kidfluencers carry out similar promotional and content creation activities as influencers, the fundamental difference is that this process occurs at a young age and the content is mostly created or directed by parents. Since there are no established age or qualification criteria for influencer status under the current legal framework, there are currently no legal restrictions on children engaging in these activities (Özer & Alpsoy, 2024: 244-245).

Children defined as kidfluencers (mostly under the age of 16) differ from child actors in that they do not need acting lessons or connections related to such lessons. If these children's families have the right ideas, social media accounts, filming skills, and luck, they can turn their children into potential sources of fame and income (Masterson, 2020:3). While the high income generated by kidfluencing activities is attractive to parents, it makes children more vulnerable to rights violations created by the digital environment. As income increases, it becomes easier to overlook the rights violations experienced by children; this situation makes it controversial, in terms of the responsibility to protect children's rights, for parents to open social media accounts on behalf of their children and engage in commercial activities. Indeed, the extent to which this responsibility is fulfilled is unclear. In this process, children face risks such as privacy violations, child labor, digital abuse, deprivation of basic opportunities such as education, and physical and psychological harm caused by economic exploitation. Consequently, the commercialization of childhood poses serious threats to children's well-being, autonomy, and development in a manner befitting human dignity (Baloğlu & Budak, 2025: 229).

The literature on this subject emphasizes that kidfluencers are a special group that should be protected both as digital labor producers and in terms of children's rights. The phenomenon of kidfluencing has multi-layered consequences, such as the commercialization of childhood experiences, the restructuring of intra-family production dynamics, and the transformation of children into economic subjects. In its 2019 report, the International Labor Organization (ILO)

states that child labor on digital platforms cannot yet be measured but is a rapidly growing field. Research shows that social media content featuring children under the age of 13 receives approximately three times more views than posts without children. Parents dressing their children like adults, encouraging them to use language inappropriate for their age, or advertising products they do not actually use through their children, paves the way for the rapid growth of this industry. The high earning potential makes this area an attractive source of income for many families with access to the internet and cameras (Gözen & Şaldırdak, 2023:116). For example, a seven-year-old child who reviews toys on a YouTube channel is at the top of the list of highest earners on YouTube. Ryan ToysReview, a child who plays with toys in his backyard and reviews them, has earned \$29.8 million (McMahon, 2018). This situation highlights the popularity of earning income through channels such as YouTube, which means child stars no longer need Hollywood.

While the paid employment of children in the media sector creates the possibility of exploitation through their labor, the fact that children are not yet capable of deciding whether to work or not forces them to act under the control of their parents (Tekin Yılmaz, 2014: 228-229). The production process of kidfluencer content is mostly under parental control. Although posts are presented as snippets from children's daily lives or moments when they are playing, questions such as under what conditions, in what timeframe, and under what pressures the content is prepared, whether children voluntarily participate in these processes, and whether the content is natural or part of a professional production are important. The answers to these questions reveal that kidfluencerism is not merely a digital entertainment space; on the contrary, it is closely related to multidimensional issues such as child labor, children's rights, privacy, abuse, and the commercialization of childhood.

Therefore, kidfluencerism should be approached not only within the scope of social media stardom but also as a phenomenon that needs to be reevaluated in the context of child labor and children's rights.

2.2. Children's Rights on Social Media within the Legal Framework

Throughout the historical process, child labor has transformed along with the production relations, consumption patterns, technological developments and social structure of the period; changes in economic, political and cultural dynamics have directly affected the nature and scope of child labor. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on November 20, 1989, forms the basis of international protection mechanisms against child labor. Article 32 of the Convention guarantees the protection of

children against economic exploitation and stipulates that States must take the necessary legislative, administrative and protective measures against all forms of work that may harm the health, education, physical and mental development of children.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has been working on minimizing child labor and eliminating poor conditions. According to ILO's Minimum Age Convention No. 138 of 1973, the minimum age of employment starts at the end of compulsory education, i.e. at the age of 15. The age limit for working in hazardous work is 18. According to the same convention, while the 15-24 age group is considered young workers, children under the age of 15 who have to work in order to contribute to the family budget or earn a living are called "child workers" or "working children". In this case, it is legally obvious that children employed in the media sector are child laborers.

Children who create content on digital platforms can only use the platform under parental supervision because they have not reached the age of digital majority. According to Instagram's policy in this regard, accounts belonging to these children include a statement in their profile information indicating that the account is managed by their parents or legal guardians. This regulation demonstrates that parents have actual control and oversight over the Instagram accounts that child content creators use as a 'second screen' on the platform (Ünlü & Keskin, 2023:281).

A clear and comprehensive legal regulation of Kidfluencers currently exists only in France. Bruno Studer, a member of the French National Assembly, explained the legislation by stating that "Children's rights must be protected and preserved. This includes the internet, and the internet should not be an area where the law is ignored", emphasizing the need to protect children's rights in the digital environment. This regulation, referred to as the "Child YouTuber Law", covers not only YouTube but also all children under the age of 16 who produce content on platforms such as TikTok, Facebook and Instagram. According to the law, parents are obliged to report such activities to the competent authorities when the revenues generated from children's digital activities and the duration and intensity of the content shared exceed certain thresholds. In this framework, France has created a legal protection mechanism that regulates their working conditions, income and visibility in the digital environment from a child rights perspective by legally categorizing kidfluencers as child actors (Ünlü & Keskin, 2023:281).

Children who produce content on digital platforms, namely kidfluencers, constitute a new category that pushes the traditional boundaries of both labor law and digital media law. Therefore, the legal status of kidfluencers lies at the intersection of multiple disciplines such as

children's rights, personal data protection and labor law. As stated in UNICEF's 2017 State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a Digital World report, "Every child should be able to benefit from the opportunities offered by the digital world and be protected from the online risks that await them". The increasing prevalence of the concept of Kidfluencing, the increase in the income earned by families and the growth of the market have led to discussions on child abuse and rights, and necessitated legal regulations (Blanco & Gutierrez, 2022).

In this context, UNICEF (2021) emphasizes that children are increasingly becoming content producers in the digital economy and that the existing legal framework is insufficient to regulate these new forms of work. Kidfluencers, who have become a source of income for their parents, face the risks of exposure of their daily routine behavior through social media and/or labor exploitation (Karakoç & Ünlü, 2021:470). Children's right to participate and express themselves on social media is ensured from the perspective of the "digital age of majority" policy in various countries in order to protect their personal data and rights. For example, the digital age of majority is accepted as 13 in countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland and the United Kingdom, and 16 in countries such as Germany, Hungary, Ireland and Romania (Livingstone, 2020: 57; Karakoç & Ünlü, 2021:475). In Turkey, according to the statement made by the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (BTK) in November 2017, the age of use for Google, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest, Vimeo, Skype, Foursquare, MySpace, Snapchat and Reddit is 13; for LinkedIn it is 16, and for YouTube and Wechat it is over 18 (Karakoç & Ünlü, 2021:476).

The control and supervision of internet usage by minors, particularly children under the age of 13, in the digital environment is primarily the responsibility of parents (Livingstone, 2020: 59). Leaving all control mechanisms regarding the social media usage practices of children who have not reached digital maturity to parents makes the phenomenon of 'children as digital workers' or, in other words, kidfluencers, which forms the basis of this study, critical in the context of child labour, privacy violations and the violation of the right to childhood. It is evident that there is still no clear legal framework regulating the working conditions of kidfluencers, who often resemble full-time employees with the content they produce on digital platforms and have become an organic part of YouTube's global consumption network, limiting their activities or protecting them. This situation raises significant legal and ethical issues regarding children's visibility in the digital environment and their participation in labour processes (Karakoç & Ünlü, 2021:476). Consequently, parents, as adults, have autonomy over their own posts. However, they are obliged to ensure the privacy and security of their children,

who, especially at a very young age, lack the capacity to make decisions or express preferences regarding their digital identities.

Result

Kidfluencers, who are influencers under the age of 13 with a large social media following, promoting products, offering sponsored content through brand collaborations, and earning financial gain from these activities, hold an important position in the social media advertising industry. The phenomenon of kidfluencers transfers the traditional concept of child labour to the digital sphere, where the key issues are the definition of 'work' and how to protect the child's interests. While existing international frameworks (ILO, UNICEF) provide fundamental principles covering the digital context, the rapid evolution of platforms and the slowness of national legislation create significant gaps in practice. While some countries, such as France, have taken regulatory steps, implementation gaps and legislative uncertainties remain in Turkey and similar countries.

The literature contains strong evidence that this labour is susceptible to exploitation and that the current legal framework is inadequate to protect children. The fact that young children are not cognitively, emotionally, or morally mature enough to evaluate the persuasive intent of advertisements further increases this risk. Indeed, Loose et al. (2022:75) found that children in the early age group cannot comprehend the manipulative nature of advertising messages, while Kasser and Linn (2016:131) found that children under the age of eight in particular cannot distinguish between programme content and advertisements. These findings indicate that the likelihood of children's labour being implicitly exploited through commercial content on digital platforms is quite high.

Kidfluencer activity generates economic value in a manner similar to traditional child acting, but due to the rapidly changing nature of the online environment and its transnational characteristics, it constitutes a more complex area in terms of legal regulation. Most existing regulations are based on general data protection, consumer law or child protection provisions; they do not fully address the new risks arising in the context of digital labour. Therefore, it can be said that the law adopted in France, which introduces specific regulations for child content creators, sets a comprehensive model on an international scale. However, the regulations of a single country are not sufficient to protect kidfluencers operating in a global digital ecosystem.

In this context, multi-dimensional solutions are required to ensure the protection of children in digital labour processes:

1. Development of a Specific Legal Framework: National legislation must establish specific laws that clearly define child digital content creators and regulate their working hours, income management, and platform responsibilities. It is important that these laws are consistent with the working provisions relating to traditional child acting but also cover the unique risks of the digital environment.
2. Increasing Platform Responsibility: Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube must monitor the content production processes of child users through a stricter oversight mechanism, clarify the obligation to label commercial collaborations, and make parental consent processes transparent. Platforms must assume a 'proactive duty of care' against the potential exploitation risks to which children are exposed.
3. Clarifying Parents' Legal and Ethical Responsibilities: Parents' accountability regarding both income management and working conditions should be increased. Regulations protecting children against risks arising from parents' economic conflicts of interest should be mandatory. For example, a certain portion of income should be protected in the child's name.
4. Strengthening Media Literacy for Children: The ability to understand the nature of advertising and commercial content should be developed, particularly from pre-school and primary school age onwards; contemporary media literacy programmes should be integrated into the curriculum. This will enable children to become more aware in their interactions with digital content.
5. Ensuring International Coordination: Due to the cross-border nature of digital platforms, international organisations (e.g. the Council of Europe, UNICEF) need to establish common standards and countries need to develop harmonised legislation. This will enable protective measures to be implemented more effectively at a global level.

Consequently, the phenomenon of kidfluencerism is emerging as a new form of labour in the digital economy and requires a high level of protection due to the developmental characteristics of children. Children's visible production of entertaining content in the digital environment conceals what is in fact a serious labour process; this process carries the risk of violating children's rights under the influence of commercial interests. Therefore, it appears imperative, as a matter of children's rights, to comprehensively re-regulate this new area where children are positioned within digital labour from legal, ethical and social perspectives.

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