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## DIGITAL SOCIALIZATION: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF INFLUENCERS ON CHILD BEHAVIOR

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**Abstract:** *In the digital age, social media has become a dominant force in the socialization of children, profoundly influencing their behavior, values, and self-perception. Among the most impactful elements of this new social landscape are social media influencers, who wield considerable power over the attitudes and actions of young audiences. This paper explores the role of influencers in the digital socialization of children, examining how their content shapes various aspects of child behavior, including consumer habits, body image, social norms, and ethical values. By analyzing the psychological effects of exposure to influencers—such as social comparison, anxiety, and the pressure to conform to idealized standards—the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the potential benefits and risks associated with this modern form of socialization. The paper also discusses the critical role of parents in guiding their children's digital experiences, emphasizing the need for media literacy and active engagement to mitigate negative impacts. Finally, the study considers the potential for influencers to promote positive behaviors and educational content, offering a balanced perspective on their influence in children's lives. Through this exploration, the paper contributes to the broader discourse on how digital environments are reshaping childhood and the implications for future generations.*

**Keywords:** *Digital Socialization; Social Media Influencers; Child Behavior; Online Socialization.*

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### INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become central to children's daily lives, serving as primary spaces for interaction, entertainment, and information. Unlike traditional media, these platforms enable children to engage directly with content creators, many of whom are social media influencers. These platforms have become a dominant force in shaping the lives of children and adolescents. Among the various influences that permeate their online experiences, social media influencers stand out as particularly impactful. These influencers, who command large followings and wield significant power over their audiences, often become role models for younger viewers. Through engaging content and strategic marketing, they can shape children's preferences, behaviors, and even their worldview.

The rise of social media influencers as a key element in children's socialization raises critical questions about the nature and impact of this influence. On one hand, influencers can inspire positive behaviors, promote educational content, and offer support in areas like mental health and self-esteem.



On the other hand, they can also propagate harmful ideals, such as unrealistic body standards, materialism, and unethical behaviors. The dual nature of their influence necessitates a deeper examination of how influencers shape child behavior and what this means for children's development in the digital age.

Understanding the role of influencers in the digital socialization of children is critical for parents, and educators. By exploring the ways in which influencers impact children's consumer habits, social norms, and psychological well-being, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon. Furthermore, it will examine how parents can guide their children in navigating the complex world of social media, ensuring that they benefit from positive influences while mitigating the risks associated with exposure to harmful content.

### **Problem Statement:**

The central problem that this paper seeks to address is the dual-edged nature of influencers' impact on children's socialization in the digital space. As children spend increasing amounts of time online, they are exposed to a vast array of content that can significantly influence their behavior, both positively and negatively. However, the extent to which influencers contribute to these outcomes remains underexplored. Existing research has highlighted the role of digital media in shaping child development, but the specific mechanisms through which influencers affect children's consumer habits, body image, social norms, and ethical values are not yet fully understood (Staksrud et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is a need to investigate the psychological effects of constant exposure to idealized lifestyles and social comparison, which can lead to issues such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and the pressure to conform (Tiggemann & Slater, 2017).

This paper aims to fill these gaps by analyzing both the positive and negative influences of social media influencers on children's behavior. Additionally, it will explore the role of parents in mediating these influences and promoting media literacy, a critical skill in helping children navigate the complexities of the digital world (Livingstone et al., 2020).

Research Questions: To achieve the above, we will address the following main research questions:

- 1- How do social media influencers shape children's consumer habits and material desires?
- 2- In what ways do influencers contribute to the formation of social norms and ethical values among children?
- 3- What are the psychological effects of children's exposure to social media influencers, particularly in terms of social comparison and anxiety?
- 4- How can parents effectively guide and support their children in managing the influence of social media influencers?

### **Literature Review:**

The digital age has fundamentally transformed the way children engage with the world around them. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, have become integral parts of children's daily lives, offering both opportunities and challenges. Research shows that social media can enhance children's creativity, communication skills, and sense of community. However, it can also expose them to harmful content and unrealistic standards, leading to issues such as social comparison and reduced self-esteem.

A study by Anderson and Jiang (2018) found that 45% of teens are online almost constantly, with social media significantly shaping their social interactions and self-image. This constant



exposure to online content can amplify the effects of social comparison, as children are frequently presented with idealized images and lifestyles that may not be attainable.

Social media influencers play a pivotal role in shaping children's behavior and attitudes. Influencers, who often present themselves as relatable and authentic, can have a powerful impact on their young followers. According to De Jans et al. (2021), influencers often blur the lines between advertising and entertainment, making it difficult for children to distinguish between genuine recommendations and paid promotions. This can lead to increased consumerism, with children developing material desires based on the products endorsed by their favorite influencers.

Furthermore, influencers can shape social norms and ethical values. For example, many influencers promote certain beauty standards, which can affect children's perceptions of body image. A study by Tiggemann and Slater (2017) found that frequent exposure to beauty influencers was associated with higher levels of body dissatisfaction among young girls. Conversely, some influencers use their platforms to promote positive values, such as inclusivity and social justice, highlighting the dual nature of their impact.

The psychological effects of children's exposure to influencers are increasingly being recognized. One of the primary concerns is the impact on mental health, particularly regarding social comparison and anxiety. According to a study by Valkenburg et al. (2022), children who frequently engage with influencer content are more likely to experience anxiety related to their appearance and social status. The study suggests that the curated and often exaggerated lives portrayed by influencers can create unrealistic expectations, leading to feelings of inadequacy and stress.

In addition, social media influencers can affect children's self-concept and identity formation. As children navigate the complex online world, they may begin to model their behavior after influencers, adopting their opinions, fashion choices, and even ethical stances. This can lead to a diminished sense of self, as children may prioritize fitting in with online trends over developing their own identities.

Given the significant influence of social media and influencers on children, parental involvement is crucial. Studies have shown that parents who actively mediate their children's social media use can mitigate some of the negative effects. For example, Livingstone and Helsper (2008) emphasize the importance of co-viewing and discussing content with children as a way to help them critically evaluate what they see online. This approach, known as active mediation, has been shown to reduce the likelihood of children being influenced by harmful content.

Moreover, a study by Symons et al. (2021) highlights the importance of setting boundaries and providing guidance on responsible social media use. Parents who establish clear rules about screen time and online behavior can help their children develop healthier relationships with social media. Additionally, encouraging children to follow positive role models and engaging with educational content can help balance the influence of less beneficial influencers.

### **Definitions of the key concepts:**

#### **- Digital Socialization:**

- Digital socialization refers to the process by which individuals, particularly youth, learn and internalize societal norms, values, and behaviors through digital platforms. This form of socialization



occurs via interactions on social media, online communities, and other digital environments, where individuals are exposed to various forms of content that shape their identities and social behaviors (Lim & Gutierrez, 2020).

- Digital socialization encompasses the way individuals are influenced by digital technologies in their everyday social interactions. It involves the adoption of digital habits, communication styles, and social roles, influenced by online networks and digital culture. This process is particularly significant for children, who are increasingly immersed in digital media from a young age (Drotner & Livingstone, 2020).

**- Social Media Influencers:**

- Social media influencers are individuals who have built a large and engaged following on social media platforms through the creation and sharing of content. They are often perceived as experts or role models within a particular niche, such as fashion, beauty, or fitness, and have the power to influence the attitudes and behaviors of their followers (De Veirman, Hudders, & Nelson, 2019).

- Social media influencers are digital personalities who leverage their online presence to shape consumer behavior and public opinion. They often collaborate with brands to promote products or services, using their credibility and relatability to persuade their audience. Influencers can have a profound impact on their followers, particularly younger audiences, by setting trends and establishing social norms (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019).

**- Child Behavior:**

- Child behavior refers to the range of actions and reactions exhibited by children in response to various stimuli, including their interactions with others, media, and their environment. This behavior is shaped by a combination of innate traits and external influences, such as family dynamics, education, and media exposure (Piotrowski & Valkenburg, 2022).

- Child behavior encompasses the psychological and emotional responses of children to their surroundings. It includes their social interactions, learning processes, and coping strategies. In the context of digital environments, child behavior can be significantly influenced by exposure to media content and online interactions, which can affect their social development and self-concept (Gentile et al., 2017).

**- Online Socialization:**

- Online socialization is the process through which individuals develop social relationships and communication skills via digital platforms. It includes interactions on social media, online gaming, and virtual communities, where individuals engage with others in ways that shape their social identity and relationships (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2020).

- Online socialization refers to the acquisition of social norms, behaviors, and networks through participation in online environments. This process allows individuals, particularly young people, to connect with peers, share experiences, and form communities in a virtual context, often leading to the development of new social skills and behaviors distinct from those learned offline (Valkenburg & Peter, 2021).

**1- How do social media influencers shape children's consumer habits and material desires?**

Social media influencers shape children's consumer habits and material desires through a combination of relatability, visual and emotional appeal, interactive content, and promotion of materialism. Their ability to present products in an engaging and seemingly authentic manner, combined with children's cognitive vulnerabilities, makes influencers powerful agents in the formation of consumer behavior. To address this question, we'll explore how influencers impact children's purchasing decisions and materialistic tendencies through their online presence:

**- Influence through Relatability and Trust:**

Social media influencers have a unique ability to shape children's consumer habits due to the relatability and trust they cultivate with their audiences. Children often perceive influencers as peers or role models rather than traditional celebrities, making their recommendations seem more genuine and attainable. Research shows that children are more likely to trust and emulate influencers because they see them as authentic and relatable figures who share similar interests and experiences (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). This trust fosters a sense of loyalty and receptiveness to the products and brands that influencers promote.

**Example:**

When influencers showcase a particular toy, gadget, or clothing item in their posts or videos, children often develop a desire to own the same items, believing that it will make them more like their admired influencers. This phenomenon is known as aspirational consumption, where children seek to imitate the lifestyle and choices of influencers (De Jans, Hudders, & Cauberghe, 2021).

**Shaping Material Desires through Visual and Emotional Appeal:**

Influencers use visually appealing content and emotional storytelling to enhance the desirability of products. Through high-quality images, engaging videos, and compelling narratives, influencers create an aspirational lifestyle that children find attractive. The repetitive exposure to branded content and endorsements can increase children's material desires and lead them to associate happiness and success with the acquisition of material goods (Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021).

**Example:**

A beauty influencer might create a video demonstrating a new makeup kit, framing it as a must-have item that boosts confidence and social status. The visual appeal, combined with the influencer's enthusiastic endorsement, can make children feel that owning the product is essential for fitting in or feeling good about themselves.

**Creating Consumer Habits through Interactive Content:**

Influencers often engage their audiences through interactive content, such as giveaways, challenges, and polls, which actively involve children in the consumer experience. This interactivity can strengthen the bond between the influencer and their audience, making the children feel more connected to the brands the influencer promotes. This approach not only encourages immediate purchases but also fosters long-term consumer habits as children become accustomed to engaging with branded content (De Veirman, Hudders, & Nelson, 2019).



**Example:**

An influencer might host a challenge where children are encouraged to create videos using a specific product, promising a prize for the best entry. This type of content not only promotes the product but also makes the act of consuming and promoting the brand a social activity, reinforcing consumer habits.

**Promoting Materialism and Brand Loyalty:**

Social media influencers also play a role in promoting materialism among children. By consistently showcasing luxury items, trendy products, and exclusive brands, influencers can create a desire for material wealth and status. This can lead to increased brand loyalty, as children become fixated on specific brands that are frequently endorsed by their favorite influencers (Naderer et al., 2022).

**Example:**

An influencer consistently promoting high-end fashion brands can make children believe that wearing such brands is a marker of success and popularity. Over time, this can shape children's consumer identity, making them more likely to prioritize material possessions and brand names.

**Cognitive and Developmental Vulnerabilities:**

Children's cognitive and developmental stages make them particularly vulnerable to the influence of social media influencers. Unlike adults, children often struggle to recognize the commercial intent behind influencer content, especially when it is subtly integrated into entertainment or lifestyle posts. This lack of awareness makes them more susceptible to persuasive messaging, leading to uncritical acceptance of consumerist values and behaviors (Piotrowski & Valkenburg, 2022).

**Example:**

When an influencer integrates a product seamlessly into their daily routine or lifestyle content without explicitly labelling it as an advertisement, children may perceive the product as an essential part of normal life, thereby internalizing the desire for it without questioning its necessity.

**2- In what ways do influencers contribute to the formation of social norms and ethical values among children?**

Social media influencers have become powerful figures in shaping the behavior and values of children. Beyond entertainment, influencers play a significant role in the formation of social norms and ethical values, as their content is often consumed and emulated by young audiences. We will try to explore the ways in which influencers shape social norms and ethical values:

- **Shaping Perceptions of Acceptable Behavior:** Social media influencers often set examples of what is considered "cool" or "acceptable" behavior. Through their content, they normalize certain actions, speech, and lifestyles, which children may adopt as social norms. For instance, a study by Anderson et al. (2022) found that influencers promoting kindness and prosocial behavior positively impacted children's social behavior, while those promoting materialism had the opposite effect.

- **Role Modelling:** Children often view influencers as role models, emulating their actions and beliefs. Research by de Jans et al. (2021) highlights how influencers can serve as significant role



models for children, especially when they endorse values like honesty, inclusivity, and respect. This influence is particularly strong because children perceive influencers as relatable and aspirational figures, blurring the line between peer and celebrity influence.

- **Promoting Consumerism and Material Values:** Many influencers are tied to brands and marketing campaigns, which can lead to the development of materialistic values in children. According to Hudders et al. (2021), the constant exposure to product placements and sponsored content encourages children to equate personal worth with material possessions. This can shape their ethical perspectives on consumption and success, fostering a consumer-driven mindset.

- **Influencing Social Justice and Ethical Causes:** Some influencers actively promote social justice, environmental sustainability, and other ethical causes. Research by Abidin and Ots (2022) shows that influencers who advocate for diversity and inclusivity can shape children's understanding of fairness and empathy. By championing these causes, influencers contribute to the development of ethical norms in young audiences.

- **Peer Influence and Pressure:** In the digital world, influencers are often seen as peers, making their influence on social norms even more potent. A study by Valkenburg et al. (2023) found that children often feel pressured to conform to the standards set by influencers, particularly regarding appearance and social behavior. This peer-like influence can shape their ethical values as they seek approval and belonging within their social circles.

- **Digital Citizenship and Ethical Use of Technology:** Some influencers focus on promoting responsible and ethical use of digital platforms. According to Livingstone and Helsper (2023), influencers who emphasize online safety and respectful communication contribute to children's understanding of ethical digital citizenship. This encourages children to be mindful of their online behavior and aware of the long-term consequences of their actions.

- **Ethical Dilemmas and Critical Thinking:** Influencers sometimes present ethical dilemmas or controversial topics in their content, sparking discussions among their followers. This can foster critical thinking in children. A recent study by McRoberts et al. (2024) suggests that when influencers engage with complex ethical issues, they encourage their young audiences to reflect on their values and make informed decisions.

### **3- What are the psychological effects of children's exposure to social media influencers, particularly in terms of social comparison and anxiety?**

As children increasingly engage with content created by these influencers, it is crucial to understand the psychological effects of such exposure. This point delves into how interactions with social media influencers affect children's self-esteem, body image, behavior, and mental health, focusing on the complex interplay between social comparison, anxiety, and overall psychological well-being.

- **Impact on Self-Esteem and Body Image:** Children's exposure to social media influencers can significantly affect their self-esteem and body image. Influencers often present idealized and edited versions of themselves, which can set unrealistic beauty standards. Studies show that this exposure can lead to body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem among children. For instance, research by Perloff (2020) found that constant exposure to idealized images on social media contributes to



negative body image and self-esteem issues among adolescents. Children may internalize these unrealistic standards, leading to dissatisfaction with their own appearance and self-worth.

- **Social Comparison and Anxiety:** The phenomenon of social comparison is prevalent among children who follow social media influencers. They may compare themselves to influencers in terms of appearance, lifestyle, and achievements. This comparison can lead to anxiety and stress, as children may feel inadequate or pressured to meet the standards they see online. Vogel et al. (2021) demonstrated that social comparison with idealized influencers is linked to increased anxiety and lower self-esteem in adolescents, as they struggle to measure up to the perceived perfection.

- **Influence on Behavior and Lifestyle Choices:** Influencers can impact children's behavior and lifestyle choices by promoting certain products, trends, and activities. For example, influencers who endorse specific fashion brands or diets can influence children to adopt similar behaviors. This influence can be both positive and negative. A study by Marwick (2021) found that while some influencers promote healthy behaviors and positive lifestyles, others may encourage materialism or risky behaviors, affecting children's decision-making and values.

- **Development of Social Skills and Peer Relationships:** Children's interactions with influencers can also impact their social skills and peer relationships. Following influencers can affect how children perceive social interactions and relationships. They may prioritize online interactions or compare their real-life relationships with the idealized portrayals seen online. Research by Valkenburg and Peter (2022) suggests that excessive focus on social media and influencers can lead to difficulties in forming genuine social connections and understanding real-life social cues.

- **Emotional Regulation and Mental Health:** Exposure to social media influencers can influence children's emotional regulation and mental health. The constant bombardment of curated content can lead to feelings of inadequacy or anxiety. Influencers who discuss mental health openly can offer support and validation, potentially mitigating some negative effects. However, as noted by Radovic et al. (2022), exposure to negative or distressing content can exacerbate mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety, particularly if children lack the skills to navigate online stressors effectively.

- **Educational and Inspirational Effects:** Not all effects of influencer exposure are negative. Some influencers use their platforms to educate and inspire young audiences. For instance, influencers who promote educational content, personal growth, or social causes can have a positive impact on children's motivation and awareness. A study by Anderson and Jiang (2023) highlighted that educational influencers who focus on learning and personal development can enhance children's knowledge and inspire positive behavior changes.

#### **4- How can parents effectively guide and support their children in managing the influence of social media influencers?**

Parents play a crucial role in helping their children navigate this digital landscape. Guiding children through the complexities of influencer culture requires a combination of communication, education, and setting boundaries. This point outlines effective strategies that parents can use to support their children in managing the influence of social media influencers, ensuring a balanced and positive digital experience.





- **Foster Open Communication:** One of the most important steps parents can take is to establish open lines of communication with their children. By creating a safe and non-judgmental environment, parents can encourage their children to talk about the influencers they follow and how they feel about the content they see. This dialogue allows parents to understand their children's perspectives and guide them in critically evaluating the content. Research by Wisniewski et al. (2020) highlights that open communication between parents and children about social media usage is linked to healthier online behaviors and better management of digital influences.
- **Promote Media Literacy:** Teaching children media literacy skills is essential in helping them navigate the digital world. Media literacy empowers children to critically assess the content they encounter, including identifying the difference between reality and the idealized portrayals often presented by influencers. Parents can help their children understand the commercial aspects of influencer culture, such as sponsored content and advertising tactics. Studies, such as those by Livingstone and Helsper (2021), show that children who receive media literacy education are better equipped to recognize and resist manipulative content.
- **Set Boundaries and Limits:** Parents can play a crucial role in setting healthy boundaries around social media use. This includes establishing rules about screen time, content consumption, and the types of influencers their children follow. By setting clear expectations, parents can help prevent excessive exposure to potentially harmful content. A study by Twenge and Campbell (2020) found that children who had structured and limited social media use reported lower levels of anxiety and better overall well-being compared to those with unrestricted access.
- **Encourage Positive Role Models:** Parents can guide their children towards influencers who promote positive values, such as education, kindness, creativity, and social responsibility. By encouraging children to follow influencers who align with the family's values, parents can help counterbalance the potential negative effects of other content. According to research by De Jans et al. (2021), exposure to positive role models online can significantly influence children's behavior in a constructive manner, reinforcing ethical norms and healthy habits.
- **Lead by Example:** Parents' own social media habits can greatly influence their children's behavior. By modelling mindful and balanced social media use, parents can set a positive example for their children to follow. Parents who demonstrate critical thinking and responsible behavior online teach their children to do the same. Research by O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson (2022) suggests that children are more likely to adopt healthy social media habits when they observe their parents practicing similar behaviors.
- **Provide Emotional Support and Validation:** It's important for parents to recognize the emotional impact that social media and influencers can have on their children. By providing emotional support and validation, parents can help their children navigate feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, or peer pressure. Being available to listen and offer guidance can make a significant difference in how children cope with the challenges of growing up in a digital world. A study by Radovic et al. (2022) found that children who received strong emotional support from their parents were more resilient to the negative effects of social media.



## CONCLUSION

The pervasive influence of social media influencers on children has become a defining feature of the digital age. This paper has explored how influencers shape children's consumer habits, instilling desires for products and lifestyles that can drive materialism. Beyond consumption, influencers play a crucial role in forming social norms and ethical values, as children often look to these online figures as models for behavior and beliefs.

However, this influence is not without its challenges. The constant exposure to idealized portrayals of life can lead to psychological consequences, particularly through social comparison. Children, in their formative years, may struggle with feelings of inadequacy and anxiety as they compare themselves to the seemingly perfect lives of influencers. This highlights the complex psychological impact of social media, where the line between inspiration and insecurity can blur.

Given these challenges, the role of parents becomes essential. Parents must act as guides, helping their children navigate the digital world with awareness and critical thinking. Through open communication, media literacy education, and the establishment of healthy boundaries, parents can mitigate the negative effects of influencer culture. Moreover, by steering their children toward positive role models, parents can ensure that their children benefit from the constructive aspects of social media.

In essence, while social media influencers significantly impact children's lives, the influence of parents remains pivotal in shaping how this content is perceived and internalized. A proactive and balanced approach, combining parental guidance with critical digital engagement, can help children develop a healthy relationship with social media, fostering both resilience and positive growth.



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