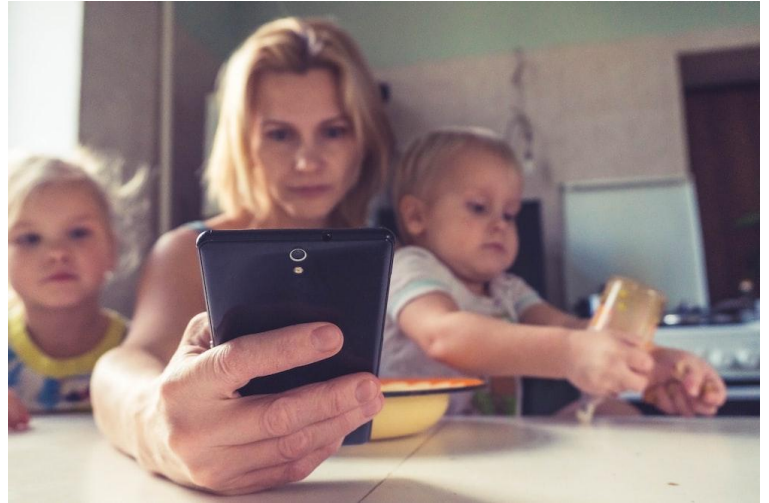




CHILD SENSATION OR EXPLOITATION?

THE ETHICS OF POSTING ABOUT CHILDREN ONLINE

Today nearly everyone is online. With easy, direct access to technology and social media platforms' user-friendly interfaces, most Americans have become accustomed to sharing bits-and-pieces of their lives with others. Indeed, generations that once took family photos on bulky cameras are now able to snap pictures of their children with the click of a smart phone – And, they do. However, with the ubiquity of digital technology all around us, it is now easier than ever to fall into the potentially unethical habit of oversharing online. While there is little controversy about posting ourselves, hobbies, and pets to social media, posting children has recently become a more heated topic of debate, as the proliferation of “child sensations” have stirred questions about the ethics of posting about children online.



One TikTok sensation, 3-year-old Wren Eleanor, has over 17 million followers (Organ, 2022). Her mother, Jacquelyn, who runs the account, has recently come under fire for exploiting her daughter for fame. While her videos simply feature Wren dressed in adorable outfits and just being a kid, the controversy lies with the comments section, as “videos of the toddler [have] been saved tens of thousands of times by complete strangers [and] comments by grown men [are] often sexual and predatory in nature” (Organ, 2022). Regardless of whether the comments are genuine or being left by trolls, many parents are understandably alarmed by the potential threat of predators having access to photos and videos of children. More concerning, perhaps, is that Jacquelyn did not delete the comments or even address them. She eventually disabled comments as she faced backlash for not protecting her daughter, but nonetheless continues to post about Wren daily (Organ, 2022).

Furthermore, aside from concerns about who is watching and engaging with Wren's TikToks, there are concerns about her inability to make decisions about being posted at all. Because she is a toddler, Wren is not able to give consent to being posted. For her, creating videos with her mom is likely just seen as having fun playing dress up together. However, her TikToks and the controversy surrounding them will follow her as she grows up. This concern is especially troublesome for children who are the subjects of viral content, as they may never be able to escape association with something that they never consented to posting online from the start.

The viral “Corn Kid” offers yet another example of how posting about children online can be ethically ambiguous. YouTube account Recess Therapy, which interviews children about their favorite things to spread joy, had one video go viral of a 7-year-old named Tariq expressing his love for corn (McNeil, 2022). The adorable video got millions of views and was even turned into a jingle that became trendy on TikTok.



Following this, Tariq, with the help of his parents, set up a Cameos account where they can accept brand deals to participate in ads. For example, Chipotle hired Tariq for an ad where he orders a lot of corn in his burrito bowl (McNeil, 2022). Is there anything wrong with this, or is it just innocent fun that also includes a paycheck? Many are split on this question. Some say parents are entitled to share cute videos of their children innocently, and that brand deals are harmless if the child can/does consent. However, others argue that is a form of exploitation, especially if there is a profit being made, and question whether (even older) children are capable of expressing consent at all since they can't fully comprehend the values and consequences involved in their actions.

Platforms like YouTube and TikTok provide opportunity for parents to share content of their adorable children with others and, in turn, potentially gain thousands of views and love from all over the world. While this sounds innocent enough, children's online presence can also lead to exploitation if we aren't careful. Protecting children online should absolutely be a critical priority, but where can the line be drawn between just sharing heart-warming experiences and accidentally causing harm?

Discussion Questions:

1. What values conflict when evaluating the ethics of posting about children online?
2. Do you think children are able to consent to being posted online?
3. How do you think child social media sensations differ from child stars in Hollywood?
4. If you had to find a way to regulate the posting of children online, what guidelines would you suggest? Does responsibility fall strictly on the parent, or does the social media platform and/or governmental bodies have responsibilities too?
5. Is it ethical for big brands to use trending child sensations for their ads? Why or why not?

Further Information:

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