

Little Influencers, Big Impact: Media Literacy and Social Media Visibility Among Thai Children

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The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In Thailand, social media has become a central part of how many children experience everyday life not only as viewers but increasingly as content creators and aspirational influencers. This paper explores how children, particularly those under the age of 13, are navigating online visibility, often without the media literacy skills needed to critically understand their participation in digital culture. Focusing on the Thai context, I examine how children are positioned, and at times positioned themselves within the influencer economy through family vlogs, product unboxings, lifestyle content, and viral moments. Much of what is known about child influencers comes from Western media studies but less has been said about how these practices take shape in Southeast Asia. In Thailand, where social media use is widespread and influencer culture deeply embedded in youth culture, children's digital presence is often shaped by parents, brands, and platform algorithms. Some begin their visibility journeys via parenting content shared by adults, while others are directly involved in creating and performing for platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. This paper argues for the need to integrate media literacy education early on, not only for children but also for caregivers so that all involved are better equipped to navigate the ethical, emotional, and commercial dynamics of growing up online.

Keywords: media literacy, kidfluencers, social media, TikTok, YouTube

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The International Academic Forum
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Introduction

In the last decade, Thailand has witnessed an unprecedented rise in influencer culture, transforming how brands connect with consumers and how individuals, including children, engage with digital media. Influencer marketing expenditure in Thailand is projected to reach USD 77.91 million in 2025, up from USD 68.78 million in 2024, with the influencer population growing from an estimated 2 million in 2024 to approximately 3 million in 2025 (Taslaud, 2025). This rapid growth reflects a broader global shift toward social media-driven consumer engagement, where influencers, perceived as relatable, authentic figures wield significant power in shaping audience behaviours (Boucher, 2016; Jin et al., 2019). In Thailand, this influence is particularly visible in digital commerce: 76% of Thai digital buyers report making purchases based on influencer recommendations (Market Research Thailand, 2024).

Within this expanding influencer economy, children under the age of 13 are emerging as a distinct category of content creators. These “child influencers” or “kidfluencers” participate in a range of activities, including family vlogs, product unboxings, lifestyle content, and viral challenges on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. Micro- and nano-influencers dominate the Thai market, and a growing proportion are minors. This trend is reinforced by platform architectures that reward frequent posting, emotional intimacy, and visually engaging content, elements that can be particularly effective when children are involved. For brands, child influencers represent an opportunity to tap into family-oriented markets and peer influence networks. For families, they offer potential income streams and pathways to social visibility.

However, the increasing digital visibility of children raises urgent questions about ethics, agency, and long-term wellbeing. Research from Western contexts has documented how children’s online personas are often staged, curated, and commodified, a process Abidin (2017, 2018) describes as “calibrated amateurism,” where seemingly spontaneous play is carefully orchestrated to serve commercial purposes. Such content can blur the boundaries between leisure and labour, introducing a form of “playful work” in which children perform repetitive, brand-oriented tasks under the guise of fun (Abidin, 2020). While these concerns have been widely discussed in Europe, North America, and Australia, there is comparatively little empirical research on how these dynamics play out in Southeast Asia, and in Thailand specifically.

The Thai context offers both similarities and distinct differences from Western cases. Influencer culture is deeply embedded in youth identity formation, with influencers now ranking among the top ten dream careers for Thai adolescents, outpacing traditional professions such as law or aviation (NESDC, 2024). Yet policy frameworks to regulate child participation in influencer marketing remain underdeveloped. Existing media literacy initiatives tend to focus on protecting children as consumers from harmful content rather than addressing their roles as content producers, workers, and commercial assets. At the same time, broader challenges such as the spread of misinformation over 5,000 fake news items traced to 7,000 accounts in 2023, some linked to influencers underscore the need for critical engagement with digital content across all age groups.

This paper responds to these gaps by examining how Thai children under 13 engage with social media as both viewers and creators, and how their participation is shaped by the intersecting influences of family, brands, and platforms. It applies a situational mapping

framework (Clarke, 2005; Markham & Lindgren, 2014) to explore the multiple actors and structures involved in children's digital visibility, drawing on content analysis of selected child influencer accounts and their associated brand collaborations.

The study has four main objectives:

1. To analyse the nature and scope of Thai children's participation in influencer culture.
2. To identify how family members, brands, and platform algorithms shape children's online visibility.
3. To examine the gaps in media literacy among children, caregivers, and audiences in the Thai context.
4. To explore the ethical, emotional, and commercial implications of children's digital labour.

By addressing these objectives, the paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship on digital childhoods, influencer economies, and media literacy. It argues for a redefinition of media literacy that includes an understanding of children as active participants in monetised online systems, and calls for regulatory, educational, and platform-based interventions that protect children's rights while supporting their creative expression.

Literature Review

Influencer Culture and Digital Participation

Social media has fundamentally altered the way individuals interact, communicate, and build personal brands. Influencer culture defined by individuals who use digital platforms to cultivate audiences and monetise their visibility has become a prominent part of the digital economy (Jin et al., 2019; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers are often perceived as more relatable, enabling them to sway audience behaviour more effectively (Boucher, 2016). Followers actively choose to engage with influencers, creating parasocial relationships that can significantly shape consumer decision-making (Abidin, 2018). Children have not been immune to these dynamics. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok not only serve as spaces for entertainment and social interaction but also as avenues for children to create and share content. With over 400 million downloads of YouTube Kids between 2016 and 2022 (Leci, 2023), online spaces have become central to childhood leisure. This has blurred the boundaries between viewing and producing, with many children participating in content creation, either independently or under parental guidance (Verdoodt et al., 2020).

The Rise of Kidfluencers

The term "kidfluencer" refers to child influencers who have amassed substantial followings and who hold persuasive power over peers and consumers alike. They often feature in family branding ventures, where their personas and activities are integrated into broader commercial strategies (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). Abidin's (2017, 2018) concept of "calibrated amateurism" describes how these children's online content is carefully orchestrated to appear spontaneous, thereby maintaining authenticity while serving commercial aims.

Family vlogging and "microcelebrity parenting" further complicate the picture, as parents become co-producers of their children's online identities, managing everything from creative direction to monetisation (Abidin, 2020). The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023)

has cautioned that such practices may constitute a form of child labour, particularly when children's work is continuous, monetised, and controlled by guardians without appropriate compensation safeguards.

Ethical Concerns and Digital Labour

The involvement of children in influencer culture raises multiple ethical considerations. These include issues of informed consent, given children's limited capacity to understand the long-term implications of digital visibility (Leaver, 2021), and the potential exploitation of children's labour for commercial gain. The concept of "playbor" where play activities are intertwined with productive labour illustrates how commercial activities can be disguised as recreational participation (Ågren, 2022). In addition, the preservation of children's digital legacies raises questions about privacy, reputation, and autonomy. As Abidin's "star accelerator" concept suggests, digital platforms not only amplify children's visibility but also shape them into potential commercial assets within broader influencer economies. This dynamic often operates without robust legal or ethical oversight, leaving significant gaps in protection.

The Thai Influencer Economy

Thailand is one of Southeast Asia's largest influencer markets, second only to Indonesia in terms of influencer population. By 2025, the country's influencer count is projected to reach three million, with individual earnings ranging from 800 THB to 700,000 THB per post (NESDC, 2024). Influencers now rank among the top ten dream careers for Thai adolescents, ahead of traditionally prestigious professions like law or aviation.

Micro- and nano-influencers dominate the Thai landscape, with children under 18 including those under 13 playing an increasingly visible role. Popular content niches include food and drink, fashion, beauty, and lifestyle, with Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok serving as the primary platforms. The commercial potential of child influencers in Thailand is significant, but the rapid expansion of this sector has outpaced the development of regulatory frameworks.

Policy discussions, such as those led by the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC), have highlighted urgent concerns: the proliferation of fake news (over 5,000 fake news topics in 2023 traced to 7,000 accounts), the lack of influencer registration systems, and insufficient media literacy training for both creators and consumers. NESDC recommendations include adopting regulatory models from countries such as China, the UAE, and Norway, as well as instituting mandatory media literacy education.

Media Literacy in the Thai Context

In Thailand, media literacy education has been part of tertiary curricula since the 1970s, initially focusing on cultural power and media as constructed realities (Langer & Dounghummes, 2009). Over time, efforts have expanded to include primary and secondary education, often in collaboration with UNESCO (Thailand) and the Ministry of Education, with the aim of protecting young audiences from harmful content (Nupairoj, 2013; Suttisima et al., 2020).

However, these initiatives largely frame children as passive consumers rather than active producers of media. While there is an emerging body of work exploring digital participation, most programs do not address the specific skills and protections needed by child content creators. Caregivers, too, are rarely targeted in media literacy programs, despite their central role in managing children's online activities.

Research on media literacy for other vulnerable demographics such as older adults shows that program effectiveness depends on tailoring content to learners' developmental, cultural, and technological contexts. This has direct relevance for child influencers: age-appropriate, culturally sensitive approaches are crucial to equipping them with the skills to navigate the ethical, emotional, and commercial complexities of digital participation. While there is a growing global literature on child influencers, there is limited empirical research focused on Southeast Asia, and Thailand in particular. Existing Thai studies often concentrate on children's media consumption, with relatively few addressing their roles as producers and commercial actors in influencer economies. Regulatory frameworks remain underdeveloped, and there is little guidance for brands or platforms on ethical engagement with child influencers. This study addresses these gaps by examining not only the content produced by Thai child influencers but also the broader socio-technical systems families, brands, and platforms that shape their participation. By situating the analysis within the Thai cultural and economic context, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how influencer culture intersects with childhood, labour, and media literacy in Southeast Asia.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach situated within an interpretivist paradigm, aiming to understand how children under the age of 13 in Thailand navigate and construct meaning around their participation as social media influencers. Rather than producing statistical generalisations, the study sought to capture in-depth, context-specific insights into the lived experiences, meanings, and online practices of these children. Situational analysis (Clarke, 2005), an extension of grounded theory, was selected as the guiding methodological framework. This approach allowed for the mapping of relationships among human and non-human actors, cultural discourses, and platform structures that shape children's digital visibility within the Thai influencer economy.

Data were collected through qualitative digital ethnography, focusing on publicly accessible content on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. This immersive approach enabled observation of the online environments where Thai child influencers actively participate. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify 20 influencer accounts that met the following criteria: the influencer was under the age of 13, the account had been active and posting regularly for at least six months, and the content aligned with common influencer genres such as family vlogs, product unboxings, lifestyle videos, or viral challenges. Over a three-month period (February-April 2025), observational data were documented in the form of field notes, screenshots, and detailed records of captions, hashtags, interaction styles, and audience engagement patterns.

The analysis process was inductive, combining thematic coding with situational mapping to uncover patterns and relationships in the data. Thematic coding began with an initial open-coding stage, where observation notes were examined line-by-line to identify recurring concepts and practices. This was followed by focused coding, which grouped related codes into broader thematic categories such as "parental mediation," "algorithmic influence," and

“commercialisation of play.” Situational maps were then created to visualise the connections between key actors (e.g., children, parents, platforms, brands) and contextual factors (e.g., cultural values, platform algorithms, and influencer marketing practices). NVivo 14 software was used to organise and code the dataset, as well as to link observation excerpts to emerging thematic categories.

Ethical considerations were central to the research design and only publicly available online content was analysed - no attempts were made to contact or engage directly with underage participants. All identifiable information, including usernames and profile images, was anonymised in field notes and subsequent outputs. Given the vulnerabilities of child subjects in digital spaces, care was taken to ensure that no materials in the research outputs would further increase their visibility or exposure. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of multiple data points within the ethnographic observations, as well as the researcher’s reflexive engagement with the data. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout the observation and analysis phases to critically examine the researcher’s own positionality, both as a media scholar and as a parent. This reflexive process helped mitigate bias and ensured a more transparent interpretation of the findings. While the qualitative approach provided rich and detailed insights, it also came with limitations. The focus on public-facing accounts with visible follower engagement meant that the study did not capture the experiences of children with smaller audiences or those operating in more private online spaces. Furthermore, the three-month observation period restricted the ability to track longitudinal changes in content production, audience interactions, and influencer trajectories over time.

Analysis

The qualitative digital ethnographic analysis of 20 public accounts belonging to Thai child influencers under 13 revealed a set of interconnected dynamics that illuminate how children’s online visibility is shaped in the Thai context. These findings are organised into five themes: (1) parental mediation as both enabler and gatekeeper, (2) platform and algorithmic influence on content trends, (3) the commercialisation of play and self-presentation, (4) cultural framing in the Thai influencer ecosystem, and (5) ethical and media literacy implications.

Parental Mediation as Both Enabler and Gatekeeper

Every account analysed showed strong parental involvement in content creation, albeit with varying levels of visibility. Parents often acted as creative directors, editors, and managers, orchestrating the technical and logistical aspects of filming, securing brand deals, and controlling what aspects of the child’s life were made public. This dual role reflects global trends where parents of young influencers serve as both facilitators and protectors (Abidin, 2015; Bishop, 2018), yet in the Thai context, it also aligns with broader cultural patterns of parental authority in guiding children’s extracurricular activities (Nopparat & Siriyuvasak, 2020).

While parental mediation ensured access to resources and safeguarded certain aspects of privacy such as blurring school locations or excluding sensitive personal details it also meant that children’s agency was mediated through adult decision-making. This raises important ethical considerations, especially where commercial interests might conflict with the child’s autonomy. Similar concerns have been noted in Western contexts regarding the “sharenting”

phenomenon (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017), but the commercialisation observed here was more embedded in family-based entrepreneurial activity, reflecting Thailand's long-standing informal economy culture.

Platform and Algorithmic Influence on Content Trends

In this study, situational mapping identified the algorithm as a powerful non-human actor shaping the creative trajectory of child influencers. Families frequently recalibrated their content strategies in response to a single high-performing post, shifting focus towards genres such as dance challenges, product unboxings, and other formats that the platform's recommendation system appeared to reward. This pattern aligns with international research (Bishop, 2021) showing that influencer production often reacts to platform metrics; however, in the Thai context, it is further characterised by the incorporation of distinctly local and hybrid cultural elements. For example, creators blend global viral trends with Thai-specific performance styles, such as *Songkran*-themed celebrations or K-pop choreography infused with Western pop influences, resulting in content that is both algorithmically visible and culturally resonant.

Commercialisation of Play and Self-Presentation

Play was a dominant content theme, but it was often highly structured to serve commercial purposes. Toy unboxings resembled product demonstrations; family outings doubled as location-based promotions with tagged brands and discount codes. This commodification of leisure parallels the "playbor" dynamic (Kerr & Kelleher, 2015), where children's play activities become productive labour within digital economies.

In Thailand, this is particularly significant given the integration of influencer marketing into everyday consumer culture (Punyapiroje & Morrison, 2022). Brands often target family-based influencer accounts for lifestyle, food, and retail promotions, and this study found that such partnerships frequently shaped the narratives and visual aesthetics of children's content. While these collaborations can provide financial benefits and creative opportunities, they also blur the boundary between authentic self-expression and brand-driven performance.

Cultural Framing and the Thai Influencer Ecosystem

Cultural values strongly shaped the style, tone, and structure of children's influencer content in Thailand. Rather than relying solely on the traditional notion of *sanook* (enjoyment), the videos often reflected a broader contemporary emphasis on creating สนุกและน่าสนใจ, content that is not only fun but also visually engaging, fast-paced, and highly shareable. This was evident in the bright aesthetics, upbeat editing, and integration of trending audio, memes, and challenges circulating on both local and global platforms.

Family participation remained central. Respect for elders and collectivist norms were visible in the frequent on-screen presence of parents particularly mothers either as co-performers, narrators, or behind-the-scenes directors. In contrast to many Western contexts where child influencer branding often focuses on the child as a stand-alone personality, Thai influencer identity was often positioned as a family-led enterprise. This reflects both collectivist traditions (Hofstede, 2011) and the evolving model of Thai household entrepreneurship, where digital media has become an extension of the family business, and intergenerational collaboration is a source of authenticity, trust, and cultural resonance.

Ethical and Media Literacy Implications

The study identified clear gaps in critical media literacy, not only among the children but also their supporting adults. While parents engaged in protective behaviours such as avoiding precise geolocation disclosures, there was little evidence of deeper reflection on the long-term implications of building an online persona from an early age, including data privacy, content ownership, and potential reputational risks.

This aligns with Thai research on media literacy (Doungphummes et al., 2024), which highlights that initiatives have historically prioritised children and youth in formal education but have given less attention to equipping parents or caregivers with the skills to navigate commercialised and algorithm-driven media environments. In the context of influencer culture, this lack of intergenerational media literacy poses heightened ethical risks, as parents may inadvertently contribute to overexposure or commercial exploitation.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how Thai children under the age of 13 navigate and make sense of their roles as social media influencers, applying a qualitative digital ethnographic approach grounded in situational analysis. The findings contribute new empirical insights into the Thai influencer ecosystem and address the four objectives outlined in the Introduction.

First, the analysis of 20 public influencer accounts demonstrated that Thai children's participation in influencer culture is multifaceted, spanning family vlogs, product unboxings, lifestyle content, and viral challenges. These activities are embedded in both global influencer trends and Thai-specific cultural practices, producing hybrid content styles that blend international formats with locally resonant performance elements.

Second, the study revealed how family members, particularly parents, play a dual role as enablers and gatekeepers of children's online visibility. Parents act as creative directors, brand negotiators, and content managers, often framing the influencer identity as a family-led enterprise. Platform algorithms emerged as another powerful actor, directing content trends and incentivising specific genres such as dance challenges and product reviews through their recommendation systems.

Third, clear gaps in media literacy were identified among both children and caregivers. While some protective measures were evident, such as avoiding geolocation data, there was little evidence of long-term strategic thinking around data privacy, digital legacy, or the risks of commercial overexposure. This aligns with existing critiques of Thai media literacy initiatives, which focus more on shielding children from harmful content than on equipping them to act as ethical, informed content producers.

Finally, the research highlighted the ethical, emotional, and commercial implications of children's digital labour in Thailand. Leisure activities frequently became structured performances for brands, illustrating the "playbor" dynamic in which play and work are intertwined. While such collaborations can offer financial and creative benefits, they also raise concerns about exploitation, loss of autonomy, and blurred boundaries between authentic self-expression and market-driven content.

Overall, this study underscores the urgent need for policy and educational interventions that recognise children as active participants in monetised digital systems. Media literacy must be reframed to address the realities of influencer economies, with tailored programs for both children and their caregivers. Regulatory frameworks should ensure transparent, ethical practices in brand partnerships with minors, while platforms must take greater responsibility in moderating and supporting young content creators. By situating these issues within the Thai cultural and economic context, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how childhood, labour, and media converge in Southeast Asia's rapidly evolving digital landscape.

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