

Mumfluencers: Family “Vlogging” and the Commodification of Childhood

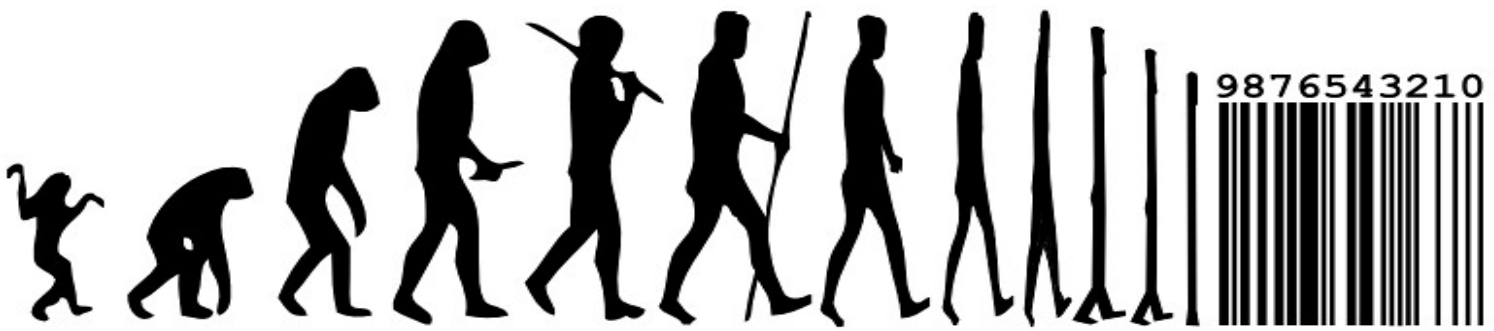
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Social media, beginning as a benign way of connecting with friends, has, in recent years, become manifest in a corporate world of advertising and as a means of collecting revenue. “Influencers” are described as “a new type of third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (Freberg et al. 2011: 92). Considered to be a next generation of online celebrities, influencers promote their idealistic luxury lifestyles to “influence” consumers to purchase goods.

A specific branch of influencing is colloquially referred to as “Mumfluencing” or “Sharenting”. In which the age-old tradition of home videos are used as a mean of advertising product to large audiences under the guise of wholesome family content. Perhaps more disturbingly due to the candid “home video” nature: “the business of family vlogging can easily disguise itself as an entirely voluntary, informal, and unorganized way for parents to showcase to the world the harmless fun they have with their children” (Riggio 2021; 511).



What lies under the surface, however, are the negative implications for the young children of these families: their childhoods commercialised as a lucrative source of income for their parents. With videos titled “We Can’t Believe Posie Is 4!!! Emotional Birthday Special” (Labrant Fam 2022), “Mumfluencers” use their children’s every milestone as branding opportunities, with every YouTube video including some sort of branding deal and YouTube advert. Family vlogging or “Mumfluencing” is indisputably a hugely successful enterprise, one of the only careers in the world where children are visibly higher earners than older counterparts with children under 13 receiving almost three times as many views as other older creators (Pew Research 2019) and the highest earning YouTube star in 2019, with an income of \$29 million, the Forbes article itself, titled “The Highest-Paid YouTube Stars of 2019: The Kids Are Killing It” (Forbes 2019). The concerning implications of publicizing children to millions are made worse due to the absence of consent toddlers and even babies are able to give, in regard to having their most personal moments



publicized to millions; “Mumfluencers” have been seen to publicize infants whilst they are still in the womb: “as expectant parents upload images from their ultrasound scan or reveal their due dates” (Taylor, 2008; 145).

In order to understand the concerning impact that commercialisation has had upon children of family vloggers, it is crucial to analyse the social and economic structures that have encouraged these behaviours. In a society, in which, as Wood states “everything... is a commodity produced for the market” (Wood, 2002: 96–7), it is arguable that the commodification of a perfect family life is not a surprising development of a capitalist society. In an increasingly Neo-liberal capitalist society, the process of commodification, “a world in which

everything is for sale: all goods, services, relationships, rights, nature, “mind, body and soul” (Harrison, 2006: 111) is certainly applicable to the notion of family vlogging, where even our most raw and human experiences are able to be contrived into sellable material. The Saccone Jolys, an American “Vlogging” family’s most viewed video, entitled “LIVES CHANGED FOREVER”, is a “video blog, shows the birthing process of their youngest child, showing Mother Anna Sacolly, holding her child in her arms for the first time (Sacconejolys 2012). The video has garnered almost 6,000,000 views since its publishing and, through Google’s advertising

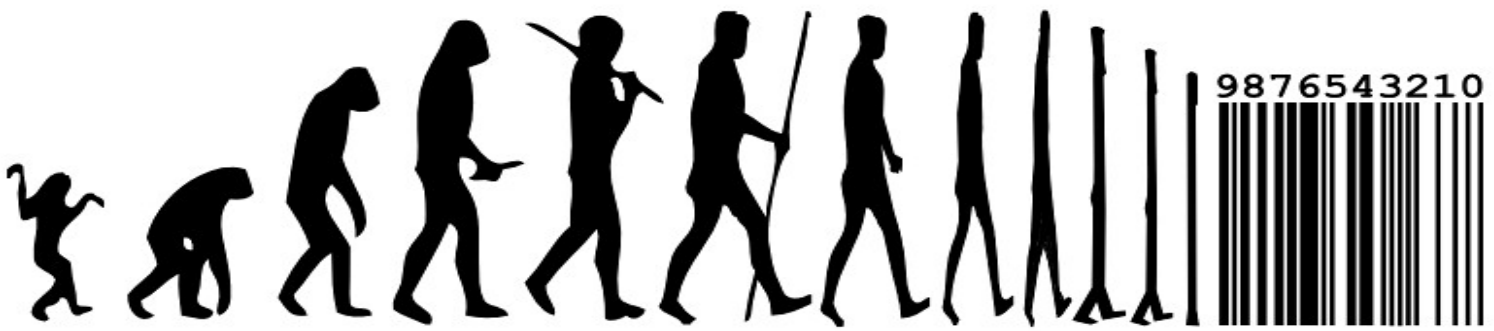


system “AdSense”, it is suggested that creators can earn up to \$29.30 per 1000 views.

The disturbing connotations of a capitalist society encouraging the use of children’s earliest experiences as a means of financial gain, are made worse by the lack of consent young children are able to give. “Parents ... have no concept of what their infants and children might consider public or private information about themselves; new-born babies have no autonomy to say “no” to having their births vlogged and publicized only days later.” (Riggio, 2021; 34).

The ways in which young children’s” entire lives are exploited by capitalist commodification, also ties closely to Sociological notions of surveillance. Surveillance is defined by Webster as the way modern society is organised around the information that is gathered from its members; what we buy, our tastes, lifestyles, and our spending capacities (Webster, 2006) and further used to gain capital. This is especially applicable to family vloggers, as “mumfluencers” monitor video views and audience engagement in order to gain revenue.

Surveillance capitalism is described by Zuboff as a “A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction and sales.” (Zuboff 2019; p.43). Mathieson’s (2010) development of Foucault’s theory of



the panopticon as a metaphor for surveillance capitalism, in which a large number focuses on something which is condensed is certainly applicable in regard to family vlogging, with millions of viewers perceiving influencer families.

As Foucault theorised, surveillance capitalism materialises itself as many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible (Mathieson, 2010) and when we consider the implications of these actors being children, forced to perform, in their own homes, for parent’s monetary gain, we see a very concerning pattern begin to emerge. As Lyon (2010; 331) argues, there is no place to hide from surveillance capitalism because “the determined surveillors who are out to find...even from your own parents or children in what was once believed to be the haven of the home”. This is a notion that could not be more relevant for the children of family vloggers, who have every aspect of their home life, from their birth to their birthdays, commercialised.

As the growth of Social media and mobile technologies have changed the way we relate to others and how we experience our embodied selves (Goggin and Hjorth, 2017), it is arguable that surveillance capitalism and the ability to exploit interpersonal relationships as a means of

financial gain has enhanced the intensity of digital connection to a concerning level – as “a means to others commercial ends...instead of labour, surveillance capitalism feeds on every aspect of human experience”.

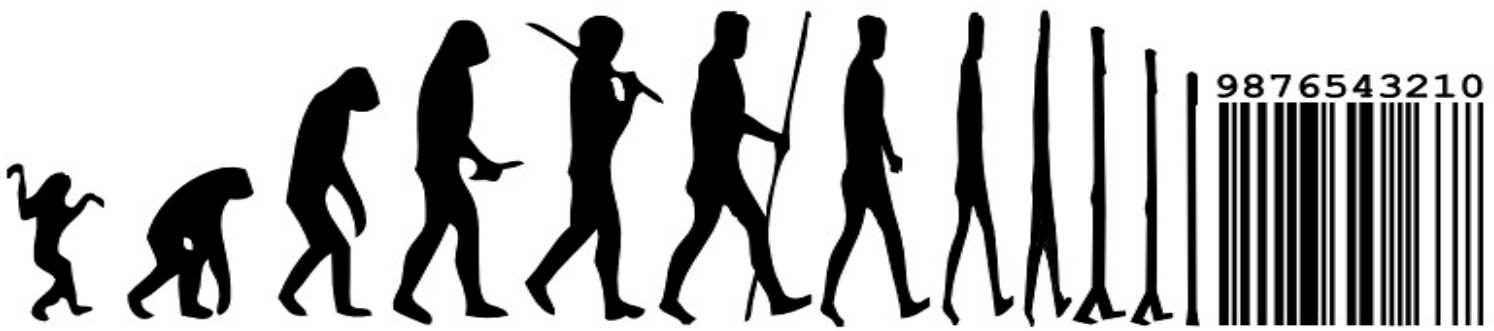
Lyon (2004) argues modern surveillance is better described as liquid surveillance, in which the modern meets the old, as surveillance mutates in order to facilitate a developing society with developing social structures – such as social media. To Lyon, “The concept of liquid surveillance captures the reduction of the body to data and the creation of data-doubles on which life-chances and choices hang more significantly” (Lyon, 2004). In other words, Lyon’s concerns surrounding liquid surveillance are based upon how surveillance, in an increasingly modern society, is mutating further, and reducing human beings (most worryingly children) into advertising data and figures.

It is not controversial to suggest that there are incredibly worrying implications of parents viewing children as an advertising commodity.

As Seattle Law states: “As long as family vloggers continue to profit from their videos and posts, their children’s involvement will have some effect on their ability to make money” (Riggio, 2021; 125), a concept that speaks directly to

Lyon’s statement that “liquid surveillance also speaks to the looseness and frailty of social





bonds, in a world where trust is eroded at every turn” (Lyon, 2010; 14) as family vlogging, transforms the social bond of parent and child relationship into employer and employee.

It is interesting to note, the traditional family structures influencer families are “selling”; often nuclear and often highly religious. Family vloggers Sam and Nia Rader published a video in August 2015 “The importance of family vlogs!” in which they stated that their main aim in family vlogging was part of their “Mission for God” and emphasised their family belief that “in order for you to have the most fulfilling life possible you need Christ in your life!” (Sam & Nia 2015). This emphasis on stereotypical “family values” is reminiscent of 1950’s advertising of the family lifestyle under the American dream. It is apparent that this lifestyle and the sharing of it are rooted in idealised notions of family structures within capitalist societies.

However, despite the concerning themes that come with family vlogging, it is important to note that some legal changes are being introduced in this area. Laws surrounding family vlogging and child labour, whilst not perfect, show that steps are being made at least to fairly compensate the children of family vloggers for the income they generate. Under new laws introduced in France “child influencers will be considered under the same French Labour Code as child models and actors, and children will not be permitted to feature in online videos for commercial purposes without prior government authorisation” (LSJ Online, 2023). Whilst it is positive that certain countries are taking steps to fairly compensate damage caused by the commodification of young people by their parents, the real-world implications and

trauma caused to young people who are already actively being publicized to millions is incredibly concerning.

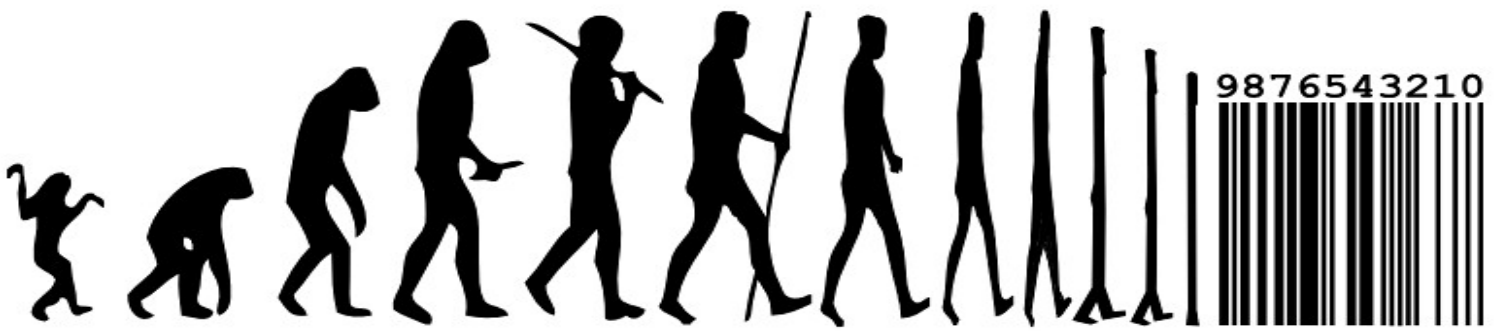
In conclusion, within a capitalist society, especially one with a large focus on surveillance and ultra-neo-liberalism (the need to commodify everything and turn it into a source of income) we are witnessing the exploitation of the youngest and most vulnerable in our society, in ways that are hugely personal and where consent and control are significantly lacking. Foucault’s notion of the many watching the few could not be truer in contemporary society. In years to come, we will most likely see the serious consequences as the children of family vloggers reach maturity and understand the severity of the ways in which capitalism, and their parents, have commodified and exploited their childhoods.

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