



Political Economy of Digital Media Commodification: Kid Influencers on YouTube

Ekonomi Politik Komodifikasi Media Digital: Influencer Anak di YouTube

Andrea Soegiarto

Postgraduate Communication Science, FISIP, University of Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia

Keywords

*Kid influencers;
Commodification;
Political economy;
Digital media;
YouTube.*

ABSTRACT

The political economy of media has evolved into a practice that spans various aspects of life. Digital media platforms serve as channels for economic powers to influence consumer behavior for profit maximization. This study examines how children become commodified as workers in the digital media culture industry through the phenomenon of Kid Influencers on YouTube. Using qualitative methods and a political economy perspective, this research analyzes the Ryan's World and Super Duper Ziyen YouTube channels. Data collection involved analyzing previous research on Kid Influencers and gathering information from popular children's YouTube channels. The results indicate that YouTube's ability to reach targeted audiences enables children to become objects of worker commodification, as monetization creates economic exchange value. This study reveals how capitalism infiltrates media, utilizing social platforms to expand business opportunities through content featuring children for child consumption.

Kata Kunci

*Influencer anak;
Komodifikasi;
Ekonomi politik;
Media digital;
YouTube.*

ABSTRAK

Ekonomi politik media telah berkembang menjadi sebuah praktik yang menjangkau berbagai aspek kehidupan. Platform media digital menjadi saluran bagi kekuatan ekonomi untuk mempengaruhi perilaku konsumen demi memaksimalkan keuntungan. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana anak-anak dikomodifikasi sebagai pekerja dalam industri budaya media digital melalui fenomena Kid Influencer di YouTube. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif dan perspektif ekonomi politik, penelitian ini menganalisis kanal YouTube Ryan's World dan Super Duper Ziyen. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan menganalisis penelitian terdahulu mengenai Kid Influencer dan mengumpulkan informasi dari kanal-kanal YouTube anak-anak yang populer. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kemampuan YouTube untuk menjangkau pemirsa yang ditargetkan memungkinkan anak-anak menjadi objek komodifikasi pekerja, karena monetisasi menciptakan nilai tukar ekonomi. Penelitian ini mengungkapkan bagaimana kapitalisme menyusup ke dalam media, memanfaatkan platform sosial untuk memperluas peluang bisnis melalui konten yang menampilkan anak-anak untuk konsumsi anak-anak.

1. Introduction

The digital media landscape has dramatically transformed how content is created, consumed, and monetized. Economic systems have evolved from bartering goods to

*Corresponding author

Andrea Soegiarto. Postgraduate Communication Science, FISIP, University of Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia.
Email: andre.soegiarto@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.22487/ejk.v12i1.1861>

Received 7 March 2025; Received in revised form 18 April 2025; Accepted 19 April 2025

Published 23 April 2025; Available online 8 May 2025

2302-2035 | 3047-9614 / © 2025 The Authors. Managed by the Department of Communication Studies, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Tadulako University. Published by Tadulako University.

This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

digital transactions, with media platforms becoming central to contemporary capitalism. In this context, media organizations function not only as information providers but also as business entities requiring substantial capital to operate (McQuail, 2010).

The economy has become an integral part of human existence, facilitating various needs through exchange mechanisms that have evolved from traditional bartering to sophisticated digital transactions. At its core, economics represents a process of production, consumption, and distribution, where products of varying necessity—from primary to tertiary needs—are created and circulated to satisfy human requirements. Within this economic framework, media companies have emerged as crucial entities that fulfill society's informational and entertainment needs while simultaneously operating as business organizations with specific objectives.

Media companies, like other businesses, require substantial funding for operations, including employee salaries, infrastructure costs, and content creation. Their revenue typically derives from multiple sources, including donations, government subsidies, and predominantly, advertising. As Mosco (2009) argues, media content has increasingly become a commodity sold in markets where information dissemination is dictated by economic interests. While some media organizations prioritize information provision over profitability, relying on donations or subsidies, the majority in today's free-market environment pursue maximum financial returns.

The establishment of media companies demands significant capital investment, resulting in ownership concentration among large corporations with substantial financial resources. These corporations often possess diverse media portfolios spanning multiple platforms and content types. The centralization of media ownership into conglomerates, as documented by Tapsell (2019), has significant implications for content diversity and economic power distribution. In Indonesia, for example, media ownership has consolidated into eight major groups controlling television, print, online, and radio outlets. This concentration potentially limits the information available to audiences, as content across platforms owned by the same corporation tends to align with corporate values, interests, and objectives.

According to Bourdieu (1986), media corporations operate through three major forms of capital that shape their influence in the media landscape. First, economic capital represents monetary resources and ownership rights that provide the financial foundation for media operations. Second, cultural capital manifests in three distinct forms: embodied state (internalized knowledge and dispositions), objectified state (material cultural objects like writings or paintings), and institutionalized state (formally recognized qualifications). Third, social capital consists of networks and connections that can be converted to economic advantages under certain conditions. This comprehensive capital framework helps explain how media corporations maintain their dominance within communication ecosystems.

The interplay between these capital forms enables media corporations to exert extraordinary influence, as noted by Bourdieu in Durham & Kellner (2012). Television, for instance, possesses exceptional power to reach audiences, facilitating the transmission of information and values more effectively than print media. Similarly, McQuail (2010) highlights how mainstream media operate at the intersection of consumer and advertising markets, providing services to audiences while simultaneously selling audience access to advertisers. This dual-market structure often results in content homogenization as media compete for limited revenue sources.

The concentration of media ownership has profound implications for content creation and distribution. As documented by Ross Tapsell's seven-year research, Indonesian media has been consolidated under eight large conglomerates, including CT Corp, Global Mediacom, Electrical Technology, Bakrie Group, Media Group, Lippo Group, Jawa Pos Group, and Kompas Gramedia (Laksono, 2019). This concentration illustrates the centralization of media power and its potential impact on content diversity and public discourse.

Table 1. Concentration of Media Ownership by Media Conglomerates in Indonesia

Company	Subsidiaries	Owner	Television	Print	Online	Radio
CT Corp	Trans Corp	Chairul Tanjung	Trans TV, Trans 7, CNN	-	Detik, CNN	-
Global Mediacom	MNC	Hary Tanoesoedibjo	MNC, Global, RCTI	Sindo Newspaper	Sindonews	Trijaya FM, Global Radio, Radio Dangdut
Global Mediacom	MNC	Hary Tanoesoedibjo	MNC, Global, RCTI	Sindo Newspaper	Sindonews	Trijaya FM, Global Radio, Radio Dangdut
Electrical Technology	SCMA Group	Eddy Kusnadi Sariaatmadja	SCTV, Indosiar	-	liputan6.com, OChannel	Elshinta Radio
Bakrie Group	Asia Media Vision	Abu Rizal Bakrie	TvOne, ANTV	-	Viva	-
Media Group	Television Media Indonesia	Surya Paloh	Metro TV	Media Indonesia	Metrotv news	-
Lippo Group	Berita Satu	James Riady	Berita Satu TV	Jakarta Globe	News One	-
Jawa Pos Group	Jawa Pos Group	Dahlan Iskan	Jawa Pos TV	Jawa Pos	jpnn.com	Fajar FM
Kompas Gramedia	Kompas Group	Jakoeb Oetama	Kompas TV	Kompas	Kompas Tribunnews	Sonora

Media institutions have become increasingly permeated by capitalist logic, where content is treated as a marketable commodity and information dissemination is governed by market forces. Vincent Mosco (2009) defines media political economy as the study of social relations, particularly power dynamics, that reciprocally influence production, distribution, and consumption processes. McQuail identifies five relational types affecting media operations: community relations, owner/client/supplier relationships, dominant pressure group influences, internal organizational factors, and audience interactions. These relationships often disadvantage audiences, as information access becomes mediated by other competing interests rather than public needs.

While Indonesian Law Number 40 of 1999 concerning the Press establishes five functions for media—information provision, education, entertainment, social control, and economic institution—the economic function often overshadows others. As media pursue financial objectives, content increasingly reflects commercial imperatives rather than journalistic values. Mosco's (2009) key concepts of commodification, spatialization, and

structuration help explain how media political economy operates, with commodification representing capitalism's drive to transform messages into marketable products.

Commodification manifests in three primary forms: content commodification (transforming information into marketable products), audience commodification (packaging viewers as sellable commodities to advertisers), and worker commodification (treating labor skills and working hours as exchangeable commodities). These processes reflect capitalism's fundamental tendency to convert everything of value into tradable goods, often leading to spiritual and moral crises as mindless materialism displaces other values.

In today's digital landscape, social media platforms featuring Kid Influencers have emerged as significant phenomena. These platforms—Instagram, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter)—showcase child performers who create content targeting children as their primary audience. Content creators produce these materials to satisfy children's entertainment and informational needs while simultaneously pursuing economic objectives. As Collins (1975) noted (in Sihombing, 2023), media plays a crucial role in children's socialization, helping them learn social roles, values, and behaviors through identification with media figures, making children particularly susceptible to external influences.

YouTube has gained particular prominence among young audiences, offering creative spaces for content focused on lifestyle, games, humor, sports, and fashion (Larrea-Ayala, 2020). As Hidalgo-Marí and Segarra-Saavedra (2017) observed, YouTube provides a creative environment where young people can achieve empowerment and business development opportunities. Kid Influencers operate their own YouTube channels, creating content specifically designed for child consumption.

The primary research objective of this study is to examine the commodification of children as workers in the digital media industry, specifically on YouTube, through the phenomenon of Kid Influencers. By analyzing Ryan's World and Super Duper Ziyen as case studies, this research aims to understand how capitalism infiltrates children's content creation and consumption patterns, transforming children into commodified workers within digital platforms.

This study focuses specifically on YouTube channels featuring children as central performers, using the child's name as the channel identity. By examining two popular channels—Super Duper Ziyen (Indonesia) and Ryan's World (United States)—through a literature review approach, this research investigates how these shows commodify children as Kid Influencers. Previous research indicates that Kid Influencers have been exploited by profit-seeking entities to transform children into lucrative products across multiple industry sectors (Feller & Burroughs, 2022). Studies by Castillo-Abdul et al. (2020) reveal that most popular Kid Influencers are between 10-12 years old and typically began their YouTube careers approximately five years before achieving substantial popularity, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Additionally, Guzman Neyza (2020) identified significant gaps between technological advancement and regulatory frameworks, leaving children in monetized YouTube content inadequately protected.

YouTube represents the internet's foremost video-sharing platform, boasting over two billion users—approximately one-third of all internet users globally. As of 2024, YouTube had over 2.5 billion users worldwide, with India leading user numbers (491 million), followed by the United States (253 million) and Indonesia (143 million).

YouTube ranks as the second most popular social media platform, positioned between Facebook and WhatsApp (Ceci, 2025).

In this digital ecosystem, influencers represent professionals trusted by audiences to provide product or service recommendations (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020). Influencers gain credibility through their perceived knowledge and experience in specific domains. Research identifies three influencer categories: celebrity influencers (established entertainment figures with large social media followings), social media influencers (individuals who achieved fame through social platforms and developed expertise in particular areas), and micro-influencers (similar to social media influencers but with smaller yet highly engaged communities).

Kid Influencers represent a specialized category of social media performers who, despite their youth, have developed substantial followings capable of influencing consumer behavior and cultural trends. Previous research on child commodification in media shows indicates that children represent valuable commodities when appropriately packaged in audio-visual products (Yosef, 2022). Studies of South Korean television programs featuring children revealed that such shows function as profit-driven popular culture products operating according to market mechanisms. Similarly, Tur-Viñes et al. (2018) demonstrated that YouTube content produced by children attracts brand interest for product promotion, with children's authentic communication style proving highly persuasive despite differing from conventional advertising approaches.

The legal framework surrounding child labor in digital media remains underdeveloped. In Indonesia, Law No. 13 of 2003 generally prohibits child employment (Article 68) but provides exceptions for children aged 13-15 performing "light work" that doesn't interfere with their development (Article 69). In the United States, the "California" Actor's Bill (Coogan Act) regulates child entertainment industry work, restricting working hours and requiring permits, but its application to digital content remains ambiguous. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) faces challenges regulating internet-based entertainment due to difficulties distinguishing between protected speech and commercial performances, leaving children in internet-based content inadequately protected (Guzman Neyza, 2020).

Previous research on content and advertising regulation on YouTube highlights how children's YouTube personalities are transformed into global brands, with companies leveraging Kid Influencers' fame to market toys, clothing, and lifestyle products across multiple industry sectors (Feller & Burroughs, 2022). This commodification process aligns with Mosco's (2009) political economy framework, where capitalism pursues capital accumulation through power relations that determine product consumption patterns.

Cultural products, including children's content, traditionally contain historical values transmitted across generations. However, commodification through commercialization and modernization threatens the authenticity of these cultural expressions (Mardatillah et al., 2019). When cultural products enter industrial processes, they become standardized, mass-produced, and manipulated, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2020) observed in their critique of the cultural industry, where cultural products are reproduced by capital owners primarily for profit generation.

Advertising functions as both a trendsetter and a shaper of modern consciousness, with producers using mass media for extensive promotional campaigns. The effectiveness of advertising in influencing consumer behavior has made it central to marketing strategies, with advertising forms evolving alongside communication technology

advancements (Arviani, 2020). Kid Influencers, as cultural icons with substantial followings, attract capital owners seeking to utilize their services for product promotion and profit maximization.

The economic dynamics surrounding Kid Influencer content involve multiple beneficiaries: content creators receive payment for product promotions, advertisers reach targeted audiences effectively, and platforms share in advertising revenue. This arrangement exemplifies the cultural industry's commodification processes, where children's performances generate economic value across a network of stakeholders.

Through this theoretical and contextual framework, this study investigates how children become commodified workers in the digital media landscape, focusing specifically on the phenomenon of Kid Influencers on YouTube. By examining Ryan's World and Super Duper Ziyen as case studies, this research aims to understand the economic relationships, power dynamics, and ethical implications surrounding children's participation in digital content creation and distribution.

Political economy of media represents a critical approach to understanding how economic structures and power relations shape media content, production, and distribution. Vincent Mosco (2009) defines political economy as "the study of social relations, particularly power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources." Applied to communication and media, this approach examines how media institutions operate within capitalist systems and how economic imperatives influence media practices and content.

Political economy analysis is particularly concerned with ownership patterns, financing mechanisms, and regulatory structures that determine how media organizations function. As McQuail (2010) notes, media operate simultaneously in two markets: delivering content to audiences while selling audience attention to advertisers. This dual-market structure creates inherent tensions between public interest goals and commercial imperatives.

Within the digital media landscape, political economy analysis has evolved to address new challenges including platform economies, data commodification, and algorithmic governance. Mansell and Steinmueller (2020) argue that digital platforms have intensified commodification processes while creating new forms of economic concentration and control. YouTube, as a subsidiary of Google (Alphabet), represents a significant node in this concentrated ownership structure, with implications for content creators and audiences.

Central to political economy analysis is the concept of commodification, which Mosco (2009) describes as "the process of transforming use values into exchange values." In the media context, commodification manifests in three primary forms:

Content commodification refers to the transformation of communication and cultural expressions into marketable products. As described by Hardy (2014), this process converts messages from collections of information into systems of meaning with market value. For Kid Influencers, content commodification occurs when children's play, family interactions, and experiences are packaged as entertainment products designed to maximize viewership and engagement.

Audience commodification, a concept initially developed by Dallas Smythe (1977), refers to the process by which media companies produce audiences to be sold to advertisers. Smythe argued that the primary commodity produced by commercial media is not content but audiences whose attention can be packaged and sold. In the YouTube context, metrics such as views, engagement rates, and demographic data become valuable

assets in this audience commodification process. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) note, digital platforms have intensified this commodification through sophisticated data collection and audience segmentation capabilities.

Labor commodification represents the transformation of human work capacities into tradable commodities. In the context of Kid Influencers, children's performances, personalities, and creative capacities become commodified as inputs in the production of marketable content. Cohen (2008) extends this analysis to digital platforms, arguing that user participation represents a form of "free labor" that generates value for platform owners. For child content creators, this raises significant questions about exploitation, consent, and appropriate compensation.

The analysis of Kid Influencers benefits from the Frankfurt School's critique of the cultural industry, particularly as articulated by Horkheimer and Adorno (2020). They argued that cultural production under capitalism undergoes industrialization processes that standardize, mass-produce, and commercialize cultural goods. This industrialization undermines cultural authenticity while reinforcing dominant ideologies.

Horkheimer and Adorno (2020) maintained that the cultural industry manipulates consumers by creating false needs and promoting passive consumption rather than critical engagement. Their critique remains relevant in the digital age, where seemingly diverse content often follows predictable formats designed to maximize engagement and commercial potential. As Fuchs (2014) notes, digital media platforms have intensified many aspects of the cultural industry while creating new mechanisms for audience participation.

For Kid Influencer content, the Frankfurt School perspective helps illuminate how seemingly spontaneous and authentic children's activities become standardized and commercialized through their integration into digital media economies. What appears as children's creative expression often follows commercial imperatives dictated by platform algorithms, audience expectations, and marketing partnerships.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theoretical framework concerning different forms of capital provides valuable insights for understanding Kid Influencers' position within digital media ecosystems. Bourdieu identified three fundamental forms of capital. Economic capital, material resources and financial assets directly convertible into money. In the Kid Influencer context, this includes revenue from advertisements, sponsorships, and merchandise. Cultural capital, knowledge, skills, and educational qualifications that provide advantages in social contexts. For Kid Influencers, this includes performance skills, digital literacy, and understanding of platform dynamics. Social capital, networks, connections, and relationships that provide access to opportunities and resources. Kid Influencers accumulate social capital through their fan communities, industry connections, and collaborative relationships.

Additionally, Bourdieu identified symbolic capital as the prestige and recognition that accrues from possessing other forms of capital. For Kid Influencers, subscriber counts, view statistics, and industry recognition represent forms of symbolic capital that enhance their market value.

Bourdieu's framework helps explain how different forms of capital interact and convert into each other within the Kid Influencer ecosystem. For example, the symbolic capital of popularity converts into economic capital through advertising revenue, while economic investments in production quality can enhance both cultural and symbolic capital.

The phenomenon of Kid Influencers intersects with broader theoretical frameworks concerning children's relationship with media. Traditionally, research has focused on children as media consumers rather than producers. Buckingham (2019) notes that digital platforms have disrupted this paradigm by enabling children to become content creators, raising new questions about agency, participation, and exploitation.

Theories of childhood and media must now account for children's complex positioning as simultaneously producers and consumers—what Bruns (2008) terms "produsers." This dual role creates tensions between empowerment and exploitation that require nuanced theoretical frameworks. Livingstone and Third (2017) argue that children's digital participation must be understood through both rights-based and protectionist perspectives, recognizing children's agency while acknowledging their vulnerabilities.

For Kid Influencers, these theoretical tensions manifest in practical questions about consent, labor conditions, educational impacts, and long-term consequences. As Livingstone et al. (2019) observe, children's digital footprints created through content creation may have unpredictable future implications for their privacy and identity development.

This study integrates these theoretical frameworks to examine Kid Influencers as a complex socioeconomic phenomenon situated at the intersection of digital media economics, cultural production, and childhood. The political economy approach provides the overarching framework, with specific attention to commodification processes operating across content, audience, and labor dimensions.

The Frankfurt School critique of the cultural industry helps illuminate how children's activities become standardized and commercialized, while Bourdieu's capital framework explains how various forms of value circulate and convert within Kid Influencer ecosystems. Theories of childhood and digital participation provide necessary context for understanding children's unique positioning within these systems.

By applying this integrated theoretical framework to the case studies of Ryan's World and Super Duper Ziyan, this study aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of how children become commodified as workers in the digital media landscape, the economic relationships and power dynamics surrounding their participation, and the similarities and differences across global and Indonesian contexts.

2. Methods

This study employs qualitative content analysis as its primary methodological approach to examine the commodification of children on YouTube through the Kid Influencer phenomenon. Content analysis provides a systematic and objective means to analyze communication content (Krippendorff, 2019), making it particularly suitable for identifying commodification patterns in digital media content. This approach allows for deep examination of how children are positioned as economic actors within digital platforms and how their activities are transformed into valuable commodities.

The research utilized a literature review methodology, which Hart (2018) describes as an objective, thorough, and critical assessment of literature related to the research topic. As Tranfield et al. (2003) note, a systematic literature review provides a methodical approach to synthesizing previous research findings. This method enables the identification of patterns, gaps, and contradictions in existing knowledge while establishing a foundation for new insights.

Two YouTube channels featuring Kid Influencers were selected as the primary research objects. Ryan's World (United States): A global channel with 32.5 million subscribers and over 51.6 billion views as of 2022, featuring Ryan Kaji who began his YouTube career at age 6. The channel, originally launched as "Ryan ToysReview" in 2015, has evolved into a multimedia enterprise encompassing multiple YouTube channels, merchandise, television shows, and video games. This channel represents one of the most commercially successful Kid Influencer operations globally. Super Duper Ziyen (Indonesia): An Indonesian channel with 4.5 million subscribers and 1.6 billion views, starring Ziyen who began appearing in videos at a young age. The channel features content predominantly in Bahasa Indonesia and has expanded to include multiple related channels featuring family members. With 565 uploaded videos since its inception in 2017, this channel represents a significant presence in the Indonesian digital media landscape.

These channels were selected based on several criteria: substantial audience reach (subscriber and view counts), commercial success (evidence of monetization and brand partnerships), longevity (established presence over multiple years), and representation of different cultural contexts (global/U.S. and Indonesian). This selection enables comparative analysis of commodification practices across cultural boundaries while maintaining focus on commercially significant examples of the Kid Influencer phenomenon.

Data collection focused on gathering relevant information from academic literature, professional publications, and channel content analysis. Key sources included academic research on Kid Influencers, digital media economics, and children's participation in online platforms, with particular attention to studies by Castillo-Abdul et al. (2020), Tur-Viñes et al. (2018), and Feller & Burroughs (2022). Industry reports and professional analyses from sources such as Forbes, which tracked the economic success of Kid Influencers (O'Connor, 2017). Publicly available channel data including subscriber counts, view statistics, and content descriptions from Socialblade.com (2023) and direct observation of channel content. Regulatory documents including Indonesian Law No. 13 of 2003 concerning Manpower and analyses of US regulations affecting child digital labor (Guzman Neyza, 2020; Riggio, 2021).

The literature review process involved systematic search, selection, and analysis of relevant sources, followed by thematic organization of findings to identify patterns related to commodification processes, regulatory frameworks, and economic dynamics.

The collected data were analyzed through a structured content analysis framework designed to identify patterns of commodification. This framework was developed based on Mosco's (2009) political economy theory with specific focus on three forms of commodification: (1) content commodification: Analysis of how children's activities are transformed into marketable content, including formatting techniques, narrative structures, and commercial integration; (2) audience commodification: Examination of how child audiences are packaged and sold to advertisers through engagement metrics, demographic targeting, and platform algorithms; and (3) worker commodification: Investigation of how children's performances constitute labor that generates economic value, raising questions about exploitation, regulation, and compensation.

This framework was supplemented by Bourdieu's (1986) capital theory to analyze how economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital interact in Kid Influencer ecosystems, as well as the Frankfurt School's cultural industry critique to examine standardization and commercialization processes. The comparative dimension of the analysis focused on identifying both universal commodification patterns and context-

specific variations between the US and Indonesian examples, considering cultural, economic, and regulatory differences.

The comparative dimension of this study involved systematic analysis of similarities and differences between the two selected channels across multiple parameters: (1) Commodification strategies: How commodification processes manifest in each channel, including variations in commercial integration techniques, branding approaches, and monetization methods; (2) Cultural adaptations: How commodification practices are adapted to different cultural contexts, including language, values, formats, and commercial partnerships relevant to specific markets; (3) scale and sophistication: Differences in production values, business complexity, and commercial integration related to the channels' different market positions and resource level; and (4) Regulatory responses: How each channel navigates different regulatory environments related to children's participation in commercial content. This comparative approach allows for identification of both universal commodification patterns that transcend cultural boundaries and context-specific implementations shaped by local cultural, economic, and regulatory environments.

The analysis integrates findings with multiple theoretical frameworks to develop a comprehensive understanding of Kid Influencers as economic and cultural phenomena. Political economy perspective by applying Mosco's (2009) commodification framework to understand how children and their activities are transformed into valuable economic assets. Cultural industry theory using Horkheimer and Adorno (2020) critique to examine how seemingly diverse children's content follows standardized formats and commercial imperatives. Bourdieu's capital theory and analyzing how different forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) interact within Kid Influencer ecosystems. Childhood studies perspectives and integrating considerations of children's agency, development, and rights within digital media environments (Livingstone & Third, 2017).

This multidimensional theoretical approach enables analysis of Kid Influencers as complex phenomena situated at the intersection of digital media economics, cultural production, and contemporary childhood. This methodological approach has several limitations that must be acknowledged. Access limitations, the study relies on publicly available content and cannot access behind-the-scenes information such as specific contractual arrangements, exact revenue figures, or internal decision-making processes. Child perspective, the method cannot directly capture children's subjective experiences, perceptions, or consent processes involved in content creation. Platform algorithms, the study cannot fully account for how YouTube's recommendation algorithms influence content creation strategies and channel development. Temporal scope, while the study examines content over time, it represents a snapshot of an evolving phenomenon that continues to develop in response to platform changes, regulatory pressures, and market dynamics.

Despite these limitations, content analysis provides a robust methodological foundation for examining the observable manifestations of commodification processes in Kid Influencer content. The findings presented in the results section emerge directly from this methodological approach, offering empirically grounded insights into how children become commodified as workers in the digital media landscape.

3. Results

3.1 Emergence and Growth of Kid Influencers on YouTube

The analysis of the selected YouTube channels reveals significant metrics that demonstrate their commercial scale and impact:

Table 2. Channel Growth and Performance Metrics

Metric	Ryan's World (US)	Super Duper Ziyen (Indonesia)
Year Established	2015 (as "Ryan ToysReview")	2017
Subscribers	32.5 million	4.5 million
Total Views	51.6 billion	1.6 billion
Videos Uploaded	2,000+	565
Additional Channels	5+ related channels	5 family-related channels
Reported Annual Revenue	\$29.5 million (Forbes, 2022)	Not publicly disclosed
Brand Extensions	Merchandise, TV shows, mobile apps, video games	Merchandise, social media presence

Both channels show substantial growth in subscribers and viewership over time, indicating successful audience development and retention strategies. The substantial view counts represent significant economic value through YouTube's monetization mechanisms and create opportunities for additional revenue streams.

3.2 Content Analysis Findings

Analysis of video content from both channels identified several predominant content categories and commercial integration strategies:

Table 3. Content Category Distribution

Content Category	Ryan's World (%)	Super Duper Ziyen (%)
Toy unboxing and reviews	42%	38%
Challenges and games	28%	24%
Educational/"learning" content	15%	12%
Travel and experience vlogs	10%	18%
Other content formats	5%	8%

Table 4. Commercial Integration Methods

Commercial Integration Method	Ryan's World	Super Duper Ziyen
Direct product reviews	Frequently used with branded toys	Frequently used with local and international brands
Branded content	Formal brand partnerships with major toy companies	Partnerships with Indonesian brands and some global companies
Integrated product placement	Sophisticated integration within narratives	Less sophisticated but frequent integration
Merchandise promotion	Heavy promotion of Ryan's World branded products	Limited own-brand merchandise
Experiential marketing	Visits to theme parks, attractions with commercial tie-ins	Visits to Indonesian tourist destinations and entertainment venues

Table 4. Cont.

Commercial Integration Method	Ryan's World	Super Duper Ziyan
Average products per video (toy reviews)	6.4 products	5.8 products
Average products per video (challenges/games)	3.2 products	2.9 products

The frequency of commercial elements varied across content categories, with toy unboxing/reviews showing the highest concentration of product placement, followed by challenges/games. Both channels demonstrated techniques for integrating commercial content within entertainment formats, often blurring the boundaries between entertainment and marketing.

3.3 Commodification Patterns

Three forms of commodification were identified across both channels:

Table 5. Commodification Patterns Comparison

Commodification Type	Ryan's World	Super Duper Ziyan
Content Commodification		
Structured content formats	Highly refined formats with consistent branding	Developing format consistency
Strategic content scheduling	Consistent upload schedule	Less regular scheduling
Episodic content	Multiple series and themed content	Some episodic content
Recognizable formulas	Established catchphrases, visual styles	Developing signature elements
Optimization for algorithm	Professional SEO and metadata optimization	Basic optimization techniques
Audience Commodification		
Calls to action	Sophisticated end-of-video engagement prompts	Simple subscription requests
Viewer participation solicitation	Regular challenges and comment requests	Occasional viewer engagement
Cross-promotion	Extensive cross-channel promotion	Basic cross-channel references
Algorithm optimization	Professional thumbnail design and title optimization	Improving thumbnail quality
Worker Commodification		
Performance elements	Professional-level scripting and performance	Semi-structured performance
Production schedule	Evidence of regular, structured filming	Less structured production
Persona development	Well-established on-camera persona	Developing performance identity
Brand development	Comprehensive personal branding	Early-stage personal branding
Extended activities	Multiple merchandise lines, appearances	Limited extension activities

The data show that these commodification processes are not isolated but operate as interconnected systems, with content designed simultaneously to showcase the child performer, appeal to audience expectations, and integrate commercial elements.

3.4 Regulatory Context Analysis

Analysis of the content with respect to regulatory frameworks revealed differences in compliance practices:

Table 6. Regulatory Practices Comparison

Regulatory Element	Ryan's World (US)	Super Duper Ziyen (Indonesia)
Sponsorship disclosures	Consistent "#ad" or "sponsored" labels	Inconsistent disclosure practices
Paid promotion labels	YouTube "Includes paid promotion" labels	Rare use of formal labels
Advertisement separation	Some distinction between content and ads	Integrated advertising without clear separation
Age-appropriate content	COPPA-compliant restrictions	General child-friendly content
Labor regulation evidence	No visible references	No visible references
Parental supervision	Visible parental presence	Visible parental presence
Educational content claims	Emphasis on "educational value"	Less emphasis on educational justification

Both channels operate in regulatory environments with limited specific provisions for digital child performers. The observable content suggests adaptation to general advertising standards but reveals limited transparency regarding child labor protections, working conditions, or financial arrangements.

4. Discussions

The findings reveal that Kid Influencer content represents a sophisticated form of multi-layered commodification that extends beyond traditional media models. As Mosco (2009) theorizes, commodification transforms use values into exchange values, and in the case of Kid Influencers, this transformation operates simultaneously across content, audience, and labor dimensions.

The content commodification patterns identified align with Adorno and Horkheimer's (1944/2002) critique of the cultural industry, where seemingly diverse cultural expressions conform to standardized formats dictated by commercial imperatives. Ryan's World and Super Duper Ziyen both present carefully structured content that appears spontaneous but follows predictable formats optimized for engagement and advertising integration. This standardization reflects what Fuchs (2014) describes as the intensification of cultural industry processes in digital platforms.

The audience commodification evident in both channels extends Smythe's (1977) concept of audiences as commodities. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2018) argue, digital platforms intensify this commodification through sophisticated analytics and targeting capabilities. Both Ryan's World and Super Duper Ziyen effectively package their child audiences as valuable commodities for advertisers seeking access to young consumers, creating what Cohen (2008) describes as a "valorization of surveillance" where audience data becomes a primary source of value.

Most significantly, the worker commodification findings highlight how children's labor generates substantial economic value within digital media economies. Unlike traditional child performers who are typically regulated under entertainment industry standards, Kid Influencers operate in regulatory gray areas that potentially limit protections. As Riggio (2021) observes, this represents a significant gap between technological advancement and regulatory frameworks.

The comparative analysis between Ryan's World and Super Duper Ziyen reveals both universal commodification strategies and culturally specific adaptations. Both channels employ similar fundamental approaches to content creation, audience engagement, and commercial integration, suggesting that these commodification processes transcend cultural boundaries. This supports Castillo-Abdul et al.'s (2020) observation that Kid Influencer formats have become globalized templates adopted across different markets.

However, significant cultural adaptations are evident. Super Duper Ziyen places greater emphasis on family involvement and cultural experiences relevant to Indonesian audiences, while Ryan's World demonstrates more sophisticated production values and commercial integration techniques reflecting its larger scale and market position. These differences align with Mardatillah et al.'s (2019) observation that commodification processes adapt to local cultural contexts while maintaining fundamental economic functions.

The regulatory differences between the U.S. and Indonesian contexts appear to influence disclosure practices and commercial integration approaches. Ryan's World demonstrates greater adherence to formal advertising disclosure requirements, likely reflecting the more developed regulatory oversight in the U.S. market. As Guzman (2020) notes, even in developed regulatory environments, digital platforms create challenges for traditional regulatory approaches.

The economic structure surrounding Kid Influencer content involves multiple stakeholders in asymmetrical power relationships. Platform providers (primarily YouTube/Google) establish the technical infrastructure and rules of operation while extracting significant value through revenue-sharing models. Child performers and their families provide the essential creative labor but operate within platform constraints and depend on algorithmic systems they cannot control. Advertisers gain access to valuable child audiences through both traditional advertising and integrated product features, while ancillary businesses including talent management agencies and merchandise producers participate in value extraction.

This economic ecosystem reflects McQuail's (2010) description of media operating in dual markets—serving both audience content needs and advertiser access needs simultaneously. The substantial economic rewards associated with successful Kid Influencer channels create powerful incentives for parents to involve their children in content creation, potentially without adequate consideration of long-term impacts on child development, privacy, and well-being.

Applying Bourdieu's (1986) capital framework helps explain how Kid Influencers accumulate and convert different forms of capital. The children acquire cultural capital through performance skills and platform expertise, social capital through fan communities and industry networks, and symbolic capital through subscriber counts and industry recognition. These forms of capital then convert into economic capital through monetization, sponsorships, and merchandise sales. This conversion process exemplifies

what Livingstone and Third (2017) describe as the "monetization of childhood" in digital environments.

The findings highlight significant ethical concerns and regulatory gaps surrounding Kid Influencers. The blending of play and work, entertainment and advertising, and public and private life creates complex situations that traditional regulatory frameworks are ill-equipped to address. As Buckingham (2019) argues, children's digital participation involves tensions between empowerment and exploitation that require nuanced approaches.

The visible evidence of commodification across both channels raises questions about children's agency, consent, and long-term well-being. While the content presents images of children enjoying their activities, the structured nature of the content suggests significant adult direction and commercial imperatives that may compromise authentic child expression. This tension reflects what Stoilova et al. (2019) identify as the complex negotiations between children's rights to participation and protection in digital environments.

Current regulatory frameworks in both the United States and Indonesia appear inadequate to address the specific circumstances of Kid Influencers. Labor regulations designed for traditional workplaces struggle to address home-based content creation where parents are both guardians and de facto employers. Advertising standards developed for traditional media face challenges in regulating the integrated nature of commercial content in Kid Influencer videos. This regulatory inadequacy creates protection gaps that potentially expose children to exploitation while benefiting commercial interests.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the commodification of children as workers in the digital media landscape through the phenomenon of Kid Influencers on YouTube. Through systematic analysis of relevant literature and comparative examination of Ryan's World and Super Duper Ziyan channels, several significant findings have emerged:

First, the research confirms Mosco's (2009) theoretical framework of commodification operating across multiple dimensions in Kid Influencer content. Children become commodified workers when their performances generate economic value through monetization, sponsorships, and product placements. Their content undergoes commodification as it transforms from authentic child expression into strategically designed marketing vehicles. Simultaneously, child audiences become commodified as their attention is packaged and sold to advertisers seeking access to young consumers.

Second, the study identifies consistent commodification strategies employed across both global (Ryan's World) and Indonesian (Super Duper Ziyan) contexts, including toy reviews, experiential content, product integration, and cross-platform promotion. While these strategies operate globally, their specific manifestations adapt to cultural contexts and audience preferences, demonstrating both the universality of commodification processes and their cultural specificity.

Third, the research documents substantial economic value generated through Kid Influencer content, with benefits distributed among multiple stakeholders including platforms, performers and their families, advertisers, and ancillary businesses. This economic ecosystem creates powerful incentives for continued and expanded

commodification practices while potentially compromising children's interests as both performers and audiences.

Fourth, the study highlights significant regulatory gaps in both United States and Indonesian contexts, where traditional child labor protections and media regulations have not adequately evolved to address the unique circumstances of children creating digital content. This regulatory inadequacy creates protection vulnerabilities that may expose children to exploitation while benefiting commercial interests.

These findings contribute to our understanding of digital media's political economy by illuminating how capitalism penetrates even spaces ostensibly created for children's entertainment and education. The research provides empirical evidence for Mosco's theoretical framework of commodification while extending its application to the specific context of children's digital media participation.

The study's limitations include its reliance on publicly available information rather than direct access to internal business practices or decision-making processes. Additionally, the focus on two prominent channels provides depth at the expense of breadth, potentially limiting generalizability across the diverse Kid Influencer landscape.

Future research should investigate a broader range of channels across different cultural contexts, potentially incorporating interviews with content creators, parents, platform representatives, and young audiences to develop a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term impacts of participation as Kid Influencers on child development would provide valuable insights currently absent from the literature.

As digital platforms continue to evolve, policymakers, parents, educators, and media companies must collaborate to develop appropriate protections that balance children's creative expression with safeguards against exploitation in the digital economy. This research underscores the urgent need for regulatory frameworks specifically addressing digital content creation by children and provides a foundation for evidence-based policy development.

References

- Armando, A. (2016). *Televisi Indonesia di bawah kapitalisme global*. Penerbit Buku Kompas.
- Arviani, H. (2020). Budaya Global dalam Industri Budaya: Tinjauan Madzhab Frankfurt Terhadap Iklan, Pop Culture, dan Industri Hiburan. *Global and Policy Journal of International Relations*, 1(02). <https://doi.org/10.33005/jgp.v1i02.1993>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In Richardson John G. (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu-forms-capital.htm>
- Bruns, A. (2008). Blogs, Wikipedia, Second life, and Beyond: from production to produsage. In *Digital formations*. Peter Lang.
- Buckingham, D. (2019). The media education manifesto. In *The manifesto series*. Polity Press.
- Castillo-Abdul, B., Romero-Rodríguez, L. M., & Larrea-Ayala, A. (2020). Kid influencers in Spain: understanding the themes they address and preteens' engagement with their YouTube channels. *Heliyon*, 6(9), e05056. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e05056>

- Ceci, L. (2025). YouTube - Statistics & Facts. Statista.com. <https://www.statista.com/topics/2019/youtube/#topicOverview>
- Cohen, N. S. (2008). The Valorization of Surveillance: Towards a Political Economy of Facebook. *Democratic Communiqué*, 22(1), 5–22. files/1332/Cohen - The Valorization of Surveillance Towards a Politi.pdf
- Collins, W. A. (1975). The Developing Child as Viewer. *Journal of Communication*, 25(4), 35–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1975.tb00636.x>
- Durham, M. G., & Kellner, D. (2012). *Media and cultural studies: keyworks* (2nd ed). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Feller, G., & Burroughs, B. (2022). Branding Kidfluencers: Regulating Content and Advertising on YouTube. *Television & New Media*, 23(6), 575–592. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764211052882>
- Forbes.com. (2022). Ryan Kaji: Profile. Forbes.Com. <https://www.forbes.com/profile/ryan-kaji/?sh=77e929646f3c>
- Fuchs, C. (2014). *Digital labour and Karl Marx*. Routledge.
- Guzman Neyza, J. D. (2020). The Children of YouTube: How an Entertainment Industry Goes Around Child Labor Laws. *Child and Family Law Journal*, 8(1), 84–115. <https://lawpublications.barry.edu/cflj/vol8/iss1/4>
- Hardy, J. (2014). Critical political economy of the media: an introduction. In *Communication and society*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Hart, C. (2018). Doing a literature review: releasing the research imagination. In *Sage study skills* (2nd edition). Sage.
- Hesmondhalgh, D., & Baker, S. (2011). Creative labour: media work in three cultural industries. In *Culture, economy and the social*. Routledge.
- Hidalgo-Mari, T., & Segarra-Saavedra, J. (2017). The Youtuber Phenomenon and its Transmedia Expansion. *Analysis of Youth Empowerment in Social Media*. Fonseca, *Journal of Communication*, 15(15), 43. <https://doi.org/10.14201/fjc2017154356>
- Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (2020). The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception. In G. S. Noeri (Ed.), *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (pp. 94–136). Stanford University Press. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9780804788090-007/html>
- Law Number 40 of 1999 concerning the Press, (1999).
- Law Number 13 of 2003 concerning Manpower, (2003).
- Jurriëns, E., Tapsell, R., & Muse, P. (2017). Digital Indonesia: Connectivity and Divergence. In *Indonesia update series*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Krippendorff, K. (2019). *Content analysis: an introduction to its methodology* (Fourth edition). SAGE. files/1356/Krippendorff - 2019 - Content analysis an introduction to its methodolo.pdf
- Laksono, P. (2019). KUASA MEDIA DALAM KOMUNIKASI MASSA. *Al-Tsiqoh : Jurnal Ekonomi Dan Dakwah Islam*, 4(2), 49–61. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.31538/altsiq.v4i2.610>
- Livingstone, S., Stoilova, M., & Nandagiri, R. (2019). Children's data and privacy online: Growing up in a digital age. *London School of Economics and Political Science*, 1–57. files/1380/Domazet and Šušak-Lozanovska - 2023 - Children's data and privacy online Growing up in .pdf

- Livingstone, S., & Third, A. (2017). Children and young people's rights in the digital age: An emerging agenda. *New Media & Society*, 19(5), 657–670. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816686318>
- Mansell, R., & Steinmueller, W. E. (2020). Advanced introduction to platform economics. In *Elgar advanced introductions*. Edward Elgar Publishing. files/1373/Mansell and Steinmueller - 2020 - Advanced introduction to platform economics.pdf
- Mardatillah, A., Raharja, S. J., Hermanto, B., & Herawaty, T. (2019). Riau Malay food culture in Pekanbaru, Riau Indonesia: commodification, authenticity, and sustainability in a global business era. *Journal of Ethnic Foods*, 6(1), 3. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42779-019-0005-7>
- McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. Sage Publications.
- Mosco, V. (2009). *The Political Economy of Communication*. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://sk.sagepub.com/books/the-political-economy-of-communication>
- O'Connor, C. (2017, December 20). Forbes Top Influencers: Meet The Kids Making Millions Reviewing Toys, Rapping And More. *Forbes.Com*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/clareoconnor/2017/12/20/forbes-top-influencers-meet-the-kids-making-millions-reviewing-toys-rapping-and-more/?sh=6187b2b04142>
- Riggio, A. G. (2021). The Small-er Screen: YouTube Vlogging and the Unequipped Child Entertainment Labor Laws. *Seattle University Law Review*, 44(2), 493–530. files/1374/Riggio - The Small-er Screen YouTube Vlogging and the Uneq.pdf
- Sihombing, L. H. (2023). The Values of Character Education in an Animated Movie,"Pororo, The Little Penguin". *KOMUNIKA: Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi*, 17(1), 103–113. <https://doi.org/10.24090/komunika.v17i1.7983>
- Smythe, D. W. (1977). Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism. *Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 1(3), 1–27.
- Socialblade.com. (2023). Superduper Ziyan's YouTube Stats (Summary Profile). *Socialblade.Com*. <https://socialblade.com/youtube/channel/UCX4RIEWrnNvS39AsHIKm8TA>
- Tranfield, D., Denyer, D., & Smart, P. (2003). Towards a Methodology for Developing Evidence - Informed Management Knowledge by Means of Systematic Review. *British Journal of Management*, 14(3), 207 – 222. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.00375>
- Tur-Viñes, V., Núñez-Gómez, P., & González-Río, M. J. (2018). Kid influencers on YouTube. A space for responsibility. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 73, 1211–1230. <https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2018-1303>
- Yosef, I. (2022). Komodifikasi Anak dalam Variety Show Korea Selatan The Return of Superman (TROS). *Jurnal ILMU KOMUNIKASI*, 19(2), 145–162. <https://doi.org/10.24002/jik.v19i2.3998>