

Unboxing Materialism: A Content Analysis of YouTube Videos from Popular American Kidfluencers

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Kidfluencers as VladandNiki inspire children around the world. Unsurprisingly, they are intensively engaged by advertisers to promote brands in their videos. Consequently, kidfluencer content is criticized for its endorsement of materialistic values. The current study therefore applied a content analysis of kidfluencer YouTube videos to explore how materialistic values are represented and how these differ across kidfluencer content genres. With a median of three brand names or logos visible or mentioned per video and 35.4% of the videos being labeled as sponsored, brand exposure was high in kidfluencer videos. Role plays had the highest brand centrality, while vlogs had the most brand presence. These videos emphasized materialistic values including being able to buy many expensive things, such as large amounts of Hot Wheels cars or Gucci T-shirts. It is recommended that kidfluencers focus on providing non-sponsored educational content and challenges not centered around acquisition of material goods in the future.

Keywords: kidfluencer marketing; materialism; content analysis; YouTube

Introduction

The past decade has seen intense changes in the entertainment and advertising industry targeting children (De Jans et al., 2019). Nowadays, much of the advertising to which children are exposed occurs online, including the exposure to sponsored content endorsed by social media influencers (De Veirman et al., 2019). Not only adults, but even young children under the age of thirteen, referred to as *kidfluencers*, have gained popularity and a significant following on their social media. They share engaging and entertaining content on their social media channels whereby they are targeting other young children (Van den Abeele et al., 2023). Ryan, for example, is a popular child YouTube star with over 35 million subscribers to his channel *Ryan's world* on which he posts videos such as unboxings of toys (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2020).

Despite the success of kidfluencers in marketing and entertainment, they have become a central topic in the public debate, given their young audiences. Young children are susceptible to commercial exploitation and persuasion as they are not yet capable of critically processing advertising (De Jans et al., 2019). Accordingly, the numerous product endorsements in this kidfluencer content arise concerns regarding the endorsement of materialistic values. Materialism is a cause of worry in society, because it is considered a socially undesirable character trait associated with negative outcomes on both the individual and the society in general (Roberts & Clement, 2007). Unsurprisingly, a stricter protection of kidfluencer audiences has been advocated, focusing on the restriction of the commercial content that is integrated in kidfluencer content, the increase of ad recognition through ad disclosures, or the improvement of young audiences' advertising literacy through training (Hudders & Lou, 2023).

Even though there has been a surge in academic interest in kidfluencers in recent years, studies on the content of kidfluencers remain relatively limited to this day. Therefore, this study

aims to contribute to this line of research by critically investigating materialistic representations within the content of kidfluencers and whether there are differences regarding content genres. More specifically, a content analysis of some of the most popular American kidfluencer YouTube videos was conducted.

Theoretical Framework

Kidfluencer content genres

Through the years, the kidfluencer landscape has diversified into multiple content genres. An interpretative content analysis by Fernandez-Gomez et al. (2022) distinguishes between five formats: scripted stories, challenges, games, vlogs and “others”, including dances and unboxing videos. However, these unboxing videos are often seen as a separate genre. Nicoll & Nansen (2018) conducted a content analysis of one hundred toy unboxing videos, describing this genre as videos “in which children and adults record themselves unpacking and reviewing various commercial toys” (p. 1). Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Diz (2016) distinguished the following genres: unboxing videos, product reviews, tutorials, product collections, meet and greets, storytelling, storytelling and reviews, challenges, and TV appearances. Castillo-Abdul et al. (2020) limited these to five: outdoor activities, challenges, video tutorials, hauls, and storytelling. In light of the current study, we propose table 1 as a categorization of kidfluencer genres.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Brand presence in kidfluencer YouTube videos

Previous content analyses have indicated that kidfluencer content contains high numbers of brand presence (Feijoo & Fernandez & Gomez, 2021; Fernandez-Gomez et al., 2022; Núñez-Cansado et al., 2021). This is concerning because a study by Watkins et al. (2016) showed a positive relationship between advertising exposure and children’s brand knowledge, which is in turn weakly associated with a preference for material objects over interpersonal relationships

and activities. In 2012, Smith et al. proposed a model for analyzing the presence of brands on YouTube channels. Their model consists of seven items: (1) *Promotional self-presentation*, the actions which channels undertake to distinguish their content from other channels and to express a specific image and identity through relying on brands, objects, products, and symbols; (2) *Brand centrality*, whether brands play a central (brands are the focus) or a peripheral role (brands are supportive) in the videos; (3) *Multiplicity of brands*, the number of brands displayed or mentioned in the YouTube videos; (4) *Marketer-directed communication*, the extent to which consumers communicate with the advertised brand; (5) *Response to online marketer action*; (6) *Factual information about the brand*, whether factual information is shared about the brand in the video, such as pricing, location, quality, etc.; (7) *Brand sentiment*, what kind of sentiment (positive, neutral, unclear, or negative) the kidfluencer conveys towards brands in the videos.

Based on this model, the first aim of this study is to analyze brand presence in kidfluencer YouTube videos and how this differs across kidfluencer genres. Because YouTube is a less convenient platform to communicate with brands, compared to Twitter and Facebook (Smith et al., 2012), and kidfluencers do not include this type of communication (Tur-Viñes et al., 2018), we decided not to include marketer-directed communication and response to online marketer action in the current study. Additionally, promotional self-presentation falls out of scope for this research.

RQ1. To what extent are brands present in kidfluencer YouTube videos, and how does this differ across kidfluencer genres?

Materialistic values in kidfluencer YouTube videos

Because of this high brand presence in kidfluencer videos, kidfluencers have been criticized for disseminating materialistic values. Belk first defined *materialism* as “the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions” (1984, p. 291). This definition was later expanded

by Richins and Dawson (1992): “the importance a person places on possessions and their acquisition as a necessary or desirable form of conduct to reach desired end states, including happiness” (p. 307). They thereby presented materialism as a second-order construct comprising of three dimensions.

Acquisition centrality. Individuals with high levels of materialism place possessions and their acquisition at the center of their lives.

Acquisition as the pursuit of happiness. Materialistic individuals view possessions and their acquisition as essential to their satisfaction and well-being in life.

Possessions-defined success. Materialistic individuals tend to judge their own and others’ success by the number and quality of possessions they have accumulated.

Research has consistently found a significant positive relationship between media exposure and materialism among children (e.g., Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003; Chaplin & John, 2007; Greenberg & Brand, 1993; Moschis & Moore, 1982; Oprea et al., 2014; Vega & Roberts, 2011). On the one hand, studies have found a correlation between advertising exposure and materialism in children (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003; Goldberg et al., 2003; Moschis & Churchill, 1978). On the other hand, non-commercial television viewing has been positively correlated with materialism in children (Harmon, 2001; O’Guinn & Shrum, 1997; Shrum et al., 2005). Most of these studies are grounded in *cultivation theory*, which states that the more time children spend engaging with television, the more likely they are to believe the social reality portrayed by it and to be influenced by the images and ideological messages that are transmitted, including materialism (Cohen & Weimann, 2000; Shrum et al., 2011). However, in this digital age, kidfluencer content has not only become a new and important source of children’s entertainment, but it has also turned into an important new revenue for advertisers. Moreover, kidfluencers themselves are increasingly turning into global brands. For example, through his commercial deal with Pocket Watch, Ryan now has his own clothing and toys lines,

a smartphone app, and more (Feller & Burroughs, 2022). Consequently, in line with the *vulnerable child* paradigm (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003), concerns have been raised on the over-commercialization of kidfluencer content and the unintended effects of this content on materialism in children. Therefore, restrictions for including commercial content in kidfluencer videos have been suggested and there has been advocacy for increasing ad recognition through the use of ad disclosures. Additionally, kidfluencer content has become more educational considering these critiques. However, in light of this over-commercialization and these global brand deals, we cannot help but be concerned with how this will impact the development of materialistic values in the child audience. Considering that only one study has explored the relationship between kidfluencer content and materialism (Rasmussen et al., 2022), the second aim of this study is to explore how materialistic values are represented in kidfluencer YouTube videos and how these may differ across genres.

RQ2. How are materialistic dimensions represented in kidfluencer YouTube videos, and how do these differ across kidfluencer genres?

Method

Research method

To address the above research questions, a deductive, qualitative, and quantitative content analysis was applied. Six popular American kidfluencer YouTube channels were identified by means of SocialBlade, a social media analytics service, and snowball research. The final sample included 130 videos, representing a variety of genres. The videos were theoretically sampled, by looking at the title of the video, and collected in a YouTube private playlist, until theoretical saturation occurred.

Coding instrument

A codebook, containing qualitative as well as quantitative features, was developed using a deductive approach based on the studies from the literature review and was used to obtain data

in a structured manner (see appendix 1). This codebook consists of four parts. A first part contains information for identification of the videos. The second part consists of a range of descriptive variables. Here, the coder is also required to indicate whether the video has educational purposes, because we suspected that educational videos might differ in representation of materialistic values from non-educational videos. The third part is related to the second research question: the representation of the three dimensions of materialism. Based on the Materialistic Values Scale for children (MVS-c; Oprea et al., 2011) different indicators for these dimensions were included in the codebook and adapted to the context of kidfluencer videos. Additionally, for each indicator, the coder was required to indicate whether it was explicitly or implicitly present in the video. The final part of the codebook is related to the first research question (brand presence). Based on the model of Smith et al. (2012) and inspired by the research of Fernando-Gomez et al. (2022) and Tur-Viñes et al. (2018), brand presence was divided into four categories: *brand centrality*, *multiplicity of brands*, *factual information*, and *brand sentiment*. An intracoder variability test based on fourteen videos indicated that this codebook was a reliable instrument. Data collection was facilitated by means of Qualtrics. Results were analyzed with SPSS version 28, Excel and a Word-document containing notes and screenshots from watching the videos.

Results

Brand presence

The median for the number of brands present in all videos was three brands per video. Table 2 provides an overview of the differences across genres and educational content.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

35.4% ($N = 46$) of the analyzed videos were sponsored, mostly by toy brands as Mattel and Paw Patrol. These videos mostly contained an ad disclosure (see for example figure 1), however, in some videos, the commercial intention was unclear. For example, in one birthday-

party video the brand AfroUnicorn was mentioned multiple times and factual information was given about it (see figure 2), however without an ad disclosure, it was unclear whether they had been the sponsor of this video. Additionally, we noticed that in some of the sponsored videos, other brands were blurred out or covered up, see for example figure 3 in which the brand Nutella is covered up. In one video the Starbucks name was transformed into “Starducks” and the logo was transformed into a duck instead of the mermaid (see figure 4). In contrast, another (unsponsored) video about creating new Starbucks drinks, showed the logo and the name very explicit multiple times.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Role plays ($N = 17$) were the most popular genre for sponsored videos, followed by unboxing videos ($N = 11$). In two cases, an educational video was sponsored by a brand. In 89.1% ($N = 41$) of the sponsored videos, the kidfluencers provided factual information about the products. They explained where it could be bought, how it worked, or that it comes in different variations in case of surprise toys. In those same videos, the kidfluencers expressed emotions, such as high excitement, when interacting with the product.

Representation of materialistic dimensions

In general, 43.8% ($N = 57$) of the videos were centered around materialistic acquisitions. The first materialistic dimension, *acquisition centrality* (six indicators) was mostly represented through kidfluencers implicitly (through their actions) communicating that you need to be able to buy a lot of things (see figure 5). For example, in a sponsored video by Hot Wheels, the kidfluencers obtained a large amount of toy cars and racing tracks.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Kidfluencers additionally implicitly communicated the importance of owning expensive clothes and brands, through product placement of brands such as Ariana Grande perfume (see figure 6), and the importance of getting a lot of presents.

[INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Role plays and vlogs represented acquisition centrality the most. Educational videos contained less representation of acquisition centrality than non-educational videos.

The second dimension of materialism, *acquisition as the pursuit of happiness*, had three indicators (see figure 7) and was represented mostly through kidfluencers acting happy when getting more things.

[INSERT FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE]

Challenges, role plays and gameplays represented this dimension the most. Educational videos contained less representation of this dimension than non-educational videos.

The final dimension, *possessions-defined success*, had three indicators (see figure 8) and was most represented through kidfluencers associating owning new things with success. For example, through getting presents when winning a challenge. In one video owning a certain brand was associated with being socially successful. The father said: “All these girls today have Hydroflasks”, which are a type of water bottle that is rather expensive. In 2021, it became popular on TikTok because of the VSCO-girl trend. VSCO-girls are girls who look and behave a certain way and can be considered popular. They wear clothes from certain brands, such as slippers from Birkenstock, make their own bracelets, etc. To be a VSCO-girl you had to own a Hydroflask. By saying this, the father thus contributes to the idea of having to own certain expensive brands to fit in.

[INSERT FIGURE 8 ABOUT HERE]

Challenges, unboxings, role plays and gameplays represented possessions-defined success the most. Educational videos contained less representation of this dimension than non-educational videos.

Discussion

Conclusion

Given that nearly half of the videos were centered around materialistic acquisitions, the importance of looking into representation of materialism in kidfluencer content is clear. With a median of three brands per video and 35.4% of the videos being sponsored, brand exposure in the videos was high considering the child audience. This is concerning because high brand exposure in kidfluencer content contributes to brand knowledge and a preference for material goods over interpersonal relationships and activities (Watkins et al., 2016). However, most sponsored videos did include an ad disclosure, which is important because recognizing the commercial intent is necessary for activating advertising literacy. Remarkably, in some sponsored videos, other brands were blurred out. We question why not all kidfluencers practice these disguising techniques of non-sponsoring brands in their videos. This would significantly decrease children's exposure to brands and might in turn result in lower levels of materialism. In terms of genres, role plays, on the one hand, were the most popular genre for sponsorships. These videos often implicitly communicated the importance of being able to buy a lot of things by showing large amounts of toys, which might promote overconsumption. Vlogs, on the other hand, often included product placements of expensive brands, such as Gucci. The presence of these expensive brands could stimulate needs or wants within the child audience, because they might look up to these kidfluencers and dream of becoming one themselves (Rasmussen et al., 2022), or because they might develop parasocial relationships with these kidfluencers, which makes them invaluable peers influencing children's consumer decisions. Acquisition centrality was the most often represented dimension of materialism. The kidfluencers thus often

emphasized the acquisition of material objects in their videos. To a lesser extent did they associate the acquisition of these items with happiness and they rarely associated it with success, except for the case of the Hydroflask. For future productions, kidfluencers could focus on producing videos in the genre of challenges which are not centered around materialistic acquisitions, since these videos represented the least materialistic values.

Additionally, educational videos contained much less representation of all dimensions of materialism, contained less brands, and were rarely sponsored. This is important because educational videos should be concerned with educating children. Their primary goal should not be commercial. Even though we recognize how important sponsorship deals are for kidfluencers, they should consider following the educational genre without sponsorships and with high attention for brand exposure by blurring out or transforming logos or brand names.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Firstly, because of theoretical sampling, the results cannot be generalized. Moreover, we cannot establish correlations between kidfluencer content and materialistic levels in children. Therefore, we strongly suggest future research explores this relationship, for example through an Ecological Momentary Assessment approach or experiments with the goal of providing evidence for causation. Secondly, this study encountered strategies kidfluencers apply to limit brand exposure, such as blurring and transforming brand logos and names. Future research could establish a classification of these techniques by means of a content analysis and investigate which of these strategies is most effective or appreciated within the audience. Finally, this and previous studies have mainly focused on the negative side of kidfluencers. Therefore, it might be insightful to investigate whether kidfluencer content has beneficial aspects as well for children. The consumer socialization process has undergone changes in this digital era, and kidfluencers may play a crucial role herein. In addition, it might be interesting to investigate whether these educational videos are effective in reaching their intended goals.

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Tables and figures

Table 1. Overview of kidfluencer content genres

Content genre	Explanation
Tutorial	Audiovisual productions that explain how to carry out a specific activity (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020)
Haul	Exposure of an object or product, in most cases, a toy, where its functionalities are explained (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020)
Vlog	Videos related to daily routines at home (Fernandez-Gomez et al., 2022)
Q&A session	Videos in which the kidfluencer answers questions posed by the audience
Challenge	Videos related to the realization of a task proposed by him/her self or by the audience, to achievement in an activity that is often a game or video game (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020)
Unboxing	Videos in which children and adults record themselves unpacking and reviewing various commercial toys (Nicoll & Nansen, 2018)
Product review	Video in which a product is analysed in detail, in this case the process of opening the product is not visible (Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Diz, 2016)
Role play	The protagonists act out a scripted story (Fernandez-Gomez et al., 2022)
Gameplay	Content revolving around playing a game (Fernandez-Gomez et al., 2022)

Table 2. Overview of Median Number of Brands per Video per Genre and Educational Purpose

Genre	Median	Educational Purpose	Median
Tutorial	2	Educational	3
Haul	2	Non-educational	2.5
Vlog	5		
Q&A	0		
Challenge	3		
Unboxing	4		
Product Review	0		
Role play	2		
Gameplay	2		
Other	4.5		

Figure 1. Example of ad disclosure



Figure 2. Example of video without ad disclosure and unclear commercial intention

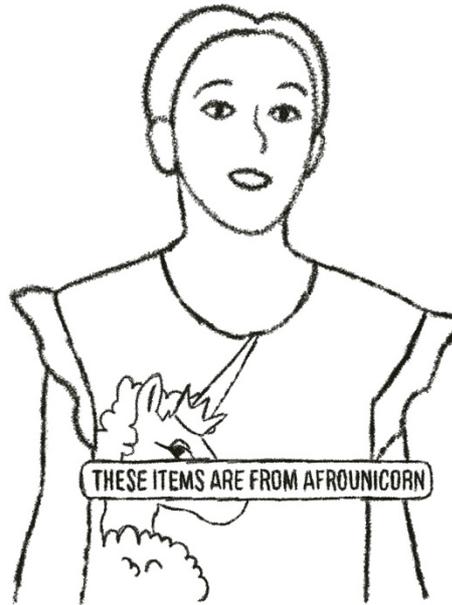


Figure 3. Example of a Brand Cover-up



Figure 4. Example of Brand Transformation

STARBUCKS



Figure 5. Overview of Indicators of Acquisition Centrality in the Analyzed Videos

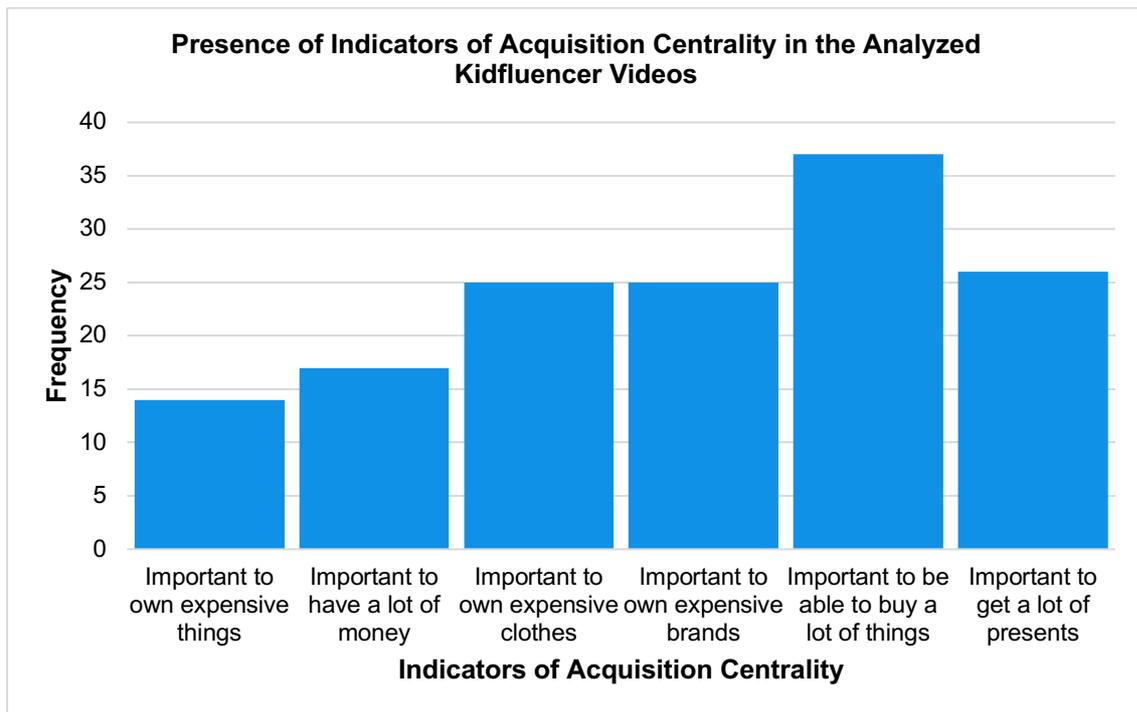


Figure 6. Example of Product Placement in a Video

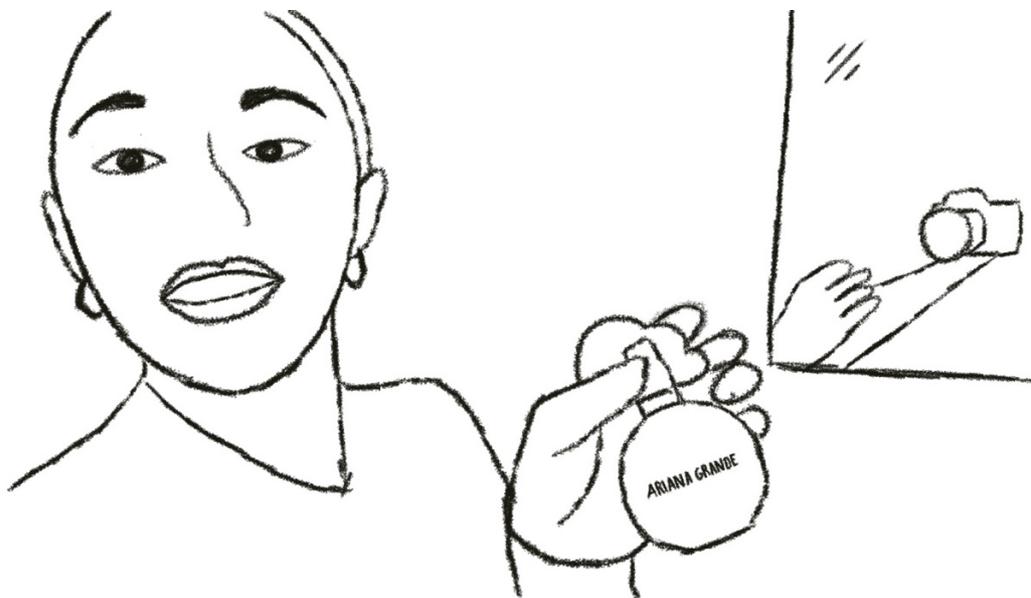


Figure 7. Overview of Indicators of Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness in the Videos

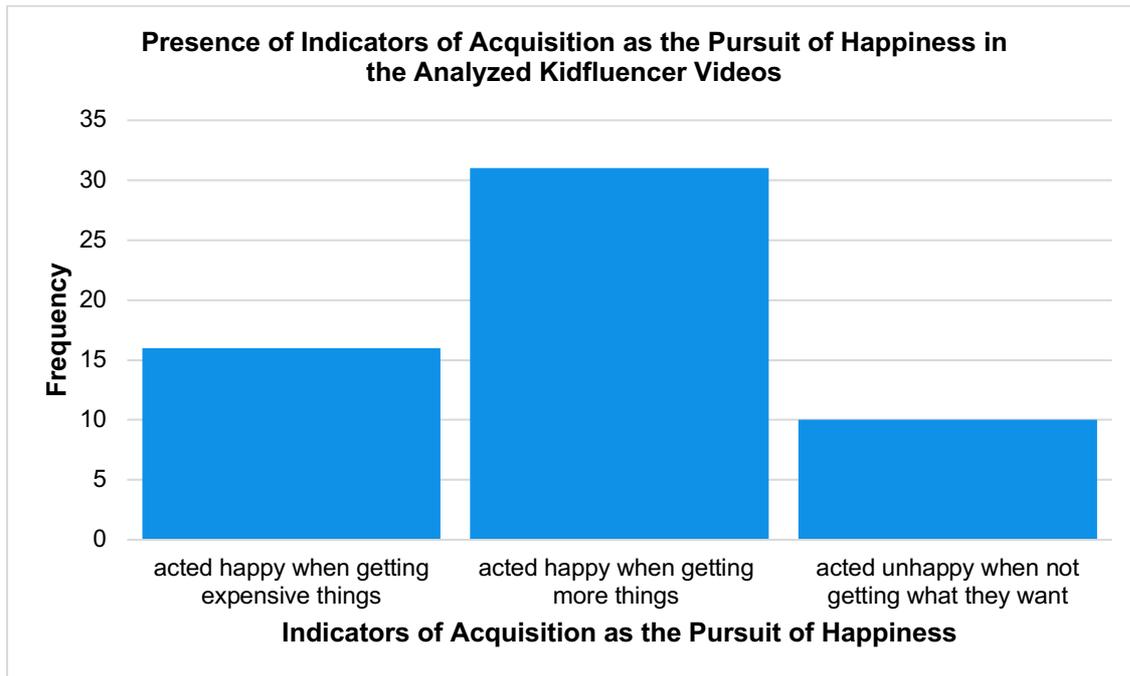
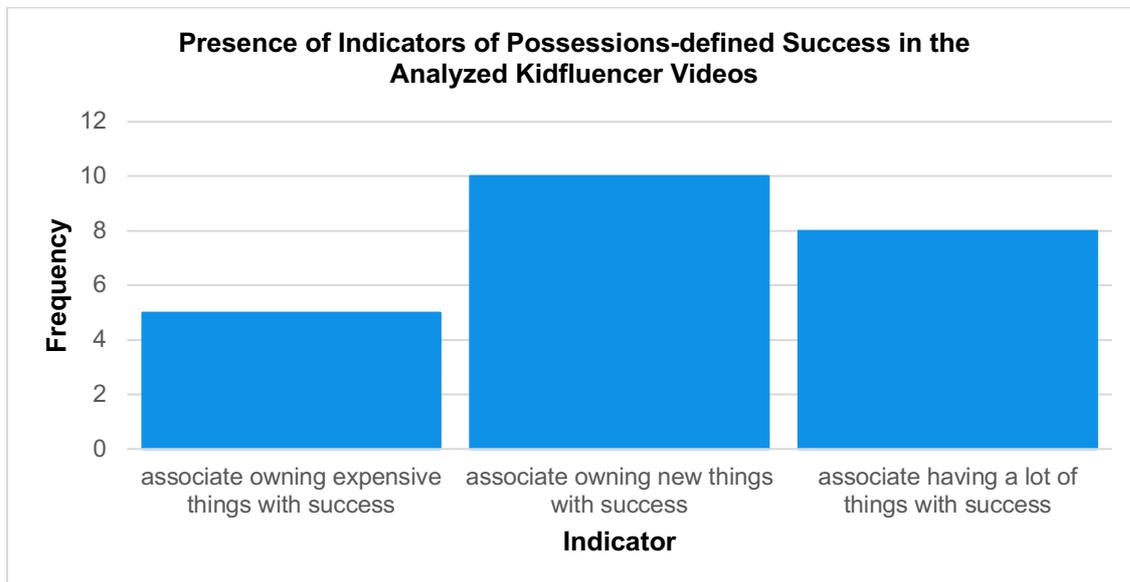


Figure 8. Overview of Indicators of Possessions-defined Success in the Videos



Appendix

1. Codebook

Item identification:

Var1: *Video code* = number of analyzed video (1 – n)

Var2: *Codification date* = date of analysis of the video

Var3: *Coder name* = name of the coder

Descriptive data:

Var4: *Kidfluencer* = name of the kidfluencer of whom the analyzed video is

- 1: Like Nastya
- 2: Kids Diana Show
- 3: Vlad and Niki
- 4: Ryan's World
- 5: Everleigh
- 6: The Fishfam
- 7: McClure Twins

Var5: *Video date* = year of publication of the analyzed video

Var6: *Video title* = title of the analyzed video

Var7: *Number of views* = number of views of the analyzed video

Var8: *Number of likes* = number of likes on the analyzed video

Var9: *Number of dislikes* = number of dislikes on the analyzed video

Var10: *Number of comments* = number of comments under the analyzed video

Var11: *Storyline* = description of what happens in the video in three lines

Var12: *Content genre* = genre to which the kidfluencer video belongs (categorical variable; adapted from Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020; Fernandez & Gomez et al., 2021; Nicoll & Nansen, 2018; Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Diz, 2016)

- 1: Tutorial
- 2: Haul
- 3: Vlog
- 4: Q&A session
- 5: Challenge
- 6: Unboxing
- 7: Product review
- 8: Role play
- 9: Gameplay
- 10: Other

Var 13: Educational purpose: 'Does the video have a clear educational value?'

0: no

1: yes

RQ1: materialism

Var14: *Acquisition centrality* = the extent to which the kidfluencer communicates the importance of owning certain acquisitions; can be analyzed by following indicators (all categorical variables; adapted from Oprea et al., 2011):

- **Var14.1:** Does the kidfluencer disclose they think it is important to own expensive things?

0: no

1: yes

0: implicit

- 1: explicit
- **Var14.2:** Does the kidfluencer disclose they think it is important to have a lot of money?
 - 0: no
 - 1: yes
 - 0: implicit
 - 1: explicit
- **Var14.3:** Does the kidfluencer disclose they think it is important to own expensive clothes?
 - 0: no
 - 1: yes
 - 0: implicit
 - 1: explicit
- **Var14.4:** Does the kidfluencer disclose they think it is important to own expensive brands?
 - 0: no
 - 1: yes
 - 0: implicit
 - 1: explicit
- **Var14.5:** Does the kidfluencer disclose it is important to be able to buy a lot of things?
 - 0: no
 - 1: yes
 - 0: implicit
 - 1: explicit
- **Var14.6:** Does the kidfluencer disclose they think it is important to get a lot of presents?
 - 0: no
 - 1: yes
 - 0: implicit
 - 1: explicit

Var15: *Acquisition as the pursuit of happiness* = the extent to which the kidfluencer shows emotions of happiness when acquiring new products; can be analyzed by following indicators (all categorical variables; adapted from Oprea et al., 2011):

- **Var15.1:** Does the kidfluencer act happy when getting expensive things?
 - 0: no
 - 1: yes
- **Var15.2:** Does the kidfluencer act happy when getting more things?
 - 0: no
 - 1: yes
- **Var15.3:** Does the kidfluencer act unhappy if they do not get the things they want?
 - 0: no

1: yes

Var16: *Possessions-defined success* = the extent to which the kidfluencer defines success based on the amount or type of products acquired, can be analyzed by following indicators (all categorical variables; adapted from Oprea et al., 2011):

- **Var16.1:** Does the kidfluencer associate owning expensive things with success?

0: no

1: yes

- **Var16.2:** Does the kidfluencer associate owning new things with success?

0: no

1: yes

- **Var16.3:** Does the kidfluencer associate having a lot of things with success?

0: no

1: yes

Var17: ‘In general, does the video attach more importance to friendship or non-materialistic things versus materialistic acquisitions?’

0: non-materialistic

1: materialistic acquisitions

RQ3: brand presence

Var18: *Brand centrality* = the extent to which brands are central to the video (dichotomous variable; adapted from Fernando-Gomez et al., 2021, Smith et al., 2012; Tur- viñes et al., 2018):

0: Brand(s) do not have a protagonist role in the video.

1: Brand(s) have a protagonist role in the video.

Var19: *Multiplicity of brands* = the amount of brands present in the videos; numeric variable:

0

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

10+

Var20: *Factual information* = the extent to which the kidfluencer discloses factual information about the brands or products present in the video (dichotomous variable; adapted from Fernando-Gomez et al., 2021, Smith et al., 2012; Tur- viñes et al., 2018):

0: No factual information provided.

1: Factual information is provided.

Var21.1: *Brand sentiment* = the emotions the kidfluencer explicitly shows when interacting with a brand or product (dichotomous variable; adapted from Fernando-Gomez et al., 2021, Smith et al., 2012; Tur- viñes et al., 2018):

0: Kidfluencer does not express explicit emotions when interacting with brands or products in the video.

1: Kidfluencer does express explicit emotions when interacting with brands or products in the video.

Var21.2: Which emotions does the kidfluencer express when interacting with a brand or product in the video?

Var22: Comments