

THE ADVERSE EFFECTS OF FAMILY VLOGGING ON CHILDREN

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Abstract

This research intends to analyse and understand how family vlogging that includes children, especially babies and toddlers, adversely affects their growth and mental health. The YouTube channels DaddyOFive and The Slyfox Family are used as primary texts to understand how parents exploit their own children and use them as tools in order to make money. Not only the children's privacy and consent is compromised, but also they are made to perform in front of the camera in many cases for hours at a stretch. Most of the family vlogs include 'pranks' that are played on the children to record their reactions for click-bait and viewers. However, it is ignored that some children get traumatized due to those pranks and often suffer from depression or PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder).

Keywords: familyVlogging, exploitation, children, depression, mental health

INTRODUCTION

A vlog is a video log, which could include any kind of content. Family vlogging comes under the category of vlogging where the vloggers film their daily activities and mostly feature their children in it. All they require to get monetized is 4000 watch hours in 12 months and a minimum of 1000 subscribers. They get paid for showing the internet their daily activities such as waking up in the morning, drinking coffee or playing with their kids, etc. The children are the main source of income for most of the family vloggers. Just like how some Instagram pages make money out of adorable puppy videos, in a similar manner, family vloggers use their children to grab attention of their audience and gain more likes and followers in order to get paid. Apart from using the children as assets for their videos, they put the mental health of their kids at risk. Babies and toddlers are made to behave in a particular manner for the channel about which the children have no idea. This paper will dig deep into how Family Vlogging, that includes continuous exposure of children to cameras has adverse affects on the mental health and growth of children, that makes them vulnerable to issues like depression, identity crisis, low self esteem, having to live under restricted circumstances and growing up according to other people's opinions. The objective of this

research is, a) To understand how parents are exploiting their children and using them as assets for subscribers and views and b) To be aware of the mental trauma that a child goes through off camera. Because psychologically torturing children to behave in a certain manner on camera and filming them for hours at a stretch without their consent is unethical and needs to be controlled. Through this paper, the question about how Family Vlogging or exposing children to the camera for long periods of time effect the behaviour and growth of the child will be answered.

The methodology that has been used in the paper includes a comparative study to understand the difference between solo or couple vloggings and Family Vlogging. The research included watching each YouTube video of the family vloggers to get a clear understanding of how parents exploit their children for money and fame.

The channel DaddyOFive was created on August 13, 2015 by Micheal (father) and Heather Martin (mother) that featured them with five of their children Jake, Ryan, Cody, Alex and Emma. The family was basically known for the pranks that the parents pulled off on their children, especially their youngest son, Cody. After the channel started growing, the parents took extreme steps to gain more views and subscribers and started uploading videos of them physically and mentally abusing their children.

In one of their videos Michael is seen spraying disappearing ink on the floor of his son Cody's bedroom before scolding and literally shouting at him for his misbehavior and conduct, to a point that Cody breaks down and starts crying. After making him cry, Michael reveals it was all a prank and that the ink was a disappearing one. Cody's statement after the prank "You made me go through all of this just for a stupid prank" hints at how emotionally hurt and traumatized he was after the prank.

The family mostly targeted the younger kids, Emma and Cody and broadcasted their miserable conditions after the pranks and abuse in front of thousands of people, on YouTube..

In another video the dad asks Jake and Ryan to steal Emma's favorite toys and asks the boys to beat Emma and Cody with the toys. Michael films them for about 8 minutes without helping the kids or asking his elder kids to stop beating them. Emma locks herself in the bathroom and comes out only after the father yells at her telling her how her room has been destroyed. She talks about killing herself in the same video.

Emma : "I am freaking tired of this house. I wish I could die."

Dad : "what?"

Emma: "I want to kill myself. You guys are making everything horrible for me"

The video had about 902k views.

Interview with the parents have revealed that Heather Martin was Emma and Cody's step mother. Their real mother Rose, disclosed that Cody had ODD, (Oppositional defiant disorder) where the child has anger management issues and gets hyper very easily. In that case, instead of treating Cody with love and care, the parents rather abuse him physically as well as mentally.

In one of their videos titled "Cody Bad in School", which was uploaded in 2015, the father tells his viewers how Cody will not be allowed to go to Disneyland, as he was being weird at school, scraping his own arm until it bled. The father calls him stupid and says "you have issues, that's your problem" for imposing self harm instead of comforting him or trying to know what exactly was the issue.

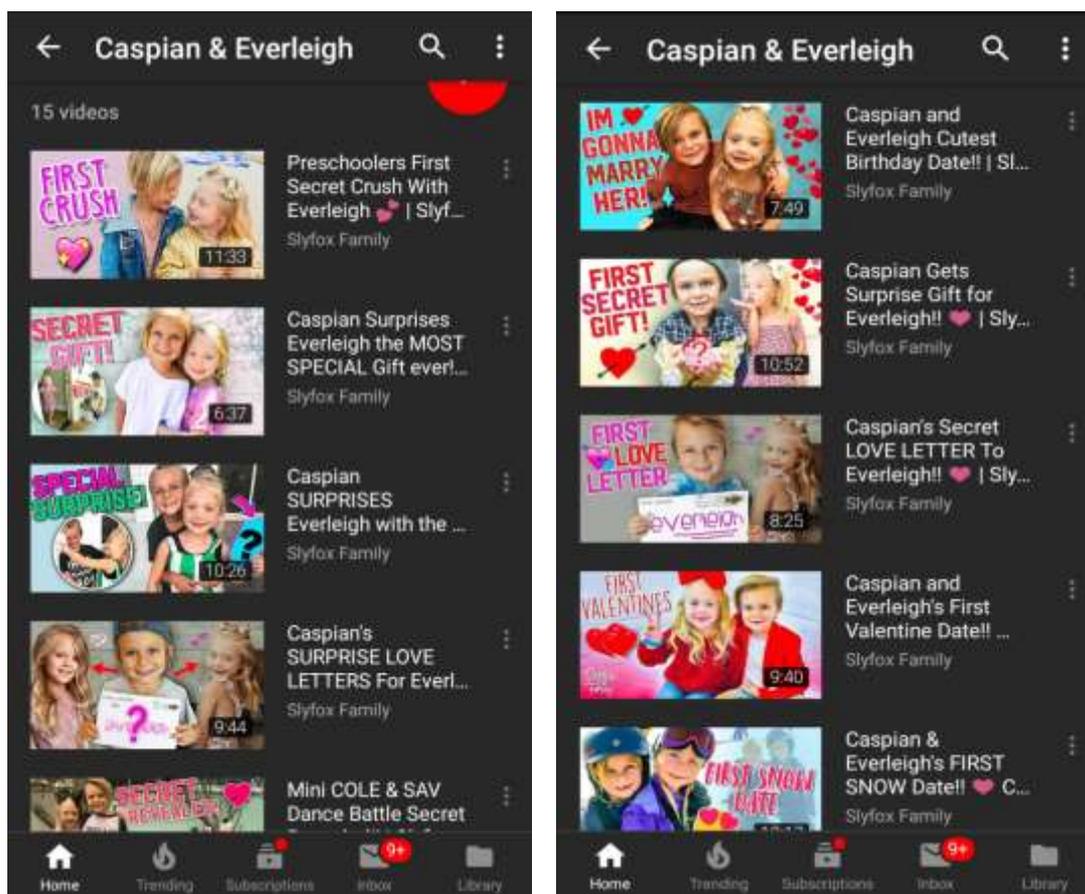
The parents rather filmed punishments and the siblings fighting with each other and giving each other death threats instead of stopping them and talking it through with them. It is disturbing that young children are unable to consent to being in videos. Even if the parents ask their children's permission to be in vlogs, the children are typically not old enough to give an informed response. Depending on how old they are, they may not understand that anyone can view their parents' content and that once something is on the internet, it can never truly be removed. (Anna Sutherland)

The family gets so engrossed in making money with hundreds of viewers and subscribers, they ignore that Emma and Cody especially were only kids and were dealing with mental health issues. The father called Cody "crazy and shit" only because he could not concentrate on his studies while there were people in his room. These YouTube stars ironically made money out of harassing and abusing Cody publically. By the end of the year, their channel was finally taken down from YouTube and the parents lost custody of 2 of their children.

Another family that uses their children as assets for the channel is The Slyfox Family. The channel was first launched on YouTube in 2015, by Caspian and Jaedyn's parents Hannah and Andrew Slyfox. They film their daily lives but the videos that were watched the most included painful or injurious situations for the kids. The parents would mostly prank their children on their house getting robbed, or having met with a car accident or someone's death, or a baby being harmed on the trampoline. They normalize all accidents ignoring that there are people in the world who actually go through those incidents and take years to come out of it. Such kinds of pranks can take a toll on the vlogger's life as well. A good example of this is a miscarriage scandal involving a vlogging couple by the name of "Sam and Nia." The news broke over three years ago, but the two are still known for this situation.

They had a pregnancy reveal video that went viral and then announced a miscarriage a few days later in another (now viral) video. Many people accused them of lying about the pregnancy, the miscarriage or both; however, the family never admitted to any falsified information. Assuming Sam and Nia truly did miscarry, a tragedy in their lives was turned into monetized drama. They had to attempt to heal from their loss while simultaneously being assaulted with hate comments every day. (Anna Sutherland)

What is more controversial about this family is, they recently collaborated with the “The Johnson’s Family”, another family vloggers on YouTube, and made their kindergarten son Caspian date the Johnson family’s 5 year old daughter Everleigh, only for views and money. Below is a picture of their YouTube page where they have repeatedly uploaded videos of Caspian and Everleigh going on a date, or having a romantic moment, or Caspian surprising Everleigh. In the thumbnail itself the kids are shown hugging or holding hands or looking at each other. It is quite evident that the kindergarten kids have no idea as to what is happening between them and that they are made to do all of those things by their parents.



The content of the video on the other hand only has the kids playing with each other or talking. However, the fact that the parents make these kids hold hands or hug or say romantic lines to each other can not be ignored. The

parents make it look like it is the kids who are in love and have a romantic relationship, but it is quite evident in their videos that the kids are very young to understand what is love or marriage or maybe even the fact that them holding hands is considered romantic by their parents. Moreover, The Johnson Family uploaded a video on their channel pretending to spank Caspian for flirting with their daughter Everleigh. The videos undoubtedly got a lot of views and positive comments with regard to how caring the father is and how adorable these kindergarten couple are. But what is being ignored is the Children's consent, privacy, and their state of mind when they are repeatedly being confused by the parents as to what is ethical and what is not.

In two of their videos, Jaedyn is filmed wearing a fake pregnancy bump to school, in one and in another video she is made to wear the bump for a whole day and work. The parents justify this by saying that she would understand what a woman goes through while she is pregnant. But the 11 year old girl does not have to know. She is a woman and she will find out eventually. The bigger picture is, Jaedyn's private space is compromised and she is made to do embarrassing things in front of her friends in the school. We can only think how she is going to feel when she grows up and looks back at her childhood videos.

In a research paper titled "Micro-microcelebrity: Branding Babies on the Internet" by Crystal Abidin, she adds that "Despite minimum age restrictions and recent concerns with "digital kidnapping" where users steal images of other young children to be re-posted as their own (Whigham), some social media platforms rarely police the proliferation of accounts set up by parents on behalf of their underage children prominently displaying their legal names and life histories, citing differing jurisdictions in various countries (Facebook; Instagram), while others claim to disable accounts if users report an "incorrect birth date" (cf. Google for YouTube). In Singapore, the Media Development Authority (MDA) which governs all print and digital media has no firm regulations for this but suggests that the age of consent is 16 judging by their recommendation to parents with children aged below 16 to subscribe to Internet filtering services (Media Development Authority, "Regulatory" 1). Moreover, current initiatives have been focused on how parents can impart digital literacy to their children (Media Development Authority, "Empowered"; Media Literacy Council) as opposed to educating parents about the digital footprints they may be unwittingly leaving about their children."

While there are always two sides of the same coin, family vlogging has also helped a few children form their own identities and be famous through their parents' vlogs. One prominent example would be the well known

Kardashians, who have gained their fame from the show “Keeping up with the Kardashians”. It is the longest running show in US which still airs on E! TV. The show was started by Kris Jenner in 2006, the father of Kendall Jenner and Kylie Jenner. Both these girls were only 11 and 13 back when the show started. Since then the girls are happily settled in life. From the show being their only source of income, to a point that now they have their own clothing line and makeup brand.

There are also families that keep their children’s privacy in mind such as The Bee Family. The family has about 1 Lakh 50 thousand subscribers on their channel, yet they keep their son at the background and only reveal information about him that is relevant to the content of the video . They feature themselves in most of their videos and keep their child off the camera. They do upload prank videos and videos that are intended only to grab attention, but their son is kept away from all of it. He is never seen being forced to do or say anything. It is only a few times that their kid is shown on their channel which suggests that the family in no way exploits their kids or use them for click-bait, or views or subscribers.

However, there are only a few instances of families that are not using their kids as assets for their YouTube channel. Since Daily Vlogs or Family Vlogging for that matter is the easiest way of making money, people resort to exploiting their kids. Allison Irons, a well known YouTuber had to delete all the traces of her children from her channel after she found out from the YouTube’s analytical tools that the videos of her children were on some paedophile websites. They were shown wearing nappies, breastfeeding, or in the bath. She said “I feel foolish,” she said in a YouTube video after making the discovery. “I’m taking a huge step back from YouTube . . . I encourage you, if you are another parent vlogger, to do the same.” Other high-profile family vloggers soon followed suit, removing their children from the videos they posted online. This indicates towards a bigger concern of being a YouTube vlogger and especially a family vlogger, featuring kids. YouTube is a huge platform to which any and everybody has access to. Anything can be turned vulgar and these parents don’t really realize what kind of people are embedded in their subscribers’ and views’ list. “The website’s safety resources for parents extensively discuss how to prevent children from watching certain videos, but say nothing about preventing them from being watched.” (Amelia Tait)

The Ace Family on the other hand is the most famous and successful channel on YouTube with over 13 million subscribers. Their 2 year old daughter is the one who is featured the most in their videos. Her video clips are all

across the internet including Facebook and Instagram in pages made by their fans. Even though they do not indulge in any kind of abuse or violence, it is quite evident that they use their daughter to make money. In their recent documentary titled “Welcome to our life”, they mentioned how their daughter Ele behaves differently when the camera is on. They also addressed that they do not feel safe in their own house, which is why they keep shifting places. They are stalked and Ele starts asking questions “why are they staring at me”. Apart from that, in many of their videos Ele is filmed crying instead of consoling or comforting her.

CONCLUSION

Even though YouTube is a good option to establish oneself in terms of making money or fame, parents should keep in mind the safety and privacy of their children. The videos they put out on the internet for people to see, has the possibility of being used in vulgar and sexual sites. It is a violation of children’s rights and also that they are being put into danger without even them knowing. Family vlogs are entertaining and interesting when fans actually look up to the vloggers, but the parents should also keep in mind the adverse effects of featuring little kids and filming them the whole day because those kids grow up trying to fit into how the audience perceive them to be and end up having identity disorders and other psychological issues. This paper does not disapprove of family vlogging, but disapproves of the fact that babies and toddlers are used as tools to attract audience. Instead of resorting to the easier way, vloggers can feature their kids when they are old enough to give consent. Because anyway YouTube’s community guidelines have clear instructions that children below the age of 13 are not permitted to be a viewer or creator. Therefore it is quite obvious that the babies and toddlers featured in family videos are not qualified, and going against the guidelines should have some penalty.

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