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"I am there for the video, not the advertising"

Children's voices on Youtuber sponsoring and merch

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"I am there for the video, not the advertising": Children's voices on Youtuber sponsoring and merch

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YouTube has become the number-one outlet for children's programming and video entertainment (Ahn, 2022). In Sweden, children spend several hours a day on the platform (Statens medieråd, 2021:58). 60 % of children aged 9–12, and 80% of Swedish teenagers follow a YouTuber or influencer (ibid:83). This form of micro-celebrity constitutes an important part of children's media culture and everyday life, contributing to commodification and commercialisation of childhood. YouTubers are not only singers, gamers or entertainers, they are "promotional intermediaries" (Jaakkola, 2020:239). Youtubers make a living from advertising products through sponsoring agreements (influencer marketing), or from advertising their own products and brands, in the form of merchandise ("merch").

Even though the YouTuber is a widely popular phenomenon, we still know surprisingly little of it from a child perspective. There is a lack of in-depth knowledge on how the child audience perceives and engages with Youtubers as commercial actors (Jaakkola, 2020). In light of this, the aim of the present paper is to further our understanding of how children appropriate sponsored content and merch within the context of the para-social relation between child and YouTuber.

To study children's appropriation of sponsored content and merch among Youtubers, we draw from an interview study with 19 Swedish children aged 10-13. The results reveal how children's meaning-making mainly centered around the relevance or irrelevance of this media content within the context of their everyday lives, and their moral economy (Silverstone, 1994) was an integrated part of their discussions. Children also expressed how they engaged in financial and moral support in order to enable Youtubers' content creation, for instance by purchasing merch or sponsored products, hence positioning themselves as active agents within the commercial media logic.

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Biographical notes

Fredrika Thelandersson: Thelandersson is a postdoctoral researcher in media and communication studies at Lund University, Sweden. She was a researcher in the collaborative outreach project “Digital marketing and young consumers” (2021-2022), which this paper grew out of. Additionally, her research interests include media, health, and gender, and she is the author of the monograph *21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2023).

Carolina Martínez: Martínez is an associate professor in media and communication studies, at Malmö university, Sweden. Her research interests concern children’s commercial media environment, children’s media education in informal and formal learning contexts, and children’s digital rights. She has published articles in journal such as *Journal of Children and Media* and *Media, Culture and Society*.

Helena Sandberg: Sandberg is professor in media and communication studies at Lund University, Sweden; former leader of CAI@LU, Children Advertising and Internet at Lund University (2010-2017); currently PI for DIGIKIDS Sweden (VR grant no 2018-01261) investigating the introduction of digital technology in early childhood (0-3 years old) and modern family life. Sandberg has long experience of doing interdisciplinary, multimethodological research on children, digital media technologies, and commercial culture.