SHARING IS CARING? HOW CHILDHOOD IS PORTRAYED, HACKED, AND
HIJACKED ONLINE

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the
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of
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## DEDICATION

This work is for all those who have survived sexual violence.


And to all those who have not.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Child Sexual Abuse....................................................................................................CSA
United Nations .............................................................................................................UN
United Nations International Children's Fund.......................................................UNESCO
National Council for Missing and Exploited Children .......................................... NCMEC
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.................................................CRC
United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner ..........................OHCHR
Commonwealth of Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child
Sexual Abuse ............................................................................................................IRCSA
United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights .......................................UNHCR
Facebook.......................................................................................................................FB
Instagram...................................................................................................................... IG
YouTube ....................................................................................................................... YT
YouTube Kids.............................................................................................................. YTK
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention........................................................ CDC

# ABSTRACT

SHARING IS CARING? HOW CHILDHOOD IS PORTRAYED, HACKED, AND HIJACKED ONLINE

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The world wide web is a virtual landscape connecting adults and children around the globe, converging in semi-segregated spaces where identity, social and cultural norms—like race, sexuality, gender, and childhood—are navigated and contested. Social media and other internet technologies are seen at once as nefarious net-scapes, corrosive to one's development, and as necessary skills for the successful social and financial future of one's child. How caregivers navigate and participate in this digital landscape, for themselves and for their dependents, are contested, convoluted and multifaceted. To understand how children and childhood are portrayed online, largely by adults, I conducted interviews with adult caregivers of children and content analyses of virtual spaces meant for various age groups. This study uncovered intersecting issues of inequality in virtual spaces, social and sexual identity, privacy, security, supervision, and

human rights, with children objectified for economic, familial, and other (adult) social

benefits.

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The world wide web is a virtual landscape connecting adults and children[1] around the globe, where competing notions of childhood are forged and contested. Cultural and social norms provide the scaffolding for what it means to portray and embody acceptable and ideal versions of the child and childhood. Race, ethnicity, religion, gender, class, and other important socially defined factors shape the contours of these discussions deciding conceptions of what a child is and ought to be. Cultural meanings like those tied to concepts around the child have been formed and scrutinized across centuries; widely accepted notions are often hidden openly under the powerful guise of a "natural phenomenon" that is therefore in no need of adjustment. These adult and societal understandings are tied to behaviors, expectations, and representations of both children and adults in society. What images are acceptable—and expected—for parents to post on social media? And what types of ideals might the pictures shared uphold? This thesis examines social meanings of childhood that circulate through posts on social media by parents and other caregivers. In investigating these idyllic portrayals, we glean much about one's society. Issues also arise of children's rights to autonomy, privacy, and even security: how much, if any, say does a child have regarding what is—permanently— shared about them online? When does sharing about one's parenthood become telling on

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[1] "Children" herein is defined as those legally not considered adults; for our purposes this refers to people under 18 years of age and is the definition used by the United Nations.

one's child? What is the line between public and private sharing in online spaces? And how are these tensions navigated, especially by parents and other adult caregivers? Do children have freedom, agency, and choice in how their self is portrayed online? If so, when?

Of the 7.83 billion people on the planet, more than 4.66 billion access the internet, or about 60% (Datareportal 2021). Moreover, data shows that 53% of the total global population uses social media, with 9 out of 10 internet users connecting to social media at least once per month (Datareportal 2021). "Facebook, Google, and Twitter operate some of the largest and most influential online social media platforms reaching billions of users across the globe" (US Committee on Energy and Commerce (US Committee), Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr., 2021:1). In fact, Facebook (FB) owns the four most downloaded applications (apps) of the decade (FB, FB messenger, Whatsapp, and Instagram (IG)), with US companies (like Twitter and Google-owned YouTube) comprising 8 of the top 10 (Shead 2019). Through these technological platforms, people are more 'connected' than ever before, especially young folks: according to Pew Research Center, while IG rules restrict children under 13, about 11% of US parents say their 9-to-11-year old's use the app, with about 72% of American teens using IG and 85% accessing YouTube (Auxier 2020).

This technological frontier was once referred to as the "wild west" for its unbounded capacity for creativity and connect-ability alongside an alarming lack of regulations and ability to prosecute unlawful and predatory behavior. In 2017, after the United States Congress failed to protect consumers and their personal data from the

exploitation of technology titans ("Big Tech") and other companies, the net was christened as "Westworld" as a nod to Michael Crichton's 1973 film and Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan's subsequent 2016 HBO series depicting an amusement park wherein a small group of humans belonging to an elite class can enact their most illustrious, illegal, and incorrigible fantasies on re/programmable human-like robots, ostensibly without repercussion (Levy 2017). The vast freedom, access, and anonymity of today's technology draws a parallel to Chrichton's unregulated reality, as people's lives are increasingly orchestrated by autocratic artificial intelligence (AI) modalities, from banking to education, with the rights to said technology centered in the hands of few, while the ability to hold those behind cybercrimes, for example, is almost nonexistent in today's digital landscape. (Levy 2017; Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr., US Committee on Energy and Commerce Staff [US Committee Memo 1] 2021:2).

This wild west web was weaponized against the United States people when foreign governments utilized these social media platforms to disseminate mis/information to manipulate the U.S. November 2016 and 2020 presidential elections (US Committee Memos 1-4, 2021). Disinformation campaigns about COVID-19, extremist content like white supremacy groups, and child pornography spread across these platforms like a fiery social sickness, and continue to have devastating impacts (US Committee Memos 1-4; Porter 2021). According to the United States House Committee on Energy and Commerce Chairman Frank Pallone Jr. (2021:2-3):

> "The consequences of disinformation and extremist content on these platforms are apparent. Many experts agree that disinformation about COVID-19 has greatly intensified an already deadly public health crisis. Experts also acknowledge that misinformation about the 2020 presidential

election and extremism content has further divided the nation and
provoked an insurrection."

In March 2021, U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Mayorkas dubbed domestic violent

extremism as the nation's "greatest threat" (US Committee Memo 2).  Taken together,

these remind us that social media platforms are complicated sites where social connection

is sought, but so are nefarious and sinister goals, sometimes on a global scale.

Dependence upon the digital world was all but forced with the COVID-19

pandemic. The majority of classes, businesses, and social interactions were compelled

online, with little guidance or consistence regarding parameters of usage, including

safety, time limits, or other online conduct of children (Noonoo 2020). "The virus

changed the way we internet…We have suddenly become reliant on services that allow

us to work and learn from home" (Koeze & Popper 2020:para 7). In 2019, US teenagers

spent a daily average of 7 hours online in addition to the time spent on schoolwork

(Rogers 2019). Already in 2002, a decade before the COVID-19 pandemic, children's

internet usage was surpassing that of their adult counterparts by the age of 10, connecting

to the online world, accessing the internet more frequently both within and outside the

home, with significant internet use by those under 25 (Victory & Cooper 2002). With the

pandemic pushing learning online, approximately 1.5 billion schoolchildren were

impacted by school closures (UN 2020, Aug 27). This exacerbated inequalities of access

and education, particularly among those living in the poorest countries, with people living

in Sub-Saharan Africa affected the worst globally, with those living in poorer regions and

younger children most likely to be excluded from online learning (UN 2020, Aug 27).

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 1 in 3 children were unable to participate in their online education in 2020 (UN 2020, Aug 27).

In addition, children can be much more tech-savvy than their adult caregivers in a rapidly changing and progressively virtual world (Schaffhauser 2019; Park & Kwon 2018; Schor & Ford 2007), creating a situation in which adults are increasingly turning to technological tools like parental controls and to their children to teach, protect, and empower both their minors and them. One study conducted in Chile found that one third of parents said their children facilitated and influenced their technology use "a lot" (Correa 2013:113). Youth, moreover, is an unclearly designated time of social, biological, emotional, and physical maturity; the definition is also influenced by many intersecting factors like culture, religion, and history. For G. Stanley Hall (1904), this was seen as a time of inevitable conflict with caregivers, moodiness, and risky behaviors that varies depending upon the child. "Some linger long in the childish stage and advance late or slowly, while others push on with a sudden outburst of impulsion to early maturity" (xiii). This protracted period creates a situation where external influence assumes an outsized role and status struggles, in the absence of any other forms of real power materialize (Milner 2004). These together create enormous "storm and stress" (Hall 1904). Due to hormonal and other chemical changes, coupled with social struggles like pressures to fit in with one's networks like peer groups, alongside familial and other cultural expectations, this stage is viewed as "the most vulnerable period for engaging in various risky behaviors such as smoking, drugs, and sex" (Park & Kwon 2018:2), though research has demonstrated that these antisocial behaviors are on the decline among

adolescents and have been since the 1980s[2]. Within our current structure, adolescents experience adolescence in age-segregated enclaves we call school; three decades after Hall's publication, James Coleman[3] described how the expansion of secondary schooling post-World War I led to our current depictions of how we understand this transformative yet blurred time in a person's life trajectory from baby to adult.

Despite this period of difficult navigation and pushing boundaries, many young people are given their own devices and left to surf with the technological floodgates open. While indeed caregivers gift these pocket-sized computers to ensure safety and security, in some ways this also risks opening the child to the opposite. One report of over 400 European studies estimated that 5 in 10 teens have shared personal information online, 4 in 10 have been exposed to pornography, 3 in 10 saw hate content, 2 in 10 received bullying messages, and 1 in 10 physically met someone they first communicated with online (Livingstone 2010b). Children, therefore, "are at increased risk of harm online" (UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Fund) 2020:para 1), including cyberbullying, cyberstalking, digital child sexual abuse, even physical abduction and human trafficking from strangers, as they face a rapidly evolving technical world their caregivers may struggle to understand. In addition, children's rights and wishes to privacy, including the ability to decide which information and images are acceptable for release, are often overlooked; guardians are given reign over those choices.

How parents and caregivers navigate this digital landscape, for themselves and for their dependents, are contested, convoluted and multifaceted. Social media and other

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[2] See Paul Howe, 2020
[3] *The Adolescent Society*, 1961

internet technologies are seen at once as nefarious net-scapes, corrosive to one's development, and as necessary skills for the successful social and financial future of one's child. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter are also progressively seen as political places of public debate and manipulation (US Committee Memos 1-4), while internet technologies are increasingly sites for both human rights abuses and deployment like racial profiling, illegal surveillance of human rights activists, and cyber attacks that threaten national security (Niezen 2020) like the ransomware attack in May 2021 on Colonial Pipeline Company that caused a 6-day shut-down in gasoline supply impacting the east coast of the United States (Volz 2021). Parents, charged with preparing children for their future careers that increasingly center around internet technologies, are expected to understand these threats so as to raise technologically-savvy students who progressively learn and socialize online. Parents are also largely responsible for protecting their children from the internet's abuses; guardians and children, together and separately, must make tough decisions regarding online use. For caregivers, too, new norms have emerged regarding online conduct: just as teens are influenced—in ways parents defined as positive, negative, or neither—by behavioral norms and expectations created, defined, upheld and challenged within their social networks, moms (especially) are as well. Online platforms are social sites, where the life of a family and its members is both documented and unfold. These are seen as gathering places for friends and family members to come and share; the space is seemingly at once a public and private place. Moreover, parents parent through online platforms, setting boundaries for their children regarding internet use, rules of communication for family and friends, and monitoring

their child's education. Parents also parent online by documenting and projecting images, and stories about family life that represent them as parents. Caregivers are expected to 'post their pride' to their 'online community' by sharing their child/ren's accomplishments and failures. These adults swap stories of personal struggles that may tangentially involve the child with the intent of posting about one's parental identity, adding another layer to the already complex web of social media sharing of minors. At the same time, caregivers are contending with issues of their child's privacy and security. The very behaviors that parents are encouraged to perform to show their involved love— to both the children about which they're posting and the people receiving these 'cute' images—can also expose their little loved ones to risks and raise critical issues relating children's autonomy, safety, and self-hood. Parents are thus situated as experts of both technology and their children, even above the youth themselves, free to post and granted authority over the narrative construction of one's childhood; privacy and autonomy are seemingly secondary concerns. Within this process, the lines between private and public, intimate and impersonal, helpful and harmful, dependent and autonomous, and "good parent" and "bad parent" become blurred.

To gain a deeper understanding of the way children and childhood are portrayed in online spaces and to investigate the tensions surrounding this sharing, mainly by adult caregivers, I conducted a four-part ethnographic study. The primary initiative included 8 interviews with adult caregivers of children and follow-up interviews with 3 of the participants to explore parents' posting habits and interpretations relating to children. I also conducted three content analyses. The first looked at the YouTube Kids (YTK)

platform, "an app made just for *kids*…to make it safer and simpler for *kids* to explore the world through online video" (YTK 2020, original emphasis). I "followed" 10 friends via my Facebook account and completed an analysis of shared images of children and related comments. Lastly, I studied images and comments posted to child model and Disney's Marvel actress Lexi Rabe's (public) Instagram page (600K+ followers), which is managed by Lexi's mother and talent manager. This study uncovered intersecting issues of inequality in virtual spaces, social and sexual identity, privacy, security, supervision, and human rights, with children objectified for economic, familial, and other (adult) social benefits.

**<u>The Problem</u>**

With increasing reliance upon the internet, for both children and adults, it is imperative that we assess the ways in which children are intended to be portrayed, how these images are received, and how kids participate online. Parents, grandparents, and other caregivers feel free to post images of the children they care for in all manners of private and precarious predicaments as well as proud accomplishments. Children's birthday parties, bath time, prom night, illnesses, broken bones, poor grades, family additions, breakups, and creative crafts are shared online through various social media sites. In fact, progressively pregnant bellies and sonograms are shared as the child is developing in the womb; a child's gender is typically anticipated, determined, shared, and celebrated before being born. Childhood itself is memorialized. Often, little consideration is given to the child whose life is perpetually on display; internet images are permanently logged and thus retrievable on the world wide web, as hackers highlight. In these ways,

what were once private moments shared in trustworthy contexts among close companions become part of an eternal record searchable by billions of people, from family friends to future romantic partners, potential employers to educators.

How are children portrayed—and viewed—online via social media by parents and other guardians, family friends, and strangers in the wider online community? And what does this say about adults' control over children's roles in society? Those under 18 years of age are oftentimes expected to be hyper-visible yet silent, "seen and not heard" while on display as a symbol of the sacred role of the child as precious and innocent, as economically "worthless" yet emotionally "priceless" (Zelizer 1984; Cook 2004; James 2011). These are cultural meanings and expectations, formed over centuries and adopted widely by adults who socialize and scrutinize children to conform to the same sorts of standards, often unknowingly, for that is the power of dismissing a phenomenon as "natural" and therefore in no need of adjustment.

Given the widespread and deepening reliance on internet-based technologies, for adults and children alike, it is important to investigate parents' and caregivers' understandings of cyberspace. For example, do these adults see the internet as an impressive yet potentially dangerous tool? How do parents and other caregivers understand and resolve tensions between sharing cute, fun, and loving photos and videos of children's achievements, silly antics and foibles online and the potential scrutiny and other risks that exist within this digital landscape? What are the frameworks that parents and other caregivers employ surrounding the rights and responsibilities around childhood? What boundaries do parents invoke to demarcate permissible behavior from

the intolerable? And what, if any, rights do children have to control the images, narratives, identities, and other forms of their representation shared in online spaces?

In examining these questions, researchers and caregivers must grapple with broader queries of children's autonomy, personhood, agency and rights to privacy and participation in civic life. In attempting to answer these, it is also essential to inspect children and childhood as socially constructed notions—while recognizing the importance of one's individuality and the array of lived experiences of young persons— and how caregivers contend with and re/create such conceptions. Rather than naturalizing the clumping of childhood as one encompassing group of people under 18 years of age, attempts at providing answers—and further related questions—to those posed herein require a critical look at the idea of the child itself, the evolving history of childhood, defined and organized by societal institutions accessible almost explicitly to adults. By unraveling our preconceptions of childhood, space can be created for query and critique. As individuals within society together reinforce the legitimacy of institutions, so, too, do people have the power to adjust the structures that hold society together; this requires inquiry, introspection, interaction, agreement, and action.

In what follows I examine literature to help make sense of this wild west web, including how it is used as a tool to communicate and re/define social norms, such as what childhood means and how to share—with family, friends, and strangers. I will therefore explore the concept of childhood and how it has changed historically, and ways in which our perceptions of what it means to be a child remain rooted in influences from our past. I also turned to the literature for a discussion on what it means to have rights,

including whether and how children are seen as having rights and delve deeper into how

technology may further emphasize and convolute these somewhat perplexing notions.

**CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

To better understand what we mean by "child" and "childhood" and the decisions caregivers navigate around sharing images of their own offspring online, I first look at the literature on internet and related technology. Ways in which our lives are impacted are also explored, with children's and adults' perspectives considered. I then look at the history of childhood, with childhood innocence emerging as rudimentary to its conception and the protection of such a parental, religious, and societal imperative and ways in which parents have influenced policy for the sake of their children. Next, I outline the literature on how our notions of childhood have been hacked and commodified for economic exploit and include a historical discussion of today's influential buying power of children. This raises the question of children's rights—to work, to not work, and what society even considers "work," for example. Finally, I identify some sticky spots we must address in the realm of kids' rights and tease out differences between children's rights and participation in society so I can consider and discuss children's rights as they pertain to what is shared about them online.

Ultimately, internet images are permanent: why and how do we share children's images online? How much say does a child have about how their personal lives are forever documented? And what considerations should caregivers, corporations, and classroom rules embrace to ensure children's participation, personhood, and privacy?

## The Rewards and Risks of the Internet

With the exchange of printed materials came a new facet in social life, as people "became part of the same invisible community of readers" (Tarrow 1998:45-6). The invention was pivotal to pamphlet wars, a popular political tool, while the creation of a mass market also paved the way for competitive capitalism within and across countries (Tarrow 1998). The relationships between states and citizens were thus transformed during this time as readers gained new insights and identities with others around the world; seeing possibilities created by other communities provided models for agency, hope, and imagination (Tarrow 1998).

The internet could be classified as the modern equivalent of the printing press, further connecting citizens globally, now in real-time and with audio, visual, recording, and other virtual capabilities on platforms owned by global corporations, like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. All the while, usage times, length, likes, groups joined, pages viewed, petitions signed, and other actions are digitized and turned into precious data about one's attitudes, behaviors, and communities. These data are then commodified, reinforced and reintroduced to consumers through targeted ads and other marketing purposes (see 2021 US Committee Memos 1—4; Schor & Ford 2007; Schor 2003). Moreover, actors on these internet-mediated platforms utilize psychological "hacks" to appeal to new followers and buyers to make online sales and other perks of loyalty. As one content marketer introduces and details: "There are specific psychological hacks you can use to increase conversions and engage readers as they discover your content. If you implement these 27 techniques, you can rest assured they'll drive conversions, even if

you don't want to include links to your signup page in every paragraph" (Patel 2021:para. 2). Examples include infusing emotions and 'authenticity' into your content, creating urgency and anticipation, and addressing "customers' pain points" (Patel 2021:para. 13). These platforms therefore are not neutral, public spaces of debate, then, but manipulated by monopolies and those who play with them.

At the same time, the internet is a global digital repository of information, a winding web of worlds that provide spaces for social connection and network building while providing anonymity; to exchange and express ideas; conduct business; and may even allow greater clarity of self-perception by providing avenues for social comparison and new information (Israelashvili, Kim, & Bukobza 2012). Young Israeli immigrants from the former Soviet Union used this tool to learn about the languages and cultures of their new country, as a technology enabling communication, and a self-empowering site for self-identity experimentation, for example (Israelashvili, Kim, & Bukobza 2012). Children and adolescents, generally having high internet access and competency, also share personal stories, social artifacts, and activities, even simultaneously, multitasking approximately 25% of the time (Park & Kwon 2018). Not surprisingly, Park and Kwon (2018) found that not all youth use is the same; for example, young people in detention centers were less concerned with issues of privacy and more likely to share information online, while male-seeking-male minors were found to have the opposite behavior for fear of stigmatization regarding their exploration of sexuality and preferences (9-10). The internet also provides answers to questions that young people may be embarrassed or scared to ask; Park and Kwon (2018) found the internet to be an important source for

adolescents to obtain medical information, including sexual health, especially for youth

questioning their sexual orientation and identities. "Overall, youth are positive about

using the internet to search for health-related information. As their most frequently used

information source, the internet is commonly used for health-related information by both

healthy and nonhealthy youth" despite their fledgling ability to distinguish credible

sources (Park & Kwon 2018:9).

Indeed, the worldwide web has been used as a tool to organize, create identities,

and more easily allow for sustained inter/actions like the ability to join an e-newsletter

and receive email updates. Modern forms of contentious actions include incorporating

historical methods like strikes and demonstrations with marches, occupations, petitions,

industrial sabotage, and legal actions (Tarrow 1998:99). These are increasingly

incorporating digital technologies to bridge "online" and "offline" worlds; it is also

becoming easier than ever for authorities and citizens to hold each other, one another, and

themselves accountable. An example of this is the recent first-ever Minnesota conviction

of a white police officer killing a Black man, George Floyd, after horrendous videos of

the deadly arrest—taken and posted by 17-year-old Darnella Frazer—went viral and the

four child witnesses delivered powerful testimony (Bailey et al 2021). This historical case

is a chilling example of how children's agency can impact a nation, invoking questions of

child participation in civic spaces. As history highlights, whether and how the technology

is applied is a politically-charged, complex conundrum fraught with cultural, economic,

legal, and other societal meanings, milestones, and agreements (see US Committee

Memos 1—4) that are upheld by the institutions we have created. However, exactly when, where, and how children fit into these institutions remains unclear and contested.

From this we can see the repertoires of contention begin to change. Tarrow outlines four major categories as the institutionalization of disruptive contention: (coup d'etat); innovation at the margins of historical forms (unionization); tactical interaction with police and other 'adversaries' (lockouts); and paradigmatic shifts (though rare, historical moments culminate into what some view as "moments of madness" and others see as 'limitless possibilities pathways') (1998:101-03). *The 2020-2021 year saw each of these—mediated by the internet—*from a coup d'état to the "moments of madness" that galvanized into a movement for racial and social justice; from "spaces" to meet, gather and plan, to 'spreading the news' and recruiting physical bodies, such as Trump's videos and tweets calling on Americans to "march down Pennsylvania Avenue" to the Capitol, insisting "if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore" (Naylor 2021:para. 4). The internet is therefore not only a place where mothers can commiserate about teething, but a tool for disruption by those attempting to actualize a new paradigm, which unfortunately is not guaranteed to be rooted in equity or justice. Hatred and disinformation have been weaponized online to gather communities of likeminded individuals, plan virtual and physical events, and even sway U.S. presidential elections (US Committee Memos 1-4, 2021).

Not only have tweets become a daily part of inter/national news and other media channels, but children are also being granted access and introduction to this complex world at younger and younger ages. Many kids also have their own "Smartphone,"

capable of connecting to the internet with one touch. And while one touch of a screen may not seem like much, in the digital era, a person can buy a house, car, or even a child spouse with one tap. These technological presents like tablets and Smartphones are therefore incredibly powerful, far surpassing the wooden rocking horse of yesteryear. One father, in China, was shocked by an empty bank account that was drained by his 11-year-old son who spent "30,000 yuan (£3,458) on 55 different characters while playing the popular game on his phone" (Lo 2017:para. 2). While the game application (app) is free, many options exist within the game to "upgrade" and otherwise purchase online characters and other 'perks' (Lo 2017). In the US, a 6-year-old boy unknowingly charged over $16,000 through the Apple App Store by playing his favorite video game, buying "add-on boosters" of red rings and gold rings to unlock perks (Lewak 2020). Apple customer service agents were indifferent and accusatory, even after the mother explained she would not be able to afford their mortgage on top of such charges; employees asserted the mother should have known about the parental control settings (Lewak 2020). "'Obviously, if I had known there was a setting for that, I wouldn't have allowed my 6-year-old to run up nearly $20,000 in charges for virtual gold rings,' said Jessica, whose husband cares for the kids full-time" (Lewak 2020: para. 4). In this way, children's access to 'the adult world' has never been so widespread; even when children were considered wage earners in the family, their pay was handed to their parents to manage. Now, children are increasingly given expensive Smartphones (portable computers), with the market—and society's—allowance expanding to children's credit cards and banking apps (Blacklock 2021). Of note, many parents view Smartphones as safety equipment for

their children, as a lifeline, location device, and a way to ensure contact, a concern that

grew with the number of school shootings (CNN 1999; Willon 2002; Meredith 2012;

CBS 2013). Unfortunately, shootings in schools have increased in the United States, with

an average of more than one mass shooting per day (Brewster 2021). In fact, a 2019 study

revealed gun injuries as the second leading cause of death in children and teens, and the

number one cause of death among high school students (Children's Hospital of

Philadelphia (CHAP) 2021). Among children aged 0 to 12 who died via firearm, 85%

were killed in their own home; 1 out of every 3 children lives with a gun (CHAP 2021).

Already in 2021, three times as many kids have died from gun violence in Chicago than

compared to the same time last year; one community leader cried "our children are

becoming extinct" (Pagones 2021:para. 1). While the leading cause of child deaths in the

U.S. remains motor vehicle crashes (accounting for about 20%), the second is firearms

(comprising about 15% of U.S. child deaths) (United Health Foundation 2021). Enabling

children's access to adult tools can therefore be dangerous, with great care required to

teach, protect, and empower kids to live healthily.

The United Nations (UN) also warns that internet technology is not a harmless

toy, but rather a nonlocal place where power, politics, economies, and identities interplay

(Ben-Hassine n.d.:para. 1):

> "Today there may be no resource as powerful, or as vulnerable, as data.
> The central role that data sharing plays in contemporary society, ranging
> from use of social media to accessing administrative services, is
> accompanied by a high degree of risk. Data sharing on a mass scale and
> for many purposes in a digitally connected world means that our personal
> information is increasingly open to attack and misuse. In our online
> communications and transactions, we risk exposing details about our lives
> that used to be private as a matter of course. This includes not just

financial data that must be kept secure but also information about our location, our friends, families and associates, our political beliefs, our purchases, and even our health data. Further, States across the globe are creating digital identity systems that connect to our biometric information, building a bridge from our digital activities to our lives and identity offline. This digital identity may then become the target of exploitation, either for commercial or political ends."

Aside from these inter/national risks, rises in internet overuse, gaming and 'internet addiction' (coined by Kimberly S. Young, an American psychologist, in the 1990s) are being recorded around the world, with patients exhibiting "significant academic, occupational, or social functional impairments and unhealthy behaviors" (Kato, Shinfuku, & Tateno 2020:265). The high level of accessibility (for those who have the means) adds to the risk of overuse, especially in adolescents, and the possibility of Internet Addiction (IA) "through the influence of biological, psychological, and social factors" (Siste et al. 2021:1-2). The possibility of internet addiction, and the responsibility to protect children from said risk, was a considerable point of concern for many caregivers who were interviewed within this study, pointing to the stress parents feel in protecting their children from potential dangers of this inescapable technology, and even changing the ways they parent, from buying Smartphones and tracking their child's location to posting about their kid's accomplishments.

The internet seems to have changed just about everything. In fact, it can be daunting to think about what this technology is and the copious ways our lives have changed as a result. In describing these historical and social changes of digital modernity, Friedrich Krotz places special emphasis on four processes: **globalization** (unequal transnational power relations facilitating the trajectories of economic, political, and other

social processes); **individualization** (dis- and re-mantling of identity alignment to traditional, hierarchical constraints, or anchors, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class); **commodification** (the marketization of everyday life via surveillance, standardization, and quantification); and **mediatization** (the process by which individual and institutional realities conjoin to fit media forms and logic) (Livingstone 2010a:2). Children and adults alike are vulnerable to these overlapping influences; as such, Livingstone (2010a) warns against adults' tendencies to dismiss youths as "digital natives" and points out that this reliance on digital media and the skills needed to be successful therein creates "a skills burden on parents, teachers and children, a burden that is likely to fall unequally, as theorized by Beck as the individualization of risk" (13). Further, she explains that a neoliberal agenda to slyly remove various global trade barriers is resulting in the individualized responsibility of skills management, and emphasizes, "it's not simply digital literacy that's on the agenda but literacy in many guises": scientific, financial, political, economic, ethical, theological, informational, environmental, and health (Livingstone 2010a:13).

Children are increasingly participating in these global economic and social issues at younger ages, whether or not this trend has been largely realized by children and caregivers.

> "It is now well recognized that the United States is a consumer-driven society. Private consumption comprises a rising fraction of GDP, advertising is proliferating, and consumerism, as an ideology and set of values, is widespread…those developments are not confined to adults; they also characterize what some have called 'the commercialization of childhood'…As their participation in consumer markets has grown, children have become increasingly attractive targets for advertisers. This is partly driven by their high media use" (Schor & Ford 2007:10).

## Influential Media and Access

Despite their significant influence, Big Tech companies' practices (including marketing and the algorithms driving usage) remains largely unregulated and unchecked (see US Committee Memos 1-4). In a UN article pushing for rights-based and user-centered internet regulations through governmental policy grounded in technological understandings, Ben-Hassine (n.d.:para. 2) reports that:

> "Prior to the 2016 presidential elections in the United States, the British firm Cambridge Analytica enabled the use of data from 50 million Facebook accounts to create profiles for targeted political advertisements. The resulting scandal has helped raise power globally about the power of data for manipulation and control in the digital era, and of how few protections we have against this kind of abuse…Laws developed without input from diverse stakeholders, including voices from civil society, are putting marginalized populations, in particular, at risk of grave human rights abuses."

"Our data," warns Ben-Hassine, "reflects who we are, and as an extension of one's self, it must be guarded with the highest levels of protection" (n.d.:para. 8). Yet what level of understanding surrounding data collection and usage does the everyday parent, teacher, child, or other user have? For example, my research found very little, if any, guidance supplied to parents or children regarding appropriate use of the internet and ways to navigate and mitigate potential risks when many children were forced to learn online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The anonymity of the internet adds to user appeal; avatars and fake profiles allow for the creation of a new identity difficult to trace. Yet some of the reasons for this sought-after secrecy move beyond privacy and into predatory. For example, a digital marketing company that conducted a study of the most

impactful technology companies in the 21st century that found Pornhub to be the third most influential, behind Facebook and Google while ahead of Microsoft, Apple, and Amazon (Kristof 2020). Pornhub monetizes and profits off the sexual exploitation and rape of children, with advertisement revenues from channels like "exploited teen Asia," "Screaming Teen," "Less than 18," "the best collection of young boys," and "under—age" (Kristof 2020:para. 8-12). "A search for 'girlsunder18' or '14yo' leads in each case to more than 100,000 videos. Most aren't of children being assaulted, but too many are" (Kristof 2020:para. 3). Videos collected in any manner can be uploaded and downloaded, producing the possibility for endless copies and distribution; "Pornhub became my trafficker," declared one woman about videos of the child sexual abuse she endured continuing to resurface regularly (Kristof 2020:para. 7). Pornhub declared "major changes" to its platform in December 2020, banning downloads and adding to its video moderation team, after the site was accused in a New York Times article of "hosting videos taken without participants' consent, including scenes featuring rape, spy-cameras of women, and underage girls," calling the assertions "irresponsible and flagrantly untrue" (Jibilian 2020:para 1).

Yet pornography sites are not the only ones with reported problems of child abuse and exploitation. According to a 2021 report by the National Council for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), "Facebook recorded 20,307,216 instances for child sexual exploitation on its platforms in 2020," which also covers Instagram, and shows "Facebook made more than 35 times as many

reports as the next company on the list, Google" with 546,704 cases (Porter 2021:para. 4). Furthermore, this represents a 31% increase from reports made in 2019 (Porter 2021). Ahead of the report's release, Facebook released a blog post about the creation of new tools to identify and track down child sexual abuse material, including whether it was new or reposted (Porter 2021).

NCMEC attributed this rise to COVID-19 lockdowns, with vulnerable children less connected to sources for help like school counselors (Porter 2021). Yiota Souras, the lead counsel at NCMEC, explained the pandemic "created real increases in the victimization of children online and their vulnerability, because they are online a lot more, often unattended, often at a much earlier age than their parents anticipated" (Porter 2021:2). Souras also noted an increase in livestreamed abuse, a relatively new form of CSA where people pay to watch children being abused in real time (Porter 2021:2). Importantly, no laws currently exist in the United States to require platforms to search for CSA paraphernalia (Porter 2021).

Yet these numbers clearly show a deeper, widespread yet largely unaddressed problem of the hypersexualization of childhood that is seemingly shielded by the internet's anonymity. In 2007, an American Psychological Association Task Force Report on the Sexualization of Girls elicited research to assess this exposure (Sherman, Allemand, Prickett 2019). In response, Sherman, Allemand, and Prickett assessed the sexualization of Halloween costumes, for both adults and children (2019:262) and uncovered:

> "as with costume sexualization, model sexualization levels in ads found in female teen sections were just as high as those found in sections for adult women. Thus, the concern about compression of sexualization into younger age groups noted by the APA Task Force Report (2007) appears warranted based on our analysis of both model and costume characteristics in ads for Halloween costumes."

This points to the "normalization" of the sexualization of teenage girls, with sexy costumes being created and advertised for children's consumption and purchased with a parent's credit card.

Additionally, as Livingstone (2010b:7) illuminates: "children do not draw the line where adults do—so these are often the same activity—making new friends or meeting up with strangers; exploring your sexual identity or exposing your private self, remixing new creative forms or plagiarizing/breaking copyright." Moreover, these behaviors may be more common than formerly realized. A study from Sweden found that among children 14-15 years old, 48% of the girls and 18% of the boys had been contacted online by an unknown adult who made sexual suggestions within the last year (Jonsson et al. 2019). Girls, older adolescents, and those identifying as LGBTQ were approached more often (Jonsson et al. 2019). And a study by Jonsson et al. (2019:1) "made clear the importance of viewing online sexual abuse as a serious form of sexual abuse", partially addressing Livingstone's (2010a, 2010b) questions of online risk versus harm. These largely unaddressed issues remain; one goal of this study is to create further dialogue about potential risks to children in online worlds, while empowering caregivers, youth, educators, policymakers, and others to collectively create and enact best use practices.

## What Is Meant by Child/Hood? A Brief History

Childhood is a socially created concept. What a child is, how a child acts, their roles and responsibilities, and when childhood ends are contested and created by one's society. Among scholars, childhood is socially and historically situated. Childhood has also been "structurally invisible" according to Danish sociologist Jens Qvortrup (cited in Cook 2004:4), with children overlooked both in public policy and census statistics; for example, in the United States, data on ages were not collected until 1900 (Cook 2004). The separations between adults and children have also been left to each society across time to decide: "One trajectory speaks to the social identity of 'the child' as an entity, as a being distinguishable from adults. Primary among this child's distinguishing characteristics are its naturalness, its innocence, and the naturalness of its innocence" (Cook 2004:22). French medievalist and historian specializing in childhood and the family Phillipe Aries argued that before the twelfth century children were represented, at least through art, as miniature adults.

Indeed, looking back into antiquity we can see how, while childhood was considered a separate category, this was much more symbolic, while situated below adults in the societal hierarchy of power and agency. "In Late Antique society, while childhood legally ended at 20 for inheritance purposes, full adulthood might not be attained until 25" while in Roman Egypt, adulthood legally started at age 14 (Beaumont, Dillon, & Harrington 2021:3). During the Classical period, one's chances of surviving to an adult was likely not more than 50 percent (Garland 2021:203 citing Oakley 2003: 163). Because of this, children were seen as "a highly valued category" while integrated into society at a young age, largely through labor (Garland 2021:203).

"Given the economic constraints under which many families laboured, their offspring would have been required to contribute to the welfare of the household as soon as they were capable of productive work, perhaps as early as age seven… Only the childhood of the élite was not characterised by work. As a result, children's lives often intersected with those of adults to a greater degree than is the case in our society. While we regard the exploitation of child labour as abusive, that was certainly not the case in antiquity. On the contrary, it was a way of incorporating children into the household and the community." (Garland 2021:204).

This work was strenuous, with boys and girls undertaking difficult tasks; young apprentices learned from potters, cobblers, merchants, and farmers, and a child's workload would increase significantly if the family did not own at least one enslaved person[4] (Garland 2021:204). The lives of those (regrettably) denied their freedom were, unsurprisingly, much more bleak; boys were typically sent to work in mines or quarries, and girls often prostituted beginning in puberty (Garland 2021:204).

Additionally, the spheres between "child," "slave," and "family" intersected and even shifted, especially around sexuality and the legal abuse and exploitation of girls. For example, Classical Greek scholar Robert S. J. Garland (2021:205-6):

"The abuse of minors was commonplace. If an exposed girl was rescued, it was highly probable that she would be raised as a prostitute. The prosecutor in Demosthenes' speech *Against Neaera* (59.18- 19) reports how the mistress of the future courtesan trained her and six other small children to become prostitutes and profited from their earnings till the age when they were no longer in their prime. Indeed some forms of what we would call abuse were sanctioned by law. Up until the time of Solon a child could be sold into slavery by its father or legal guardian. Even later a father (or a brother) could enslave a daughter (or sister) whom he caught having sex before wedlock (Plut. *Sol.* 13.3, 23.2). It is not improbable that in some Greek communities poor families sold their children into slavery.

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[4] Slavery is a human rights violation. While enslaved people were in fact not treated as humans, I herein attempt to reference those who were forced to undergo such repugnancy with the respect, honor, and dignity they deserved in life.

If a child was the victim of abuse within the family, no legal redress was available."

Thus, while childhood was regarded as "a highly valued category," those belonging to this designation were arguably not treated with the same care as the symbolic classification itself. Furthermore, a girl's freedom, perceived worth, and duty were often hinged to her sexuality, youth, and exploitation thereof. Unfortunately, these supposedly outdated beliefs and behaviors from past millennia like child prostitution and trafficking still exist today, igniting as the catalyst for the creation of universal children's rights within the last century, as described below.

Aries marks the twelfth through fifteenth centuries with a focus on what he terms "sentimental realism" or the depiction of young Jesus and eventually other people as dependent and caring, creating a "theme of Holy Childhood" (Cook 2004:24). The concept is important, Cook emphasizes, in how this historical take on the child influences how we view and allow children to participate and construct their worlds today. Evidence of this longstanding belief is pervasive; Viviana Zelizer (1985:113) contends that this "'sacrilization' of children in the twentieth century led to an increased intolerance of child death, whether by illness or accident, and a great concern for protecting child life. Children of all social classes were not only vaccinated against disease and better nourished, but their lives were increasingly supervised and domesticated."

Per Phillipe Aries, childhood is a social invention constructed by the relatively modern (post-sixteenth century) family's devotion to the child, evident in 'separate spheres' of child and adult living spaces and responsibilities (Cook 2004; Schor 2003; Zelizer 1985). Aries theorized this stems from a "common conscience" societal shift,

particularly in Western, Christianized parts of Europe, through which "[n]ewly in possession of a soul, the child materializes as at once sacred and secular" (cited by Cook 2004:23). Moralists, religious officials, educational, and other institutions outside the family unit asserted children as "fragile creatures of God who needed to be both safeguarded and reformed" (cited by Cook 2004:26).

Yet before the 1700s, in England and Europe the loss of a child was akin to the loss of a pet, likely buried on one's property with resignation and indifference (Zelizer 1985:25). By contrast, in colonial America, a death of a child was seen as both a tragic loss and a "Tax we must pay" (Zelizer 1985:25). Ann Douglas noted a "magnification of mourning" that accompanied the rising distress by the middle-class over loss of children's lives between 1820 and 1875 (Zelizer 1985:25). This trend of publicly expressing private emotions aimed at the state to enact change expanded to include children's rights. According to one early 1900s American activist, "The child has a right to a fair chance in life. If parents are delinquent in furnishing their children with this opportunity, it is the clear duty of the state to interfere…" (Zelizer 1985:27). This led to data collected for the first time on these big little losses, and child deaths became considered not only private damages but public failures (Zelizer 1985).

Also popularized by the seventeenth century, Aries reported, was the Christian creation of "childhood innocence" (cited in Cook 2004:29). "Childhood innocence retains a sense of the sacred in secularized conceptions of children by the necessary insistence that it is an original and natural state of affairs, only to be corrupted by adult intervention or by virtue of life experience…there is no way to reverse innocence lost" (Cook

2004:29). Similarly, Gill Valentine documents this dualist "angel/devil" construction of children by North Americans and Europeans, with American Puritanism viewing this 'innocence' as a flaw through which children can be easily led and tricked, believing Satan can enter and influence humans from the moment of birth—this interference would then require Religious 'conversion' (Cook 2004:27-28). "The relative powerlessness of children enables images and depictions of children—and, by extension, their identities—to be quite malleable" (Cook 2004:15-16).

For others, the pliability of children was seen as beneficial; indeed, the current field of child marketing would agree. Around the sixteenth century, Aries contends, the sentimental realist view of children began to separate from religious narratives. John Locke, an English philosopher in the 1600s, asserted a popularized view of the child and thus the person as a *tabula rasa* at birth, shaped throughout one's life experiences. Critics have pointed to what they've termed as anachronistic liberalism, charging children with the responsibility of being rational thinkers as citizens of the future (Cook 2004). Nevertheless, Locke has been credited with having an "enormous" influence of the creation, beginning in eighteenth century England, of a "new world of children" and child-conscious raising, counter to Calvinist and other "negative, innate dispositions, including infant depravity" (Cook 2004:29). Genevan-born philosophe Jean-Jacques Rousseau was also instrumental, disseminating the assertion that people (children implied) are born free and pure by God and become corrupted through societal interactions across one's lifetime, helping to replace parental fear with encouragement to invest in their families. The perspective of achieving social mobility through the crafting

of a child's future allowed for a new market targeting middle- and upper-class (white) families, since "[f]ew desires will empty a pocket quicker than social aspiration" (Cook 2004:29). At the same time, following Georg Simmel's *Philosophy of Money* (1900), the "Protestant work ethic' and its link to capitalism that Max Weber (1905) details stressed the relationship between religious values, public ideas, and the economic sphere that was greatly expanded with the inclusion of children (Zelizer 1985).

Childhood innocence has been painted as a fragile and fleeting state that grownups can never attain, as people plummet from perfection after sexual corruption. American art historian Anne Higonnet described the romanticizing of childhood and children in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe as "an Edenic state from which adults fall, never to return" (Cook 2004:27). The sentimental construction of the "Romantic Child" was a reconceptualization of childhood, wherein "an older concept of a child born in original sin, correctible through rigid discipline, hard work, and corporal punishment, gave way to a concept of the child born innocent of adult faults, social evils, and sexuality" (Higonnet as cited by Cook 2004:29; see also Cross (2004)). This "fall from innocence" trope is still seen today, in beliefs around parenting (e.g., 'protect the child's innocence as long as possible') and in marketing ploys that utilize this dichotomy to appeal to children (through messages of rebellion) and parents (contending that giving in to a child's 'natural' desires is the best way to protect and nurture them (Schor 2003; Schor & Ford 2007; Cross 2004).

Sexuality has since increasingly been linked to conceptions of childhood and used to understand and influence the choices children are given. Michel Foucault describes the

insidiousness of sexuality and how it has been controlled via religious personnel,

psychologists, medical professionals, and politicians for the benefit of those in power

(1978). Rather than one message from one entity or organization, these controlling

messages come from intersecting points of power within society that each act to

normalize and institutionalize "normative" sexuality that ultimately results in growing the

workforce (Foucault 1978). He asserts:

> "it was in the 'bourgeois' or 'aristocratic' family that the sexuality of
> children and adolescents was first problematized, and feminine sexuality
> medicalized; it was the first to be alerted to the potential pathology of sex,
> the urgent need to keep it under close watch and to devise a rational
> technology of correction. It was this family that first became a locus for
> the psychiatrization of sex. Surrendering to fears, creating remedies,
> appealing for rescue by learning techniques, generating countless
> discourses, it was the first to commit itself to sexual erethism. The
> bourgeoisie began by considering that its own sex was something
> important, a fragile treasure, a secret that had to be discovered at all costs.
> It is worth remembering that the first figure to be invested by the
> deployment of sexuality, one of the first to be 'sexualized,' was the 'idle'
> woman. She inhabited the outer edge of the 'world,' in which she always
> had to appear as a value, and of the family, where she was assigned a new
> destiny charged with conjugal and parental obligations…As for the
> adolescent wasting his future substance in secret pleasures, the onanistic
> child who was of such concern to doctors and educators from the end of
> the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth, this was not the child
> of the people, the future worker who had to be taught the disciplines, but
> rather the schoolboy, the child surrounded by domestic servants, tutors,
> and governesses, who was in danger of compromising not so much his
> physical strength as his intellectual capacity, his moral fiber, and the
> obligation to preserve a healthy line of descent for his family and his
> social class. For their part, the working classes managed for a long time to
> escape the deployment of 'sexuality'" (Foucault 1978:120-1).

Foucault (1978) explains that the impact of sexual repression such as seen by the

bourgeoisie and hardened by the Victorian era was the multiplicity or forms of sexuality

and a fascination with such concepts, creating a reinforcing interplay between power and

pleasure, a tug-of-war that exists today. Sexuality therefore became entwined in race, class, gender, religion, and duty, at once a moral behavioral standard to be met and a constant threat to guard oneself and one's children against if a "good" life (that is, white and aristocratic) is to be obtained. Herein we also see a tie between materialism, sexuality, and parenting; ensuring a comfortable life dictated that one shield oneself and family from becoming social outcasts to secure a "beneficial" marriage (gaining money, status, etc.).

The approaches and attempts by society to safeguard childhood innocence and even delay or repress one's sexuality, in part by preventing against the sexual exposure and exploitation of children, have also changed with cultural narratives, including those shared in mass media. The amount of empathy, participation, and agency afforded to the children in these instances has also varied. In the case of child sexual abuse, for example, sociologist Nancy Whittier asserts that "everything about the culture and political response to child sexual abuse has changed, sometimes more than once, since 1970" when "[f]eminists brought it to public attention" (2009:4-5). Before that time, the common view was that CSA rarely occurred and was usually confined to racial and ethnic minorities and other economically disadvantaged groups (Whittier 2009:5). "Seductive children were thought to provoke sexual contact with adults, and incest was often believed to be the result of controlling mothers who drove their husbands into their daughters' arms" (Whittier 2009:5, citing Brownmiller 1975; Butler 1985; and Rush 1980). Feminist activists sparked and transformed the conversation of CSA as an institutional product of patriarchy and children's subordination, and pressed for more

effective legal changes such as the removal of the statute of limitations; mandatory

reporting and accountability of religious organizations; accessible and affordable mental

health options; and other social services to promote healing while removing the potential

for further abuse (Whittier 2009:109). However, despite some progress, especially at the

grassroots level, momentum was restricted in the 1980s with the rising popularity of

twelve-step Christian recovery and self-help groups (Whittier 2009). Criticized for being

problematic in their promotion of powerlessness and victim-blaming, such organizations

led to conflicts and division within the women's movement, diffusing the likelihood for

forcing social change (Whittier 2009). Recurring themes seen herein are the relative

powerlessness of children and women (including mothers), influences of religion, and the

tendency to hold an individual accountable and even at blame—rather than considering

how these may be driven by institutional and other societal structures that continue the

cycles of unequal power and abuse.

## The Commodification of Childhood

The tension between market calculation and social valuation of children was

made visible by a fundamental shift in the sentimental and economic view of the child in

the United States between the 1870s and 1930s, detailed by Viviana Zelizer (Zelizer

1985; Cook 2004; see also Cross 2004). During this period, children's monetary and

economic value was less emphasized than what a child offered emotionally and

sentimentally. Zelizer (1985:11-12) marks the contention around these morphing social

understandings of children that occurred at the turn of the last century, an obligatory

parental battle still seen today:

"In an increasingly commercialized world, children were reserved a separate noncommercial place, *extra-commercium*. The economic and sentimental value of children were thereby declared to be radically incompatible. Only mercenary or insensitive parents violated the boundary by accepting the wages or labor contributions of a useful child. Properly loved children, regardless of social class, belonged in a domesticated, nonproductive world of lessons, games, and token money. It was not a simple process. At every step, working-class and middle-class advocates of a useful childhood battled the social construction of the economically useless child."

As Simmel argued, pricing something simultaneously "trivializes" or destroys its value (Zelizer 1985:19). As Zelizer asserts, "in prostitution, marriage for money, or bribery, when price and value most directly intersect, monetization leads to a 'terrible degradation of personal value.' The sale of nonmarketable commodities is thus the ultimate conquest of the market in the modern world" (1985:29). And this 'commodification' soon extended to children; as Cook explains, "The change here can be understood as a change in the locus of value. Commerce, the money economy, and economic exchange tend to generalize value, affixing it to that which is external to the child, making children, in a sense, derivative of that value" (Cook 2004:8).

Cook (2004) documents how the definitions of childhood stages were demarcated and marketed according to children's clothing at the turn of the last century, infusing work of child psychology experts and governmental organizations for legitimization. "The market-culture of childhood represents a monumental accomplishment of twentieth-century capitalism," specifically "the rise and proliferation of a children's consumer culture throughout American society" unlike anything historically seen; exerting household purchases into the hundreds of billions annually, Cook claimed "the child

consumer is its enduring product and legacy" (Cook 2004:2; see also Schor 2003, Cross 2004, and Schor & Ford 2007). In addition to its imposing scale,

> "[t]he child market stands apart from others because childhood is a *generative* cultural site unlike any other. Childhood generates bodies as well as meanings which grow, interact, and transform to the point of creating new childhoods, new meanings, and quite often new markets, and in the process effectively ensuring the movement and transformation of exchange value beyond any one cohort or generation" (Cook 2004:2).

It is the shift in attempting to see the world through a child's eyes—in order to appeal and sell to the person at the youngest possible age—that propelled society to transform the cultural construction of both the "child" and "childhood" beginning in the 1930s, Cook contends (2004:2). In spite of and/or due to The Great Depression, desperate clothing merchants and other retailers started to attempt to attract children as customers. As a result, marketing previously reserved for parents only started to persuade the parents to focus on the child—even the "toddler"—as not only a customer but a consumer (Cook 2004) and a "wondrous child" as a "'natural' object of giving" (Cross 2004:186).

The "toddler" was so named for the swaying motion s/he made in learning how to walk, the differentiating ability from infants, and was identified by child psychologists as "the first stage of a willful individual capable of movement, choice, and direction" (Cook 2004). This "upright child" stood as the market's signal that the "toddler was now both morally ready and socially able to take her or his rightful place in the emergent commercial order of things" and is moreover "a vehicle more amenable than infant for the expression of style, taste, and gender. These expressions are concomitantly taken as expressions of 'personality,' of personhood" and remain marketing tools today (Cook 2004:89). Even at this young age, commercial products were designed and sold to parents

and other caregivers with the intent to mold, and thereby transform, the body: "walking stools and narrow cradles encouraged children to be physically straight…as quickly as possible, in order to bring the danger of animalness under control" (Cook 2004:28). Advertisers framed children's desires as a natural part of her or his personality that is to be supported and encouraged, through marketplace participation and therefore profits made (Schor 2003; Schor & Ford 2007). Salesclerks were trained to approach the child as adult-like as possible, while marketing messages to parents, such as through parenting magazines, urged caregivers and especially mothers to be "good parents" by nurturing their little ones' impulses and desires as fragments of their offspring's latent personality, with the children's market divided via gender differentiation aligning with puberty (Cook 2004). Through this profit-driven childrearing approach, perpetuated by psychology and medical experts as well as an array of trade writers, 'personality development' rather than moral or social training became the focus of parenthood advice through which children's value becomes partially dependent upon appearance, yielded as a tool for social distinction and mobility and shrouded in a 'new morality' (Cook 2004:89). Concurrently, maternal and parental authority was undermined by physicians, advertisers, and salesclerks through the guise of the child's own self-directed desires and future development (Cook 2004), a trend that continues today.

Furthermore, this shift occurred amidst rising financial pressures. "Children stopped working just as the rise in consumerism and mass advertising created tantalizing new opportunities for spending. Parents, whether they could afford it or not, were expected to train children as expert consumers" (Zelizer 1985:13). And representing more

than "the capitalist drive to expand markets and to extend 'consumer citizenship' to all…What took place on the floors of clothing departments and transposed by others during this time was a change in perspective—from seeing the world as a mother would to the beginnings of seeing the world through children's eyes" (Cook 2004:2-3). Cook terms this "pediocularity" (Cook 2004:3). The "wondrous innocence of childhood" were believed to have significant payoffs (and incentives) for the adults, also, resurrecting a happy appreciation for life that had been dulled by adult responsibilities as "an escape from the disappointments of market society and modernity" (Cross 2004:184). This 'escape from adulting' is a concept seen heavily within this research.

Today, this $32-plus billion industry has extended beyond "looking through child's eyes" to actually using them. Children are not only consumers but also corporate consultants, recruiters, and "fashion setter" market experts; these young people are taught, among other things, to sell to their friends, such as "Slumber Party in a Box," bringing marketing into children's most intimate spaces, including bedrooms and relationships (Schor 2003, Schor & Ford 2007). This blurs the boundaries between friendship and commerce, and can send the message that popularity, money, and 'likes' are just as or even more important than actual connections with peers and other people. Moreover, our very terms and understandings of children, a child's gender, childhood, play, and "good parenting" remain tied to the market in increasingly pervasive ways.

The marketized 'toddlerhood' marks the "first step in transforming the sacred child of sentimental domesticity. It is a movement away from the internal value and toward external markers of value" (Cook 2004:88). "Once children become treated more

or less as autonomous, volitional persons, they lose part of the cloak of sacredness and are enfranchised as near equal participants in and through the marketplace" (Cook 2004:12). Careful not to place outward blame on mothers and other child caregivers with pocketbooks, capitalists knew "[t]his narrative must invoke the child's own perspective. To do otherwise would be to profane the sanctity of the priceless child who is beyond all imposed value" (Cook 2004:88; see also Zelizer 1985). In this strategic rhetorical move, charging the child with desire and some degree of autonomy (a concept that was not surprisingly largely unaddressed in popular media), "'The child' is thus several steps removed from dependency only a year or two beyond infancy" (Cook 2004:88). Seen as an adult-in-progress, the toddler is "therefore 'less' sacred—less sacred than the crawling, hyperdependent infant" (Cook 2004:93). ***Herein the often-unstated cultural link becomes evident: to be fully dependent is to be sacred.*** Handed the responsibility of guiding their own development and style for the sake of profits, "[c]hildren's 'right' to consume in many ways precedes and prefigures other, legally constituted, rights" (Cook 2004:12).

> "Essentially, the commodification of childhood refers to the ways in which this phase or stage of the life cycle has taken on economic exchange values. The term focuses attention on how the imputed 'nature, boundaries, and exigencies of childhood have become market segments in and of children's culture… commodification is not merely some process imposed upon independent, individualized children which has turned them into consumers, nor is it something which soils pristine, autonomous childhood, but instead forms the basis of latter-day children's culture" (Cook 2004:6).

Furthermore, this relationship, hitched to culture, continues to shift. "The economic world of the modern child further illustrates the importance of considering the

symbolic functions of money as well as the noneconomic aspects of work roles. Children are unique economic actors" (Zelizer 1985:212). The emotional and economic 'worth' of a child, while not static, remain a moral dilemma, voiced by questions of a "growing anti-child culture" (e.g. Vance Packard and Germaine Greer) and the "disappearance of childhood" (e.g. Neil Postman and Marie Winn) (Zelizer 1985:214-5). Questions of whether, when, and how much it is appropriate for a child to work, and at what age, especially as a model or actress where a child is put on display—often for adult entertainment—remain. These issues were raised in my examination of Lexi Rabe's Instagram page by anonymous people interacting online. Such queries were also seen throughout this research process, from parent interviews to comments on shared photos. Is including one's child on a virtual advertisement for the parent's business considered work? Does the child have the right to say no if disinterested? What role, if any, does a child's age play in the decision-making process? These economically-tied social dilemmas, detailed by Gary Cross (2004) and others, appear repeatedly throughout my study, especially in relation to what it means to be a "good" parent and how to raise a "good" child.

**Power and Childhood: A Sweet Spot for Corporate Marketing**

The unprecedented buying power of children (direct and indirect) and young people's ability to influence the market—from cars and living room sets to computers and games (Schor 2003; Schor & Ford 2007)—lies in stark contrast to children's roles in the family and society, particularly in terms of youth's lack of agency within adult-created institutions. Their roles remain largely symbolic; "[c]hildren may not be asked

their views and opinions, and even if they are consulted, their ideas may be dismissed (James 2007:261). The decisions regarding their daily life, from which school they'll attend to which parent they'll live with in the case of divorce are decided by adults; their participation into civil society, such as through voting, is also restricted until "adulthood," typically drawn at 18 years of age. As such, people not belonging to the "adult" category are not given the same power to make and implement choices over one's life.

What is power, and why do adults "have more" of it? From a Weberian standpoint, power is the ability to make someone else do something, whether that is their desire or not. Parents have the power to choose in which state the child will reside, what school they will attend, and their peer groups. Yet for German-American philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt, power is a boundless, mutable potential rather than a measurable constant. Living in a society necessitates rules, organizing, and structures; yet implicit within those definitions and relationships is the notion of power. Who has power and who does not? From outset, white male property owners were the ones deemed able to participate in society. "To be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence" Arendt (1958:26) writes of how the Greek Nation-State considered all matters believed to impact the public. Matters deemed "private" included "home and family life, where the household head ruled with uncontested, despotic powers" (Arendt 1958:27). Women, children, and slaves were barred from participation, issues of inequality and inequity that remain today. Yet the ways in which societies have understood and organized what is

considered "public" and "private" life, and to whom such rights will be extended, have

not remained constant.

> "The distinction between a private and public sphere of life corresponds to the household and the political realms, which have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state; but the emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state. What concerns us in this context is the extraordinary difficulty with which we, because of this development, understand the decisive division between the public and private realms, between the sphere of the *polis* and the sphere of the household and family, and, finally, between activities related to a common world and those related to the maintenance of life" (Arendt 1958:28).

The public space, according to Arendt, is a place in which to exchange rational

debate, ultimately to critique unequal power differentials, especially institutionalized

inequality, in attempts to re/formulate the best version of democracy, that is, upholding

equal access and opportunity for participation for all citizens "to establish relations and

create new realities" rather than "to violate and destroy" (Arendt 1958:200). She

stipulated "[t]he only indispensable material factor in the generation of power is the

living together of people" and is "what keeps the public realm…in existence" (Arendt

1958:200-1). Many teenagers today would undoubtedly respond that social media like FB

keeps their public realm in existence. While social media platforms like FB and IG are

corporately (privately) owned, they are often understood as a "public" space for debate

and sharing, where parents assert the power to post images of their lives, in which their

offspring often play a significant role. The posting parent therefore holds the power in

deciding what photos and videos will be uploaded online, determining what—and

perhaps even *who*—the world sees. Still, as Cambridge Analytica's election involvement,

the US Committee on Energy and Commerce (2021), and many others have decreed, these spaces are highly commodified and have become profiteered and even weaponized against the public through the mining and selling back of one's own data and preferences and the organized, invasive, and seemingly relentless spread of dis- and misinformation, arguably creating a more uniform society and eroding public debate.

Our personal data is being collected and used to monitor and influence our preferences and behaviors.[5] And those under 18 years of age are not immune; rather, children's perspectives, desires, and dislikes are now sought and bought. Cook coined the term "'invasion' theory of commodification" (2004:6) to describe the expanding frontier of commodities in previously undisturbed social realms, like the yearnings of toddlers. Despite this "invasion" of elaborate, often sentimental, targeted marketing of consumers throughout the life-span beginning before a child can speak, Cook argued that children are neither empowered nor exploited by the market; instead, in asking 'what does childhood as a construct *do*,' Cook defined the child as a consumer who is omnipresent and embedded within market relations. Here we may find limits of thinking about children through an agency frame, since exploited notions of the child tend to rely on specific configurations of the child through the lens of "childhood innocence," depicted throughout history for being dependent, naïve, and easily led, as previously discussed. Children are heralded for ability to exercise their voice and choice, yet how much freedom to choose is given to the child by the caregiver, the education system, or the state? And how much choice does someone have when they have been groomed since

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[5] See US Committee on Energy & Commerce Memos 1-4 on the joint hearing "Disinformation Nation: Social Media's Role in Promoting Extremism and Disinformation."

before their first conscious memories to be a loyal consumer? The choices one has been exposed to growing up is exceedingly controlled by the highest bidder. Billion-dollar corporations like Coco-Cola and McDonald's have the ad revenue to dominate the market, with children increasingly targeted and exposed; these companies even have commercial agreements with school districts and incentive programs like Pizza Hut's "Book It" program that rewards children with free pizza for reading (Schor & Ford 2007). "Heavy media use is the foundation of high levels of advertising exposure. The range of estimates is that children are exposed to between 20,000 and 40,000 ads per year…Decades of studies show that food marketing to children is effective" (Schor & Ford 2007:13). In sociological and anthropological interpretations,

> "advertising is effective through its intervention in powerful systems of symbolic meaning that are at the root of how humans understand the world and act in it. Advertising messages skillfully engage symbolic structures of meaning and identity formation motivate people to act (and spend)…Children's marketers posit a sense of innate 'needs' and attempt to create ads whose message is that the product will satisfy the need. Needs include love, mastery, power, and glamour" (Schor & Ford 2007:13).

While choice alone as the basis of freedom is fraught and incomplete, children's perceived choices are increasingly bought, sold, and screened, with youth targeted and manipulated for their current and future value as consumers, and many of the effects of this shift remain unknown.

## Children's Rights: A Sticky Space

To actualize rights, including those of children, we must first define and then demand them so that we can continue to transform to fit the needs of our modern era. As we see with childhood itself, current attitudes about children's rights are deeply rooted

within historic, including religious, beliefs surrounding the autonomy of the child. Autonomy can be understood as one's sense of oneself as an individual with choices over his/her own life, or ability to self-rule. For much of human history, children were viewed as patriarchal property rather than autonomous beings, and therefore were granted little to no moral status nor moral rights (Beauchamp and Childress 2012:63). Two critical components of autonomy in nearly all theories are liberty, or one's right to be free from oppressive and controlling forces, and agency, one's capacity to act on purpose (Beauchamp and Childress 2012:102). Do children have liberty? And at what age can children make their own intentional decisions, understand and control their actions and behaviors?  Until 18 years of age, in this country the parent or guardian maintains rights of the individual, including medical decisions. Furthermore, the Bible and other fundamental religious texts view adolescents as property and teach children to "honor thy father and mother"—even when that child is ordered to marry her rapist (Deuteronomy 22:28-29). Thus, children have neither full liberty nor complete agency, and according to these definitions, are not autonomous beings; in fact, their subordinance is expected, even required.

Relatedly, Rebecca Kukla (2013) argues that autonomy includes liberty, self-determination, independence, integrity, and agency, and asserts that to exercise one's positive power of autonomy—or ability to choose options, resources, and other decisions of daily life—citizens must ironically depend upon social scaffolding, or networks of material and social resources, to some degree. While this scaffolding is central to one's

lived experiences, children are given little say regarding these structures, from legal and

education systems to which friends the family spends most time with.

     Alongside re/visiting the concept of child autonomy, the rights of children have

been expanding rapidly this past century, just as nation states have become increasingly

aware of problems and responsibilities surrounding protecting children against sexual

abuse. United Nations documents reflect these transforming beliefs regarding the

autonomy and moral status of the child. The Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the

Child in 1924 and the Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted in November 1959

by the General Assembly paved the way for the United Nations Convention on the Rights

of the Child (CRC), a treaty recognizing the cultural, political, social, economic, civil,

and health rights, including sexual health, of the child (United Nations Human Rights

Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) 2018). The CRC asserts that since:

> the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members
> of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the
> world,
> Recalling that, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United
> Nations has proclaimed that childhood is entitled to special care and
> assistance,
> Convinced that the family, as the fundamental group of society and the
> natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and
> particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and
> assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the
> community,
> Recognizing that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his
> or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an
> atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding,
> Considering that the child should be fully prepared to live an individual
> life in society, and brought up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the
> Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of peace,
> dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity,
> States Parties shall protect the evolving capacities of children including
> from sexual abuse and exploitation (CRC 1989 per OHCHR 2019).

Yet it was the issue of human sex trafficking, particularly of children, that brought real movement to the area of CSA prevention; in 1996, the first World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children was held in Stockholm, Sweden (National Action Plan 2008). This World Congress led many nation states to implement their own responses and created new international responses and protocols (National Action Plan 2008). Children's rights, as described by the United Nations and other global organizations, are thus inherently linked to their vulnerability as targets for sexual abuse amidst a global culture of hacking and exploitation of youth's dependence and "childhood innocence."

Other important rights afforded to the child include rights to privacy, security, freedom of thought and expression, and even access to mass and social media. These include (OHCHR 2019):

> *Article 12*
> 1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
> *Article 13*
> **1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.**
> 2. The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:
> (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; or
> (b) For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals.
> *Article 14*
> 1. States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

2. States Parties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child.

3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

*Article 16*

1. No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation.

2. The child has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

*Article 17*

**States Parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health.**

**To this end, States Parties shall:**

**(a) Encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child and in accordance with the spirit of article 29;**

**(b) Encourage international co-operation in the production, exchange and dissemination of such information and material from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources;**

**(c) Encourage the production and dissemination of children's books;**

**(d) Encourage the mass media to have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority group or who is indigenous;**

**(e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being, bearing in mind the provisions of articles 13 and 18.**

*Article 18*

1. States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.

2. For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing

responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.

3. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible.

*Article 19*

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

2. Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement.

*Article 34*

States Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. For these purposes, States Parties shall in particular take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent:

(a) The inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity;

(b) The exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices;

(c) The exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials.

*Article 35*

States Parties shall take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent the abduction of, the sale of or traffic in children for any purpose or in any form.

Significantly, while the rights of the child and obligations of parents and State are itemized, exactly how these rights are to be upheld are not stipulated, assumedly to allow each Nation State to decide how best to implement these measures within their own culture, norms, and structures. However, a lack of guidance, coupled with a lack of enforcement, largely leaves caregivers alone to navigate these contested waters.

Moreover, three States—including Somalia, South Sudan, and the U.S.—remain

unwilling to ratify the CRC (Human Rights Watch 2014). These rights, then, may be seen

as symbolic ideals rather than literal privileges.

**Children's Participation: Multidimensional, Diverse, Relational**

When contemplating an expanded framework of child participation, it may be

helpful to consider "ways in which we can differentiate childhoods according to political,

economic and cultural contexts. Within these contexts we can identify different

conceptions of childhood" (Wyness 2018:65). Only as recently as the 1990s has the

consideration of children's participation in the structures that scaffold our daily lives and

our societies developed as a dominant theme within studies, policies and practices of

childhood (Cook 2004; Wyness 2018). Sociologist of childhood in England, Michael

Wyness, drawing on Oswell (2013), explained "participation emerges from and is closely

associated with children's agency, which focuses on children's capacities and their

formative influence within environments" and asserted that the "idea of children's

participation brings a practical and political dimension to the idea of agency" (2018:53).

It is important to note that any specific age range, ability, or any other marker of

the child's ability to participate was not stipulated. In addition, a lack of agreement exists

concerning the meaning of children's participation. With these unclear terms aside,

Wyness (2018) contended that the dominant narrative is narrow in favoring institutional,

developmental, and discursive aspects that mimic adult conceptions of civil participation

and democracy, the "realities" that teach diplomacy, compromise, and also the

hierarchical order and possibility-pruning mechanisms of institutions (Wyness 2018).

Moreover, despite adults' preference or default for (or perhaps resignation to?) discursive, procedural meeting structures, research indicates children prefer informal participatory models and may be more effective (Wyness 2018 citing Cockburn & Cleaver 2009). In addition to losing efficacy, a forced adherence to a system in which children do not feel listened to or validated runs the risk of leading to future cynicism and noninvolvement in important political processes (Wyness 2018 citing Matthews 2003). It is therefore important that if children are to be involved that it is beyond a tokenist capacity.

Wyness (2018) advocated for a participation model emphasizing the relational and embedded nature of children's contributions in order to shift unequal power relations rather than merely being treated as a token. Of note, to distinguish between idealized versus actualized agency, Wyness considered, "does it count as a form of participation in that it satisfies the three requirements of agency, voice and decision-making?" (2018:67). Much opportunity exists to foster ongoing intergenerational dialogue. With this approach, "[t]here is a more eclectic approach to the meaning of participation with less of an emphasis on hierarchical approaches, which are drawn on in making judgements about the authenticity of participatory initiatives and practices (Wyness 2018:64 referencing Hart 1997). This could provide new opportunities for understandings of the child, particularly in relation to civic participation, and could even allow for a more democratic power dynamic between those who are above and below 18 years of age.

**CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

This study investigates the construction of childhood narratives in online spaces, largely by adult caregivers, through the sharing of child images on social media sites. Specifically, I conducted an ethnographic case study via content analyses of photographs, videos, and related comments of children shared on my Facebook newsfeed, child model/Disney's Marvel actress Lexi Rabe's Instagram page (600K+ followers), and YouTube Kids website.

As Facebook and Instagram are two of the most widely used social media platforms, by adults and children, both were targeted in this study. YouTube (YT) is also a top rated and used platform, made for adults, whereas YouTube Kids was designed (after YT gained global support) as a "kid specific" alternative, specifically for children under 12 years old. As a child-centered platform positioned as an alternative to the "normal" (adult) YT that was created and managed by adults for kids, investigating the types of content therein lends a specific look into the types of messages being distributed to children worldwide. A Pew Research Center study found that YouTube was "very important" for 1 in 5 adults' updates and understandings of world events and learning new information, with YouTube algorithms encouraging popular (most viewed) and longer content and thus more time spent on the influential platform (Smith, Toor, & Van Kessel 2021). Researchers also found that approximately one fifth of the content on

YouTube is geared toward children, with problematic and/or troubling content "common" (Smith, Toor, & Van Kessel 2021). "YouTube's chief product officer said the site's recommendation engine is responsible for more than 70% of users' time spent watching videos on the platform" that can introduce viewers to extreme content that otherwise may have remained undiscovered (Smith, Toor, & Van Kessel 2021). With YTK as the product created by this monolithic corporation specifically for kids, the site was rife for investigation. Additionally, all participants interviewed discussed YTK use unprompted, often in comparison to "the regular YouTube" (Karen, Valerie, Chanel, DK) signalling its importance to both parents and children and worthy of additional study.

I also interviewed 8 caregivers who shared images of their underage grand/children on the Facebook social media platform and were "friends" of mine, belonging to my personal social network. Initial requests were made via telephone, text message, and direct messages (DMs) on FB. Interviews were semi-structured, with an interview template (Appendix A) used for guidance and organized by research project's main topics, and lasted approximately one hour each. These were conducted via Zoom or by telephone; calls were also recorded via Zoom by placing the participant on speaker phone to ensure the conversation could be transcribed, coded, and analyzed thereafter. Once transcripts were saved, the audio/visual recordings were deleted as a precautionary measure to protect the identity of those interviewed, with only pseudonyms utilized. Research participants were given the chance to create their code name in attempts to be as participatory as possible, along with the semi-structured nature of the interviews.

At the beginning of the research project and the end of each three-month period for one year, I looked at the participants' FB pages and evaluated images (both photo and video) that participants shared of a child (whether or not the adult participant was also captured). I conducted a content analysis of these images, using coding to identify themes. Data from each of the 5 data collections (initial and quarterly) were compared at the end of the study to identify how themes have continued, changed, and/or emerged.

Ideally, participants agreed to at least one interview and to be "followed" on FB to allow the student researcher to cross-reference interviewee's perception of sharing habits with the actual number and content of posts and types of comments, and other volunteered information. However, this is not required. Altogether, 6 of the 8 interviewed also agreed to be "followed;" 4 other participants were "followed" and not interviewed. Specifically, I looked at the kinds of photos shared involving children (for example, what they're doing, who is in the photos, what the children are wearing and posture, any brands in the photo) and the 'reactions' these photos get ("likes", 'heart emoji' or "dislikes", comments, etc.). No identifiable information was kept at any point in this study.

Finally, Lexi Rabe's Instagram account was included in this study for several reasons. At the early stages of my research, I decided that Instagram, a widely used app by adults and children, should be included. During this time, stories broke about bullying behaviors directed at the then-7-year-old model and actress of Disney-owned Marvel's "Avengers: Endgame" who played Morgan Stark, the daughter of Iron Man (played by Robert Downey Jr.) (who is now 8). Around the same time, headlines highlighted pedophilic comments left on Lexi's IG pictures: "Don't Leave Creepy Comments on

Morgan Stark Actress Lexi Rabe's Instagram. She's 7." (Leishman 2019). Lexi's mother, who is also her talent manager and maintains Lexi's IG account, publicly renounced such behavior. Some attacked the mom for sharing risquee photographs of her young girl, accusing the mother of profiteering from Lexi's body while others supported her 'decision and rights' regarding parenting this minor model. This case was therefore seen as rife for further exploration, and added an example of how a 'Hollywood mom' navigates sharing about her child's body, with the body itself the source of the family's income.

Guided by the research, data analysis included coding with attention to intersecting issues of inequality in virtual spaces, social and sexual identity, privacy, security, supervision, and human rights, with children objectified for religious, economic, family, and other social benefits. The kinds, frequency, and fervor of sharing were evaluated, noting repeated terms and phrases referring to the child (such as "cute" and "fun"). What types of images were shared, by whom, and the reactions gained within this digital interaction were assessed as part of this study.

While the concept of children as commodities is not novel, my focus on the online world brings a contemporary perspective, with the COVID-19 pandemic forcing much of our professional and personal lives online, from pre-kindergarten to PhD programs. Moreover, while many of these sites and applications began with a millennial U.S.A.-centric target market, they have expanded to include billions worldwide. The boom in social media dependency, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, indicates a need to investigate how children are being represented, what types of idea about childhood are

being constructed, shared and solidified in the exchange of these images and participating in these spaces, to what aims (e.g. strengthen family and friend networks, objectifying children to sell products), and with what results on children, families, and communities. For example, children are placed centrally in familial communications and events, hinting to the ways in which parents, families, and society emphasize and place importance on childhood as a time separated by the distinctions and differences from adults. Children are also viewed as the imperative 'social glue' that lends easily to conversation, mutually created and attended events, and other dialogue (such as around birthday parties and holidays). In these ways, children help to create communities of 'insiders' and strengthen family and friend networks. At the same time, children and their perspective childhoods are often objectified as an ideal that is not ever again quite achievable by parents and caregivers, despite nostalgia and crawling on the floor to gain a more 'short-sided' perspective on life, attempting to feel wonderment at a newly unfolding world. It is in the spirit of 'capturing' and re/creating those feelings (of newness; familial support and attention; and higher amounts of care) that family and other community members seem to participate and to which marketers aim to please.

The study procedures included recruiting interested adults to discuss in a semi-structured in-depth interview conducted by myself through Zoom or via telephone their online sharing and posting practices of children for whom they are at least partially responsible. I utilized my personal social network to recruit participants. Initial outreach occurred via phone call, text message, or FB messenger request. If conducted via phone,

a voice recording application was used to capture the interview for later transcription and analysis. I interviewed 8 caregivers, and 3 participated in follow-up interviews.

In addition, I "followed" 10 "active" partipants on Facebook (FB) over the period of one year, connected as a "friend" on FB. (Participants must post on their FB page at least once per month to signify an "active" status.) Participants must be responsible at least part-time for the wellbeing of at least one person under 18 years of age (which can include grandparents who babysit, for example). Participants signed a statement of approval agreeing to being "followed" and content used in creation of this study. At the beginning of the research project and the end of each three-month period for one year, I looked at the particpants' FB page and evaluated images participants shared of a child, either with or without the participant. I conducted a content analysis of these images, using coding to identify themes. Data from each of the 5 data collections (initial and quarterly) were compared at the end of the study to identify how themes have continued, changed, and/or emerged. Most participants agreed to at least one interview and to be "followed" on FB to allow me to cross-reference interviewee's responses of perceptual sharing habits with the actual number and content of posts, types of comments, and other volunteered information. However, this was not required.

**Role Conflicts**

All my interview participants were friends, and in some cases family members. This posed multiple challenges of clashing roles of observer and participant. For example, interviewees assumed I had certain insider knowledge and therefore were hesitant to elaborate upon a question. This is because I have had numerous conversations

surrounding my general study interests with each of these women. I was also Facebook friends with each of them, and I believe contributed to their vague answers describing the kinds of videos and photos they share; they know I have access to them and have commented in the past. However, during the length of the project I have refrained from leaving any posts in order not to interfere with the data in any way. This is not out of the ordinary for me, as I very rarely provide feedback online underneath photos of friends' and families' young'uns, or other comments for that matter, and would therefore not raise any questions.

**Ethical Issues**

The world of research, like children's rights, is a sticky space. To remain as objective as possible means to question my questions, delve into definitions, and consistently check for unconscious biases. How does one take truly neutral notes? For example, I felt uncomfortable remarking on skin color, as the social construction of race is a convoluted and historic one steeped in discrimination, judgments, and pain. There is certainly a fine line between observing and judgment, and perhaps the two are inseparable. I try to remain as objective and unbiased as possible while acknowledging my background, education, appearance, and other experiences influence perceptions of myself and by other members of society. Yet I believe this contradictory tight-rope is a necessary act for all social scientists.

A similar issue I ran into was the boundary between observing and judging caregivers specifically. As Hochschild argues, the wife-mother is a central role of the family (2004). I did not want to come across as insensitive to the impossible demands of caring for another human. Though I have no dependents, I have much experience in

raising little ones, from feeding newborns at half past three and supervising juvenile delinquents, to caring for those with differing mental and physical abilities. The term "full-time job" does not begin to explain the hefty responsibility and honor of raising a person to be their best self. I strove to remain compassionate yet critical.

   ***Issues of Power.*** I was able to turn some of my challenges into opportunities for research. One instance involves the power dynamic of my being researcher and friend having access to photos. This became a benefit to me when comparing their responses outlining their sharing habits with actual posts of pics and videos. Each interviewee severely downplayed the amount of sharing, as well as the content. This could again stem from previous conversations regarding child sexual abuse (CSA) held between participants and myself. Though I tried to remain unbiased in my words, inflexions, and other cues, these women know my views intimately: I'm an extremely liberal feminist who also believes in the prevention of CSA, and feel that while adult, consensual sex should not be stigmatized as taboo, children are entirely separate creatures in that regard, with underdeveloped brains and a complete dependence upon adults for survival. Participants could also have been hesitant to provide information about their virtual sharing of minors since they know I am a published author, and thus a real possibility exists that the project could be printed at some point. While they gave me permission to use their words, the women were still bashful in answering these questions; these repeated reactions were present particularly around the topic of mothering, a position that is easily judged and often infused with criticism. This is another example of the power dynamic that exists, as I have the final say in what is released about these women and the

very personal choices they make as grand/mothers and caregivers. To help mitigate this power differential between researcher and participant, I promised to share the final draft and completed paper with my participants. None of the participants provided further feedback.

*Practical Struggles.* Access to data, including field observation sites and Facebook friend/caregivers, presented opportunities to be creative. None of the women I interviewed live near me. As a result, I found an app that allowed me to record phone conversations so I could transcribe the interviews later. I tried a few and tested each before settling on one that worked well, though used up a lot of data memory storage on my device. I gave each participant the choice to be interviewed via phone or video chat, and none of the women were comfortable being recorded over video (despite my promises that no one would view them but me).

*Stating the Obvious.* Finally, an obvious factor to note in my study is that the voices of children themselves are not included though the need to empower young people plays a central theme. Though the point of this research was in fact to look at how childhood is created online largely through adults and the ways in which tensions around sharing are navigated, as we've seen, while the internet may have been created by adults, it has been hacked by millennials! Further research should be done to investigate the meanings children place around such concepts as internet, social media, agency, voice, participation, and community.

**CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

Given the widespread and deepening reliance on internet-based technologies, for adults and children alike, it is important to investigate parents' and caregivers' understandings of cyberspace. Another important concept to study is how parents and other caregivers understand and resolve tensions between sharing cute, fun, impressive, and loving photos and videos of children online and the potential scrutiny and other risks that exist within this digital landscape. What are the frameworks that parents and other caregivers employ surrounding the rights and responsibilities around childhood? What boundaries do parents invoke to demarcate permissible behavior from the intolerable? And what, if any, rights do children have to control the images, narratives, identities, and other forms of their representation shared in online spaces? These questions are probed in the following section.

**The Internet: An Awesome and Scary Resource**

How would parents and other caregivers describe the internet? Interestingly, this was one of the hardest questions for interviewees to answer. Why? Internet technologies have become so normalized, utilized, and interwoven into our lives—certainly before the COVID-19 outbreak but increasingly since— as to become nearly unrecognizable, from the way we bank, buy, and pay to how we search for and apply to potential universities

and employers, and the digitally-mediated platforms upon which our social relationships and our habits seem to hinge. For example, Ariadne replied:

> "What is the internet? Oh jeez, that's hard. Let's see, it's, um…It's this magical place of…um, describing the internet…I have no idea. You have websites, which are like collections of data, and like, sharing information? I don't know. This is hard…I have no idea…How does that sound? My brain hurts!"

Each response utilized a researcher lens, describing the internet as "a resource" "for research" "collection of data" "information sharing" and "access", often having seemingly very little or no boundaries. One mother of three, and an online entrepreneur, summed it up as "awesome and scary" as she demonstrated real-time:

> My favorite thing is that it's a good resource to be able to make money um, you know, and to be able to do research and to be able to store information. You know, I think the internet is a really good tool and, since you asked me that, I want to do something really quick, I want to Google, the word. Internet and see what we come up with and I saw that that 'the Internet is a vast network that connects computers all over the world. Through the Internet, people can share information and communicate from anywhere with an Internet connection.' That is awesome! You know? It's awesome and scary. It is awesome and scary at the same time. But you know, the powerful words when they created this Google definition, or, this is a Britannic-, Britannica definition, the words that really resonate with me is information--share information and communicate. Hmm. Who does not want to do that?"

This illustrates in-the-moment inquiry and reflection into the definition of the internet *through* the internet, in some ways the tool itself (or in actuality, where the language of people meets the language of computers) is reinforcing the narrative. Additionally, this not only shows a heavy reliance on internet technologies, it also points to the intense speed of the instrument and the ease of use.

To Amani, "The internet is where you go to access everything we need, like to go do something, meet someone, buy something, social media, all this stuff. For the kids, it's all games, actually." The boundary here is placed between "fun"—the children's realm—and "practical"—the adult's world. She sees the internet as a tool for helping her provide for the family (food), take care of tasks, and stay connected (social media), which is also a form of emotional work (tending to relationships). So for Amani, while mother is using the internet to work, the children are connecting online for play.

Yet all this access to information and "known others"—not to mention "unknown others" like strangers, extremists, hackers, or bots—also comes with potential downsides. The moms interviewed spoke at length about the challenges of the internet. For DK, "I would describe the internet as a resource, but a resource that you have to be careful using because it can be addictive, it could be, it could take you down lots of rabbit holes and so on and so forth." The danger referenced was the potentiality for wasted time, not on the risks of posting private or sensitive information. Valerie has a similar description of the internet as "a black hole. (Short chuckle.) I mean, it can be an amazing tool, if you use it right, or it can be a very destructive tool, so, and yeah it really depends on what kind of person you are and what, what you're looking for." The destruction Val referenced included child abduction and trafficking. Here she links one's internet use with one's character, one's morals, ethics, and intent, with a frame centered around child safety from threats posed by strangers. Respondents therefore discussed the internet's vast potential—from gathering information and obtaining an education to building community and securing income—alongside potential risks like loss of time and unproductivity.

Those interviewed also demonstrated an understanding that online behaviors are indications of the type of person one is "in real life" or offline.

One specific way character was discussed within interviews was through the act and amount of taking photographs of oneself, with the goal typically seen as attention seeking, linking one's online posting habits to one's perceived character in the physical (referred to as "real") world. "Selfies," or pictures of oneself (sometimes within a group context) taken *by* oneself, usually with the intent of sharing on social media (Bansal et al 2018) were linked to self-centeredness and/or selfishness in several respondents' answers. Valerie attested, "I try not to post, like, a lot of selfies. I'm not self-absorbed or anything, so, I usually don't. But if it's like, a big trip then you know, I will, which, I use private settings and everything." She justifies her behavior, stipulating how it's an exception, and even goes one step further by including her privacy settings in the same sentence. This may suggest that she may be self-conscious and hyper-aware of her answers to my questions relating to sharing of children's photos and safety. It could also mean that she, like others, operates within existing categories by which to interpret behaviors online. Posting what one views to be an excess of photos of oneself is understood as a sign of self-centeredness, pointing to an awareness that one's self is being projected—and interpreted—online. It could also indicate that she perceives a link between how much one not only takes selfies, but shares them, and to how 'intimate' an audience (e.g. friends only or open to all). DK stated, "I'm not a big selfie person, so I don't go around like, 'I gotta take my picture;' I don't even think about it half the time. I am doing a little recently, though, but that's because I got another phone and the camera

is like, perfect, but that's the only reason. That camera is soo good!" DK distinguishes herself from "a selfie person" to communicate her inner character and virtues and demarcate herself from online behaviors from which she typically refrains. Again, we see this behavior being rationalized to me as the researcher, hinting that she understands personal traits are tied to posting habits.

Navigating what types of content to post and how frequently—of oneself and children—is not as black and white as old photographs; instead, navigating this virtual space is fraught with contention, confusion, and criticism. According to Valerie, when parents post selfies, "I think sometimes it's more self-absorbed, it's about themselves— I've never thought about that too much until now, but a lot of people with children, it's about, it's mostly about them posting about themselves and not always about their kids." Here she describes the difficult line parents try to toe between sharing about oneself and sharing about their children; if a parent is posting too many selfies, they can appear to be a selfish parent. Selfishness was used almost as a swear word among mothers; focusing too much on oneself seemed to imply that one must therefore be neglecting one's child/ren, or at the very least, neglecting to fill the 'mother role' of ultimate caregiver. As DK described,

> "I've always been, where I had always been in corporate America and always had a side hustle. But I've always been that type of person who has worked on something, you know, stayed busy. I'm—not that I ignore my kids but—I've taught them at an early age to kind of be independent, to be able to do stuff for themselves."

This mother points to an understood cultural boundary between being a caring mother and teaching children to care for themselves. Again, we see that

dependence of children on older people is linked not only to parenthood and motherhood but also to the very notion of childhood, and by extension, what it means to be an adult, which is independent. Moreover, mothers often feel they must be at once *independent* in their caregiving role (responsible for creating and maintaining another's life) whilst *interdependent* upon the larger society to respect their parental wishes (including posting habits) while also helping to provide guidance and safety, such as from educational and health systems. This adds enormous pressure to the emotion work of moms.

Alongside parental expectations of teaching their children how to avoid appearing selfish across social media, selfies can also pose a safety concern. Photos of oneself have expanded from a cultural phenomenon to a consumerist ploy, led by millennials. These young folks place themselves in dangerous positions to capture a breathtaking photo, like a cliff's edge, that will gain the most attention on social media (Bansal et al 2018). Innumerous sites discuss 'how to take the perfect selfie,' and merchandise like "selfie sticks" and "selfie shoes" created for the specific purpose of capturing a picturesque photo of oneself (Bansal et al 2018). However, not only are selfies seen as selfish by many adult caregivers, the act of taking a selfie can be dangerous and even deadly. One study discovered 259 deaths resulting from 137 incidents between October 2011 and November 2017 (Bansal et al 2018:828). In response, some dangerous tourist areas have demarcated "no selfie zones" (Safi 2018). While five parents interviewed mentioned or alluded to the connection between selfies and selfishness, none spoke about the selfie death phenomenon specifically, suggesting that the potential social consequences of

posting too many me-pics is an issue parents are met with much more often. This point

also alludes to the layers of potential risks—often unanticipated—available for children's

access online; in this case, daredevil selfie photos "going viral" (or an internet sensation)

caused a phenomenon in which young people began participating in such behaviors

alongside their peers worldwide. Beside discovering knowledge online, children now

have access to peer pressures and senseless stunts performed from around the globe. As

Livingstone (2010a) reminded us, partaking in risky behaviors is a part of the growth

process of humans—we need to test boundaries to learn what and where they are. Yet as

Karen pointed out, children today have access to a much wider array of much more

powerful tools, including internet-mediated social media, far easier than in the past, and

at a much faster speed:

> "I spend way too much time on Facebook and Instagram and it's so
> fascinating. I love seeing how different people are and how crazy society
> is. It's the same as reality TV. It's like, oh my gosh! Everything is just so
> easy now, though, ya know? When I was a kid, you had to get up and turn
> the channel. When cable came along, and when you had the first VHS
> movies, you could rent a movie. That was when people said, 'oh, these
> kids are wasting so much time in front of the TV.' Then video games
> came out, ya know? Then home games. How much time spent on these,
> and then computer games. All these stories kept coming out in the news
> about how bad it is. It just keeps evolving with technology, whatever the
> new thing is. But the bottom line is any responsible parent in my opinion
> who allows screen time, even TV, should watch with them."

These evolving technologies place even more uncertainty, pressure, and responsibility on

caregivers. And as she alluded, parents seemed to be warned of new and increasing

dangers with each wave of technology. Technology, therefore, is painted as both a

powerful tool and a potential weapon about which parents must be ever vigilant and

protective, at once a perpetual threat and a necessary resource for any child growing up in

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the new millennium. In fact, two-thirds of parents in the United States believe parenting is harder today than compared to 20 years ago because of the contested waters around screen time and internet use, and 71% believe smartphone use by young children may potentially cause more harm than benefits provided (Auxier et al, 2020). Parents are therefore torn between allowing their child to have a cell phone for safety purposes, while the lifeline itself poses a potential threat to the kid's security and privacy.

Economically-tied social dilemmas, detailed by Gary Cross (2004), Viviana Zelizer (1985), Juliet Schor (2003), Schor and Ford (2007) and others, appear repeatedly throughout my study: questions of how much to spend on one's child for birthdays and holidays (in attempts to be a "good parents" to reward their child, who's happiness is "worth the money spent," while simultaneously shielding from selfishness or "becoming spoiled"); whether including one's child in marketing ads for the parent's home-based business is "cute" or 'cheap;' and parents' continual attempts to ensure their children "look good" (showcasing the adult's ability to parent—including behavioral and financial factors—and the 'love' the adult has for the youth) were common among caregivers' posts and sympathizing comments to one another. This was especially visible in relation to what it means to be a "good" parent and how to raise a "good" child. Crucially, "good" moms raise "happy kids", and posting pictures is social "proof" of "good parenting." Parenting, then, in addition to childhood, is at once a social and economic affair, spanning public, private, and profitable worlds.

## Limiting Screen Time: A Parent's Position

When, where, and how often a child can access the web are decisions made by adult caregivers. Chanel admits of her 8-year-old, "Her tablet is tied to her—for school purposes" and is left to roam with her portable device. For Amani, her children's internet access happens "only in the living room. Here. With me. The whole time I'm here and watching them." KDD's approach differs greatly: "As long as we're not doing something as a family, like eating, she can pretty much have it and do what she wants." Parental rules and guidelines also varied greatly; for DK, a solo entrepreneur, the only rule was "not to download apps that cost money" so they "don't get hacked," whereas others reported "no foul language," "put-downs," or being mean" (Karen, Ariadne, KDD, Rain).

Because parents are warned about prospective harms of the online world, like Karen describes above, one role of the caregiver is to limit screen time. Interviewees talked about limiting screen time both in terms of brain health (preventing possible cognitive and/or physical brain impairments) and limiting the potential for 'stranger danger' or other potential negatives. When asked whether there have been any surprises associated with her 6-year-old son's internet use, Ariadne answered, "I felt like that he learned a lot. I was kind of afraid that it's not rotting his brain, but I felt like he has actually learned a lot, like about numbers, and that game that you play, that's kind of forcing them to be treated like more of an adult." She not only echoes—and rejects—the types of negative messaging that Karen shared was part of news reporting for parents, this mom divulges another important takeaway: for her, technology use is associated with "adult" behaviors, and can facilitate learning that also bolsters one's maturity, perhaps because he is moving away from the "fun" of "games" and instead using the internet as a

tool for gaining knowledge. One reason for this may be because gathering new insights is a technique adults use to further their economic status, as obtaining further education generally correlates with making a higher income.

Perhaps because of Ariadne's overall positive outlook regarding the world wide web, describing the internet as "a magical place," she approaches her child's screen time usage with more flexibility than some of the other caregivers interviewed. She allowed her son (6) to use his personal tablet freely "if we're not eating dinner or doing homework." Ariadne also posts pictures of him regularly, at least a few per week, for her network of over 1,000 Facebook friends, but struggled to describe the types of images she shares: "Just like, I don't know, nothing *bad!* Just like, good pictures of him, like not ones of him looking goofy or whatever, but just like the ones with his nice smile and his hair not all disheveled, I don't know, just like, just pictures." The interviewee begins by distancing herself from posting "bad" photographs which could be criticized as "bad mothering" and instead discusses the 'normalcy' of posting pictures of one's child and the importance of the child appearing well groomed, happy, and handsome ("nice smile"), social proof of productive mothering.

Valerie, on the other hand, takes a very different approach. She describes the internet as a force against which to be protected, with the results of such use exacerbated by one's own character and self-control, much like the Christian and Victorian dialogues of sexuality as a sin. She also speaks of ingesting internet-based media almost like a cake; eating too much can lead to uncomfortable consequences. In this way, she also links one's own behaviors with not only the quantity but the quality of one's internet

consumption. She describes the internet as "a black hole" that "can be an amazing tool if you use it right." When asked whether any connectable devices belong primarily to her sons, 8 and 4, she answered, "No, ma'am. My children *DO NOT GET* media devices." She also acknowledged this was not typical behavior: "…even though with kids, like even *young* kids, having it's like a popularity contest or something. A lot of people will give their kids, you know, the tablets and whatever, and their kids are allowed to do whatever. But I've never exposed them to it [internet]." Interestingly, Valerie and Ariadne post about the same amount of images of their children, though Valerie's network is about one-twelfth the size—Valerie discussed keeping her network "small and private" to decrease hesitancy around posting "pics of my kids for strangers to see" and emphasized "I'm big on privacy settings. I always double-check [photos are set to private]."

Though parents choose differently if and how to monitor children's internet access, and while much grey area exists, there are cultural expectations to which the mothers I interviewed compared their own behaviors. A gap between what was perceived as expected and what was actually performed created guilt and shame. DK reflected upon her beliefs regarding her rules regarding the children's usage:

> "[T]hey actually will do a lot all day and I actually am so bad, I will let them. My kids are playing all the time, And then that's how do I feel shame, like…(stops talking). And I again, I'm a bad parent, because I don't really put a lot of blocks and filters on their YouTube. They watch the *regular* YouTube, not YouTube Kids so... I need to do better."

DK goes as far as calling herself a "bad parent" for not adhering to these cultural guidelines. She also refers to YouTube Kids (YTK) in reference to the "regular"—or

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adult—version. And though YouTube Kids was in fact created after YouTube, the challenge in keeping children on the youth-focused sites, from games to conversational platforms, was mentioned by several moms, and the adult version was always referred to as "normal" or "regular." In fact, the YouTube Kids (YTK) platform is a virtual space where kids can go to learn about "becoming"—and subsequently monetizing upon—an adult role, in this case a "YouTuber." I saw this in each of my YTK data collections, with videos like "Famous YouTuber?!," "1,000,000 Subscriber Mansion!! YouTuber's Life #10," and "Sasha and Shiloh BECOME YOUTUBERS!-Onyx Kids" (2020, 2021). Instagram Influencers, YouTubers, and video streamers are often "young" (less than 30) and have amassed and monetized upon their own kind of fame by creating their own kind of world within the construct of the internet that they inherited, as ad revenues grow with the number of views and subscribers (Martin 2020).

Millennials are combining the internet and their own bodies as a pathway to becoming more economically stable (an "adult" characteristic) and less financially dependent. While this can lead to fulfillment and economic stability, becoming an internet celebrity can also come with additional risks, especially for young people, and is discussed below. Childhood can therefore be understood as an "irregular" and a vulnerable state, not only for its impermanence but likely because of its dependent and reliant nature. Becoming financially capable can be seen as a key for unlocking the door of adulthood but is in direct contrast with Zelizer's (1985) reports of the child's role being viewed as economically useless. The internet is providing avenues for those under 18 to become entrepreneurs and influencers paid precisely for their "pediocularity" (Cook

2004:3), standing to profit from focusing on the wants and outlooks of a child. Are adults trying to escape their mundane responsibilities when they peek into a child's world? Are they looking for more "fun" and happiness? Does this create the potential for children to be seen as possible economic contributors rather than valuing an adolescent purely as fulfilling emotional needs of love and belonging? The impacts of this shift have not yet fully manifested.

In addition to limiting kids' screen time, some caregivers described limiting the *number* of pictures posted—rather than *content*—as a preventive technique against potential risks. For example, Chanel explained, "I try to keep the number of photos I share of her to a minimum, ya know, to be safer." Likewise, KDD divulged, "I don't post too many of her. I try to be mindful of how much I put up and how much about her is out there." This quote is also tangentially telling of the parent's consideration for the child's autonomy, nodding to the fact that it is "her" (the child's) information that the adult is choosing to release.

### Outside Versus Inside? Dichotomizing the "Real" and "Virtual"

One other way parents attempt to protect children from possible harm and risk exposure is by limiting a child's time staring at screens. In fact, providing a healthy balance between the "real world," described as physical, natural, and outdoors, and the "virtual reality" of social media. According to Karen:

> "We do a lot of screen time here, but ya know, the kids actually prefer to play. When they're here, they're playing. The grandkids are constantly playing Barbies, animals, school, Legos, Legos, Legos! The last thing they want to do is sit in front of the screen. Our friend's kids, if we had the TV on, like for background noise, they were mesmerized with it, like it was

soo amazing! Now you can walk around with your MD, your mobile
device. It's primarily a camera for me."

"Playing" here refers to activities with objects and people in the physical, rather than virtual, reality, while watching a screen is differentiated. Interestingly, Karen refers to her phone as primarily a camera, a physical object that creates a virtual portrayal of the physical; often these photos are taken with the intent to be shared online. Posting images can therefore be seen as bridging a moment between the physical and the virtual. What's more, these same concepts were discussed by Valerie:

> "I post and it's like, 'okay, it's another fun day at the park,' you know?
> It's shared with everybody that, 'hey, get outside,' and you see--, because
> you see a lot people say like, 'well, your kids are raised on computers' and
> I'm like, 'only if you let them.' So I always share stuff of being active
> with family to, hopefully it encourages other people to take their kids out
> and just have fun."

Valerie not only describes the dichotomous struggle between "inside" and "outside," the photos she shares are a form of social proof that she is parenting properly by teaching her children to balance nature with technology while speaking to the pressures associated with screen time. She also alludes to the point of her posts being persuasive and providing guidance for other parents in navigating the seeming divide. In this way, she acknowledges peer pressure parents face when comparing themselves and their activities online through the sharing of said photos.

The type of device one had, as well as one's internet access, impacted the frequency and the use itself. Three caregivers interviewed talked about this directly. Valerie also said the amount of photos she takes and how much she posts increased when she "upgraded" her phone to a "better camera," saying, "Now everything is just so

gorgeous it's like, hold on, I have to take a pic. I mean, wow!" Herein, she gives a

glimpse into what posting means for her; the internet is a space to share your life, for

others—strangers and intimates—to bear witness to one's lived experience across vast

geographical distances. Her daily life is compared to photo-worthy perfection, and if

what she sees is not too far from the ideal she imagines, she takes and posts the photo.

The same process was described for the selection process of sharing images of children,

discussed below. Similarly, Valerie admitted, "My internet use changed during the

pandemic, mostly when I got a new phone and I had access to everything. I never used to

be so attached."

The moms interviewed spoke at length about the challenges of the

internet, including navigating the space for themselves and their kiddos. Here,

issues related to internet access and stability also come into play. "It runs a lot

slower, and I only have internet on my phone, so when the mobile data exceeds

the amount, especially like with pictures and that, and that happens in about two

weeks into the month, so I can't really use it after that" (Chanel). In addition, both

Valerie and Chanel live in rural areas with spotty internet connections, impacting

not only the frequency of their posts, their levels of selectivity around which

photos to share were inversely related to their accessibility. When one has

bandwidth to upload only one photo, added care was taken in which images to

select. "I usually only get one or two, so I gotta make it a good one!" Chanel

chuckled, described as "the cute ones, ya know, the ones that show her with her

rabbits and doing fun activities" that were chosen as the most important memories

to share with friends and family members, which dictated Chanel's posting

process. Mothers' roles in managing memories are discussed more below.

<div align="center">**Sharing Rules!**</div>

**Keeping it Positive**

Across all interviews, there was an emphasis on promoting positivity, including

sending (to loved ones, strangers, their children and themselves) and receiving "good

feels" (Karen). Children were a key part of this, with parents and other caregivers

purposely making an effort to post pictures and/or videos of the children doing "fun"

"cute" and "little" "activities" "just to spread the positivity and ya know, try to make

someone's day, cuz ya know, we're all dealing with a lot right now," Valerie admitted.

The excerpt below shows how rewarding this sharing can be.

> Chanel: Once in a while I might share them, if I can get into my Facebook
> account, but a lot of times I don't go on there no more. But when I do, I get like
> the thumbs up or the heart from my friends and family. Or like their friends, still,
> ya know, that kind of thing, and once in a while I'll see comments like 'Thank
> you for sharing,' so I know people are paying attention to what it is that I'm
> sharing.
>
> Interviewer: And how does that make you feel?
>
> Chanel: Um, it's amazing! Yeah, it feels pretty good!

Posting pictures of children can be rewarding for the person who uploaded it and

the person viewing the image. The parent can feel seen, and encouraged that they're

doing well with a set of responsibilities that can feel enormous and open to scrutiny,

while the recipient can feel included in the family. This may be in part due to popular

notions of the family being "complete" only when a child is present, evident in comments

on newborn baby pictures like "You're a family now!" "What a beautiful family!" and

"Now you're complete (heart emoji)." Insinuations are therefore that families are incomplete without a child. Taking that a step further, one could say that there is a cultural understanding of the function of the family unit as providing a structure with which to raise a human being. That would mean that a childless 'family' is not considered a 'family' at all. The family, then, can be understood as a contract between two individuals, their social group, and their society to continue the human race through the creation of a system held together by members of society agreeing to care for another. Traditions and celebrations hold the unit together like glue, creating shared experiences that deeper relationships; birthdays and holidays consistently call these groups together, allowing the cycle to continue. They assume greater meaning when an imagined audience is contrived. Online networking platforms fulfill that need and also connect parents to a broader familial network who may be separated by vast geographic distance. Of note, every interviewee stated a primary reason she uploads pictures of her child/ren on social media is to share these memories with family members in various locations across the nation; three respondents also mentioned sharing with family across the globe.

New arrival announcements were also heavily weighted with comments tying religion and family into one "sacred" entity. Comments posted in response to a birth announcement, like "God's precious gift!", "All praise to god," "God blessed you with a baby!," "Thanking God you all are healthy!", "another warrior for Jesus!!" "God favors you," and "God granted us a gift!", depict children as other-worldly presents in need of care, with mothers chosen to perform the task of rearing the tyke. Holding this view may make commenting on one's parental style much more difficult to address, as one may feel

as though they could be challenging God. As KDD explained, "I mean, some of this stuff *I* certainly wouldn't post of *my* kids, ya know? But that's not between me. That's between them and God." An important point is raised herein; with parenting viewed as a task from heaven, alongside freedom of religion, for deeply religious adults may feel unable to interfere if they do in fact see parents posting what one may consider as inappropriate, such as exposing photographs of bath time. Another important question to raise here is whether big life announcements made on social media (birth announcements, engagements, graduations) are sent in physical form, or whether these electronic posts have all but replaced them? This practice would exclude those who don't regularly spend time online or even on a person's favored social media site. While this query is beyond the scope of my research question, this topic should be more closely addressed elsewhere.

**From Sacred to Cute: Children on Display**

Open for scrutiny as patriarchal, condescending, and belittling remarks and pet-names, "precious," "sweetie," and "doll" were common comments of children across this study. Scott Balcerzak (2005) and Lori Merish (1996) lend insight into this "cuteness" craze. Merish (1996) outlines the transition of the child's image from one of sacredness in "the Victorian cult of child" past the Dickensian orphan trope, to becoming an object of gaze devoid of morality or spirituality on the modern-day American "cute stage" (Merish 1996:187). Perceived sexuality of the child was also warped through this shift. While in "its association with childhood, cuteness always to some extent aestheticizes powerlessness…what the cute stage is, in part, is a need for adult care" (Merish 1996:187). Balcerzak argues that "what becomes lost during this cultural development is the idea of maturation, illustrated by Dickens in his recognition of young David

Copperfield's sexuality and complex emotions" (2005:51-2). Because Merish defines cuteness as a "distinctly secularized post-Victorian concept, devoid of any significant spiritual or moral sanctity" (Balcerzak 2005:52), she asserts "the cute child is pure spectacle, pure display…" (Merish 1996:187). The two conclude the main difference is this "removal of sacredness" (Balcerzak 2005:52).

To better understand societal conceptions of the roles of childhood and how they may change with increased exposure, I also examined the images that circulate among children who exist in the public eye in a more formal way. In addition, analysis of eight-year-old white model and actress Lexi Rabe's IG page depicts her mother, who is also her manager, promoting her child's body in sexy and revealing poses and outfits. Poufy white wedding-type dresses with low-cut backs, sitting in short shorts with legs spread open while she puckers her lips and closes her eyes, kissing the camera and suggestively posing with her lipstick-outlined mouth smiling open while laying on her bed are images readily available to her more than 600K followers (F3, all pages). Some of the comments detail the dresses and their designers, tag and otherwise highlight Hollywood superstars, and promote businesses. My FB feed also included photographs of children posing with merchandise and in advertisements for their parents' businesses. As such, my research documented children being used for their "cute" or "sexy" allure to increase publicity, sales, and other economic opportunities, though images seen on my FB feed were tempered (less revealing, less makeup, less provocative poses including legs spread open) when compared to those shared by Lexi's 'momager' (see Lexi Rabe IG 2019 Observation; KDD FB feed; DK FB feed). In fact, the word "cute" appeared often in

every field assignment (observations and interviews), literally hundreds of times when combined across all observations (YouTube Kids, Lexi's IG, Facebook feed) and interviews.

### The Rise of the Child Star and Virtual Friend: The Commodity Frontier

The nation's obsession with cuteness grew from the late nineteenth century, and by the American depression era, ideas of the child were largely propagandized by a wave of child stars. Americans focused—on the big screen—"upon the *image* of a child—the abstraction of cute…the commodity of *display* emerges as the primary alteration during the cultural evolution" from Dickensian to 1930's eras (Balcerzak 2005:52). His research uncovered that

> "[d]espite the dire economic situation, dancing schools flourished after the arrival of such child superstars as Shirley Temple. Captivated by the screen performances of children and by the large salaries revealed in movie magazines, many parents rushed their offspring to Hollywood in search of stardom…Among performing youngsters of the period, it is estimated that only 1 juvenile performer in 15,000 ever earned enough in a year from movie work to cover a single week's expenses" (Balcerzak 2005:53).

The desire to be the parent of a child star or said celebrity continues today. Child stars become objects, girls are often sexualized and also cast as innocent at the same time, their images are consumed by adults, often men, and depictions of them follow familiar tropes for the male gaze, signifying potential payouts for being the focus of men's objectification for sexual purposes. For example, one Instagram photo shows Lexi Rabe laying on her back while wearing a lavender dress with ~2" thick satin straps connected to a tube-top rouched purple dress. Her brown hair falls, loosely curled, around her shoulders on the bed. One hand is lightly placed on her bare chest and the other is gently

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wrapped around some of her curls. Her lips are a bright pink and match the comforter underneath her. She stares into the camera with a smirk. "Yes, this IS my real bed," the caption reads.

This demonstrates a link between fame/Hollywood/publicity, girlish sexuality, the family, and money, as the economy is stimulated with demand for products and goods featuring the child star. This relationship is particularly stark in Lexi's case, as her mother is responsible for managing her social media accounts as well as modeling and acting careers (Lexi Rabe's Instagram Profile 2019). Spheres of "market" and "home" are not separate, just as the official duties of personal assistants cross this imaginary divide (Hochschild 2004). Meanwhile, Lexi is a multi-millionaire, while the mother maintains her child and the bank account created by the hypersexualization of Lexi, now 8. Hence, this is arguably a case of the commodification of Lexi's (sexual) innocence. Arlie Hochschild identifies this kind of commodity frontier (2004). In her work, she defines the family as a frontier zone for companies to market specific goods and services (especially those duties falling under 'unpaid family life') while filling the family's desires or needs to consume these products and offerings (Hochschild 2004:10). She also points to how contemporary versions of this concept have a unique effect on our current family life and structure compared to those during the Industrial Revolution or before.

> "Especially in its more recent incarnation, *the commercial substitutes for family activities often turn out to be better than the 'real' thing*…Even child care workers, while no ultimate substitute, may prove more warm and even-tempered than parents sometimes are. Thus, in a sense, capitalism isn't competing with itself, one company against another. Capitalism is competing with the family, and particularly with the role of the wife and mother" (Hochschild 2004:12-3, emphasis added).

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Collected data supports Hochschild's analysis; across interviews and observations, a repeated connection and cooperation was found between three of the "Big 4 Tech Companies" (Apple, Facebook, and Google, with Amazon not present) (Big 4 Wikipedia 2019) whose platforms allowed for the fostering—and perhaps even replacement—of familial activities. Several interviewees referred to their tablet as "a babysitter" (KDD, Rain, and Chanel)—for children as young as nine months old—with many others (Karen, DK, Ariadne) referring to internet technologies as helpful for keeping the children's attention when there are other tasks like household chores needing to be addressed (Rain, Adriadne), and even as a tool that allows the parent to help the child with homework (Chanel, Valerie, Karen, Rain). In addition, interviewers described YouTube, YouTube Kids, games, and other social media as providing their child with connection, companionship, entertainment, and learning, filling babysitting obligations. As such, an argument could be made in support of Hochschild's views of the commodity frontier impinging upon the role of the parent/guardian, and in particular those historically provided by the mother and other women responsible for the caretaking of children like teacher/playmate (Cooke 2011). This support may in fact be welcomed by busy mothers and caregivers: amidst economic strain and fewer children per household, Hochschild illuminates, "[i]f there are fewer helping hands at home, the state has done nothing to ease the burden at home" (2004:14).

**Child Stardom: A Risk Worth Taking?**

If caregivers are receiving needed support with childcare duties, and the possibility of one's family and childhood dreams of becoming a Hollywood star actualizing, all with the help of the internet, is there a downside to so fully integrating this

assistive technology into our daily lives? "In addition to the depletion of both private and public resources for care, there is an increasing uncertainty associated with cultural ideas about the 'proper' source of it" despite the fact that "[t]he traditional wife-mother role has given way to a variety of arrangements" (Hochschild 2004:14). The popular trend continues to be the marketization of former family functional roles; central to this shift was the movement of women into the paid labor force (Hochschild 2004:14). The cycle is perpetuated by relatives who once provided childcare and other communal support now more likely to join employees nationwide in working more hours (40+/week) and retire later (Hochschild 2004:13), creating a void in child-focused resources. Additionally, as people continue to relocate for their careers or other work assignments, families today are much more likely to be geographically dispersed. These are needs which virtual media companies like the Big 4 profess to accommodate (Big 4 Wikipedia 2019). Combined with how commercialized substitutions are seen as 'better than real' and the tendency and/or pressure to portray one's life and relationships online as virtually perfect (Hochschild 2004:10), one can easily understand how people across the lifespan could turn to online media for their source of connection and other emotion work (traditionally filled via wife-mother roles), as Hochschild finds (2004:10), a trend exacerbated by the geographically dispersed family

This sets a potentially incendiary stage when combined with the fact that, as news reports show and all interviewees and YouTube Kids admitted, the internet can be a dangerous place (see Interviews 1-3, YouTube Kids observation, and YouTube Kids 2019); pedophiles, kidnappers, and other predators can just as easily access these apps as

children can. In fact, Hollywood has been outed as a dangerous place for children. For example, famous and prolific Hollywood Producer Gary Goddard was accused of sexual abuse, including rape, by at least eight former child actors (Garcia-Roberts 2017). One survivor, Anthony Edwards, known for his performances in "Top Gun" and "E.R." explains, "This is a man who's attracted to little boys, and attracted in the sickest way…This is not love, this is not friendship what he was doing. It is a horror because it is manipulating young hearts and minds" (Garcia-Roberts 2017:Para 3). A documentary exposing the proliferation of Hollywood child sex abuse allegations, An Open Secret, "died upon release in 2015, but is seeing a renewed interest online amid a cascade of allegations against Hollywood's elite" (Carroll 2017: Para 1). This sentiment of Hollywood is not new; rather, Zelizer (1985) documents a rife battle in the early to mid 1900s between those who supported child actors and those who did not, with those opposed pointing to the unsavory and often predatory nature of the theatre, particularly when minors are unaccompanied as was so often the case. This battle of social opinion— whether child acting is exploitative or empowering—still wages today, as seen in the Instagram comments on Lexi Rabe's page.

**Risquée Versus Rewards**

One may rate the level of risks and rewards as greater in the case of Lexi and her mother. The comments Lexi receives are not all as family-friendly as her movie. She is called "sexy," has jealous fans ("that guy behind you wants you so bad, I can tell"), and is left sexual comments regarding her modeling outfits (F3, all pages). The following is most notable, from lovely_mwrvel, whose small picture shows a white grown man with

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reddish-sandy blonde hair, appearing to be in his mid-30s, looking at the camera with his tongue sticking out:

> "Love, how to express everything I feel for you? I think it's impossible, when I see your pictures it hurts so much that I can't be by your side, feel you, smell you, and say that I love you that I want so much. Listening to you laugh is like medicine for me, when i'm stressed, sad, or discouraged, it's like I start my life, my day! Your laughter makes me delirious, when I see you, there may be millions of people in the same place, plus me I see only you, hear only your voice, and scream only your name. A perfect day? Let me see, maybe that's when I knew of your existence, when I heard you laugh and talk, when I can Touch you, hold you, and say 'I love you.' Before I know you, I don't know serious I was, I just know now that I live to see you smile, seriously I depend on your happiness, your smile and your laughs. Just only so I can lie on my pillow, and sleep, and of course have beautiful and perfect dreams with you. I love you 3000 @lexi_rabe (black heart emoji)" (Lexi Rabe Instagram 2019).

Sexualization of a minor is a (sometimes illegal) taboo, however profitable, that the mother was called out for even on Lexi's Insta. Lokiquinncosplay writes (F3, Pg 7):

> "She's not my child, that being said, if she were my child, with the amount of pedophilic comments on her pics, I'd shut down the account. I feel sick to my stomach reading these comments and knowing they are looking at a child the way they are. Our jobs as parents first and foremost is to keep our kids safe, and she's not while she's being exposed to these pigs."

### **Parental Rights to Show and Tell?**

The overwhelming response to these comments was to push blame and shame on those buying into the sexual perception of Lexi (the pedophile "pigs") who are responsible for their own actions. However, the narrative often failed to suggest that her mother-and-business-manager modify the kinds of content she releases and promotes of her daughter. The onus is therefore placed almost entirely on the male consumer, though little on the legal guardian who is overseeing the photo shoots and posting. In popular media discussions, several women have criticized the manager, and were met with a large

group of women—and some men—defending Lexi and her mother's rights to dress 'however they want' as a form of empowerment, even if that way is known to garner sexual attention from men directed at children (Pan 2019).

The ways in which we understand our roles as adolescents and adults are taught and often passed down through families. And some parents' parenting is on public display and emerge as people around which we debate work through the contention and morally charged and challenging nature of parenting. The Rabe family is no stranger to the potential for success of a child star, especially when that star is a girl. Lexi, backed by her mom-manager, has already experienced stark success such as acting alongside Robert Downey Jr. in a recent Marvel movie; her mother-manager secured an impressive paycheck as compensation for the child's work. Lexi's mother, Jessica, is also no stranger to Hollywood. She was likewise a child actor, and taught theatre from age 13; Jessica's grandmothers were both in showbusiness as talent managers (cite). Lexi is now an acting coach, too; her older brother also models and Lexi's older sister is reportedly a movie director alongside her mother (cite). Disturbingly, Jessica is allowing Lexi to teach under James Franco despite a recent lawsuit settlement from allegations during 2018 wherein multiple women "accused Vince Jolivette and Jay Davis of 'widespread inappropriate and sexually charged behavior towards female students by sexualizing their power as a teacher and an employer by dangling the opportunity for roles in their projects'" (Alter 2021). According to reports, the lawsuit claimed that Franco "sought to create a pipeline of young women who were subjected to his personal and professional sexual exploitation in the name of education," which included pressuring them into filming "orgy" scenes on

camera" (Alter 2021). No comments on the matter, from Jessica Rabe, her husband, or other family, were found. As we attempt to decipher the expectations of parenting in this modern era, accounts like that of the Rabe family help us to investigate the role parents play in upholding children's rights to participation, personhood, and privacy.

On my Facebook feed, parents shared private, intimate images: of their child being born, still slimy with afterbirth; a naked boy standing in a tub, barely holding a sopping washcloth in front of his body enough to cover his penis; a child with red skin, inflamed with fever; and children used in advertisements (see Observation 2). What once was a site prohibitive of the newborn's father—just decades ago—is now readily available to the world, directly shared with an "online community" of hundreds comprised of old school buddies, former coworkers, and friends of friends. Cute, as Merish contends, equals vulnerable and dependent (1996). From these, one can grasp how parental/caregiver views of privacy can vary greatly. While all those interviewed had shared videos and pictures of photos online, each one gave reasons of family connection and inclusion. One mother also revealed that she took pictures and videos as a way to ensure memories are restored for her daughter in the future, something she herself did not have (I3, Pg 4). Sharing in this way represents an intentional gift as well as a commitment to being the memory builder and keeper, a type of parenting work for which women are typically responsible.

**When Private Parts Become Public Domain**

What kinds of images are okay to share? Are all photos—including bath time—permissible because of the perceived innocence of children? Or should we be even more

mindful of what and how we share in part because of this innocence? Is childhood

innocence itself seen as a corruptible target by some in society?

> "I think people have familiarized family photos with online photos. You
> know, like bath time, that's a family photo. That should NOT be on
> Facebook. You know? I get that some people are fine with their three-
> year-old girl running around shirtless at home. Fine, ya know? My boys
> run around in their underwear at home. But I am not posting underwear
> pics on mine."

This quote by Valerie discusses the line between public and private photos, between what

is distributable and what should stay offline. She sees this as a violation of a child's

privacy and of a child's innocence. This To Valerie, private parts of one's body, even if

not yet developed such as in her example of a three-year-old girl without a shirt, should

never be shared. Another mother, Amani, divulged that she in fact used to include these

types of photos on her social media, and explained her thought process behind the

change:

> "I used to. A long time ago now I stopped actually. About five years ago I
> was sharing them on Instagram and Facebook. One day it was bath time,
> when they were babies, but never when they got bigger. I suppose, I don't
> know, I suppose I think about my kids, if they would actually be happy
> about it. I don't want to hurt my kids. And all of this abuse of children,
> yeah, that's the reason, actually. I'm afraid of that."

Amani differentiates between babies and bigger kids but does not specify where or how to

demarcate them, since both are social abstractions; one day, even one's birthday, does not

instantly change a human from a baby to a toddler, from an adolescent into an adult. And just as

these groups are hard for society to distinguish, parents are often left to determine at what age to

begin knocking on a child's door before entering or when to refrain from sharing photos of their

children in a bathing suit. Children's growing bodies are viewed as problematic in their

uncertainty of acceptability, and an uncomfortable topic typically unprobed, leaving parents to

patrol themselves. Valerie also discusses the discomfort of addressing when a private photo has

been shared publicly online:

> "I think I'm just more aware and cautious of posting those kinds of photos.
> And I'm just very weary when other people do, too. I'm like, what if I
> don't say anything to them? I'm just like, that, no, I can't NOT. I've
> messaged them and been like, these photos, literally hundreds of people
> can see. And I mean, generally their reaction is generally positive. But
> there are maybe, like, 25% that recognize hey, this is a private photo and it
> shouldn't be posted."

Valerie speaks to the hesitancy of telling another parent how to parent, explaining

the calculated dance of ethics including what would happen if she did nothing.

This may be in part because moms post to garner support from other moms, and

pointing to what could be questionable posting habits is a criticism of another

mother and breaks the norm described herein of mothers sharing positive images

and creating a supportive environment. As she reported, her interference led to the

parent taking the picture down only about one quarter of the time. Could this be

because, on top of the difficulty many adults seem to experience in admitting fault

or wrongdoing, that it is likely much more difficult to admit that one's actions

may have placed one's beloved child in a less-than-ideal situation? After all, a

mother's ultimate job is understood as protecting—not placing at risk—one's

child/ren. Could these mothers be rejecting taking down the photos as a way of

avoiding that question altogether? It is also likely that some mothers truly

disagree, believing that such sharing is harmless. However, this still places the

parent in charge of the child's sense of self and autonomy.

**Parents: Legality, Privacy, and Security**

One reason for the sharing of revealing photos of children is that the guardian or parent may not know that the internet has within it potential risks. Instead, parents repeatedly pointed to privacy settings like "Friends only" as a way to control where, how, and with whom photos and videos of their children are seen. Parents were found to see this as a "friendly" and relatively intimate space wherein they had perceived control of the images posted.

Following the first interview, all three who agreed to a second said they had spoken to others about sharing habits by guardians as a result. Karen confessed:

> "You know, it's strange, because I *have* thought about it, and like, in depth. But I thought, I don't know, what do I do differently, or how should I do things differently? But I don't know, I feel like all things considered, I'm doing a pretty good job and it was insightful, though, to know what you're writing about stuff like this and I hadn't thought about it before. I talked about [our interview] with a couple of my friends, and I told them what you were working on, and I think it kind of brought things up into their minds. But you know, I didn't really talk *in depth* with them about it, but just the topic. And we talked about, ya know, if we had to shield the kids more or not, ya know, and have to be careful of…and I feel like I've been really careful. But I mean, who knows? Maybe I haven't been, yeah."

Similarly, Chanel professed:

> "Well, I told one of my friends I volunteer with at 4H, talking to her about it, and she says that her granddaughter was safe because they don't post where they live. And I told her that it's still there, because it's in the location and like it's in the photograph, the information, and she said she didn't even think about that at the time."

In this way, I am not only studying the impacts of parental online sharing habits of children; I am helping to influence it in real-time to bring more awareness to the need to think through how much access others have to children online and in what capacities.

Yet even when a parent does understand and recognize their role in the exposure of their children's photos online, they may feel entitled to controlling the online narrative of one's child or even overriding a child's requests—even an adult child's demands—especially when biologically related. There were many instances of blatant disregard to adhere to the child's requests discussed in interviews. According to Karen:

> "Ya know, on the news just a couple a days ago there was a story on there about how sharing photos of your kids and stuff can really be harmful for them. I only share baby pics of [my son] like on his birthday or something, and that's because he's my son. I brought him into this world, ya know? (Four short bursts of laughter.) He hates it, though. He really hates it. He always tells me not to do it. In fact, I have a close friend, her daughter and [my son] grew up together. And my friend is always posting pictures of her as a baby. And the daughter gets so mad! (Quick laughter.) She says, "Mom, stop sharing photos of me on Facebook!" And ya know, that's not so bad. But some of the teenagers they interviewed, it was a *lot* worse. Their parents are on there and constantly sharing everything their child was doing. And it really sucked for them. I was like, "Daaang." Like, watching live video, it was really surprising. It's interesting. I mean, and there, too, it was nothing terrible. But the news did go on to say there are ways kids can be victimized by seeing videos and pictures on social media and stuff like that. And it certainly makes sense to me that it's possible. Ya know, under this roof, we are very strict."

The caregivers are entrusted with safeguarding their child/ren's privacy, safety, and security in the physical and virtual worlds. Moreover, mothers may feel entitled to sharing images of a body they helped to create and carried. They may even believe they know not only what is best for their child, but that they know who their child is better than the kid her-, him- or themself. This is a potentially harmful misconception. Where is the line between acceptable and unacceptable? And who decides? Of course, legally the child must submit to her/his guardian's rule until 18 years of age when considered an adult by U.S. standards. However,

the quandaries surrounding sharing children's photos and videos online are perhaps in the realm of forcing children to hug people against their will and despite protests. In this way, children are taught that their bodies are not their own, nor are they allowed to decide what presentation of self is shared. Where is the line between harming and caring in sharing? And how is this influencing our youth's self-perceptions, our family structure, and social ties? These are questions requiring further study.

**Company Roles in Kids' Safety and Privacy: To Parental Control Settings…and Beyond!**

While it is generally accepted that parents are the gatekeepers between their children and the online content minors' access, a theme emerged within caregiver interviews of relying on social media and other tech companies to protect their children online. Nearly everyone interviewed admitted their child/ren had their own device able to connect to the internet, including tablets for two six-year-old boys, an iPad for a seven-year-old girl, and an iPhone for a five-year-old girl. When asked how children spend their time online, all of them named YouTube and YouTube Kids. Two interviewed also said they have rules including time limits for children's usage and use net access as a reward for good behavior (Karen, Chanel), having communicated rules to children. One of the women interviewed admitted to having "no real rules." Yet none recalled any "surprises" regarding the youth's internet use, with each one stating the reason as "parental control settings" or "parental controls." Additionally, each of the caregivers stated threats to their child/ren's safety, security, privacy, and well-being when asked about their least favorite thing about the internet: "how dangerous it could be for, ya know, especially for children.

They could see things that they shouldn't be seeing and things I shouldn't be seeing, ya

know?" (Chanel), referring to violent and/or sexual images or predators.

Another explains preventive posting strategies of one parent: "[my friend] tries

not to put her name on there so they can't um, like can't, like, sex offenders who go on

the Internet who are not supposed to be on there can't associate a picture with her name"

(Chanel). The same respondent also described direct, specific examples of explaining

family rules of tech use to the child: "[b]y telling her that the phones are for adults only

and it's, they're mainly for phone calls, and the reason she has her iPad is so she can

watch her movies or play her games so that it's safer for her." Here the guardians take

responsibility in teaching the child about (age-appropriate) online safety while still

relying on technology to block access to unwanted content on a device with adjusted

viewing settings.

While parents may be confident, or at least comfortable, in entrusting YouTube

and YouTube Kids with a large responsibility of screening inappropriate material, the

YouTube Kids parental set-up process highlights—several times—the company's lack of

ultimate responsibility for anything the child may come across while on the app. "Our

systems work hard to exclude mature content, but not all videos have been manually

reviewed. If you find something inappropriate that we missed, you can flag it for fast

review…Either way, there is always a chance your child may find something you don't

want them to watch. You can flag this content for our quick review" (YouTube Kids

Parent Setup 2019).

Yet multiple participants alluded to their children "sneaking" behind caregivers' backs to access "adult" (forms or versions of) technology, like Facebook instead of Facebook Kids and YouTube rather than YTK (Karen, Valerie, Rain). "My youngest one [4 year old] knows how to get to YouTube through the TV and he'll look up like King Kong videos and stuff just because it happens to be on the search, but my kids do not have access to just randomly typing in stuff to the internet unless they steal my phone" (Valerie).

The YouTube Kids Privacy Policy attests, "We will not disclose individual user information outside of Google" unless granted parental or legal consent, or when utilizing "our affiliates or other trusted businesses or persons" to process user data (O4, Pg 3-4). This essentially lends the company huge oversight control. Of note, "Google LLC is an American multinational tech corporation" whose broad specializations span industries including online advertising, search engine optimization, cloud computing, and more (Google Wikipedia 2019). The agreement therefore potentially covers many companies and employees. This is an example of how the matter of individual privacy becomes commodified and spread, even across the globe, almost instantaneously.

In Hollywood CSA allegations, and littered across Lexi's Instagram, we see the combination of "cute" and "sexy" in the commodification of children. YouTube and YouTube Kids is well aware of the tendency for some to sexualize children and expose youngsters to sexual material and have issued multiple apologies for potentially damaging material circulating across YouTube Kids; these include violent, bloody, and sexual acts in videos and in clips embedded within other innocuous vids (Weston 2018).

This brings to light questions regarding privacy, safety, and security, as well as the role of guardians and tech companies in protecting children against online predators.

It is also important to remember that "child" is not an age, nor does the number of years one has been alive perfectly correlate to one's emotional, cognitive, or social abilities. "Child" is a social category, largely defined by what a person is NOT: not an adult, not considered autonomous, not able to work without restrictions, etc. And what may be emotionally damaging to one 7-year-old boy may be entertaining to another. This points to the complexity involved in these considerations.

Finally, one must ask what causes others, whether adults or children, to forcibly expose minors to potentially harmful adult content and violent sexual behavior including pedophilia? These are questions that, while beyond the scope of this research project, deserve further inquiry, as do the survivors who have been impacted by such behaviors.

## **Parenting in the Pandemic**

Almost every facet of many children's lives—all over the world—were mediated by internet-based capabilities this past year during the COVID-19 pandemic except in places where access was hindered. From school classes and homework assignments to conversations with classmates and health care providers, the institutions that structure children's lives became nearly technology-dependent. Along with that, parenting during the pandemic created additional struggles and work. At the same time, taking, posting, and replying to photos and videos of beloved children in action not only became a way to stay connected to family despite geographical constraints, these activities also provided an often-needed distraction from pandemic stress. Valerie explained:

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"We'll share photos of [Grandma] with them, like selfies of her with them, or [my son] will be showing off something really cool they did, like what they made with Legos or something fun. So everything we do is very positive, and not letting them grow up so fast, and not exposing them to craziness, like with the COVID, basically. Because people's greatest fear now is getting the COVID. MY biggest fear is my children becoming germophobes because of this constant hand sanitizing and feeling like they can't be around people."

The transition to online learning was "chaotic" according to KS, Karen, DK, and Chanel. Many parents reported that it was much easier for children to learn at school than at home. Moreover, school from home was harder for immigrants and other non-native English speakers, especially those with little or no social/familial support network, and for those with children who have special needs. Parents also reported some subjects were harder to learn virtually than in person—especially math (mentioned by three mothers). In addition, families with low income and/or in rural environments faced barriers of access, widened existing disparities.

As Amani, an immigrant from Jordan, explained,

"At first it was very hard. For example, it was hard for them to pay attention and not playing games or going to sleep, paying attention, they kept asking for things, for food. It took getting used to. And they did, Thanks, God. Because he is in third grade and was having a problem with math and some vocabulary. And we didn't know the meaning. And see, in school, he was better than in the house, that's even easier. Like, he's a good kid, but for his education, going to school is better. But still, considering everything, everything is still good, Thanks, God. And safety is important and so we are safe here and today is a good day."

This shows a focus on resilience, gratitude, and safety during self-quarantining. Of note, this mother also equates good grades with showing how one is a "good kid."

The unexpected flood of additional roles and responsibilities caused by the pandemic stunned parents. Not surprisingly, children also felt overwhelmed this year, as Chanel experienced:

> "There has been times where she has like had little meltdowns, or like shaking the monitor, because she is so overwhelmed with all of the school work she's gotta do, she's like, this has to be done on time!! And she gets far more work than we ever used to do. And far more than they ever gave children going to regular school. Once in a while it gets to be too much for her. Like when she doesn't understand something, so we work with her, and say okay, let it out, breathe, okay. And then get back to it!"

Here Chanel coaches her child through coping mechanisms and motivation to keep going amidst the challenges. These led to additional responsibilities, or perhaps chances to prove to oneself and others of one's own leadership, self-management, and further abilities. As a result, adults reported treating children more adult-like as children were asked to take more responsible for own learning and behaviors, as Ariadne mentioned about her six-year-old son.

### **Children's Agency: An Adult Decision**

The convoluted nature and potential risks of approaching children as limited social actors warrants discussion, especially as societal perspectives can serve to maintain the status quo rather than foster creative ways of practicing and promoting the interdependent agency between adults and young people. If children are to actualize their rights, they must first be made aware of them, followed by opportunities for practice and application of using one's voice, a responsibility often handed to the parents. As James (2011:177) warns:

> "Irrespective of their rights, as enshrined in the CRC, a continued reliance on the determinism of the developmental paradigm will work to legitimize adults' power over children. It is this that enables adults to ignore the interdependency that necessarily characterizes all social relations and,

instead, to underscore children's dependency on them as both 'natural'
and 'inherent.' And it is precisely this construction of childhood that
enables children in England to largely still be seen as 'becomings' rather
than 'beings' and for their status as citizens to be denied."

Parents are responsible for protecting their children's rights. It is therefore imperative that

adults consider what these are and ways they can be improved upon. Though a new school of

sociological thought popularized in the 1990s considered children as competent and childhood as

a(nother) social construction, practices in addressing young'uns primarily focus on paternalistic

approaches "protecting children's 'becomings'" (Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:83). Herein, the key

lies in the discrepancy between legitimacy and power (Thomas & Stoecklin 2018). With the

UNCRC as "the most ratified international treaty," the modern social construction of childhood

can be defined by Weberian terms as an institution of "rational-legal domination" (Thomas &

Stoecklin 2018:85 citing Weber 2013). Within this structure, adults continue to impede

children's voices being seen as legitimate and the child's power is hampered (Thomas &

Stoecklin 2018). Weber in this case would describe children as having the ability to pursue

legitimate claims, yet having very slight to no effective power (Thomas & Stoecklin 2018).

Children's rights, then, are inescapably "an adult-driven habitus" since the internalization

process of this socially constructed 'right' is necessarily entrenched in education as an

ontological requirement (Dewey 1910 referenced in Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:86). "The

rational-legal domination associated with human rights, extended to children through a binding

normative instrument such as the UNCRC, should logically include children as stakeholders in

the implementing of their own rights. But how much capability do they really have in this

process?" (Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:86).

Thomas & Stoecklin admit that the "central concept of 'agency freedom,' or freedom to follow ones own life choices, is not really applied to children" (Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:78). I assert this is not (only) because of the "vulnerability and future orientation" often applied to children as the authors argue (Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:77), but specifically because a child's access to and participation in civil life, to exercise one's agency, to access and collaborate with the institutional gatekeepers, and indeed the ability to work toward one's goals, require economic and social resources that have been denied and/or stripped from the roles of children as parents and other adults made decisions on behalf of—not alongside—their underage counterparts. "Citizenship from below," on the other hand, "is expressed by children themselves setting goals they want to reach and choosing the way they want to act" (Leibel 2008:42, also in James 2011:173) and requires reconsideration of the abstract and overgeneralized conception of 'child' institutionalized by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, "that draws, as Boyden notes, 'primarily on [global] northern, and especially Christian, thinking' by positioning children as dependent and in need of protection (1997, 219)" (James 2011:177) and largely viewed, as T. H. Marshall (1950) did, "as citizens in potential only…as 'becomings,' rather than 'beings'" (James 2011:169).

The article by Thomas and Stoecklin, like Wyness (2018), did not specify the ability, age, or other distinctions of where along the growth process the referent child is likely to be. Even if the child is the oldest s/he can be without entering into legal adulthood, s/he is still unable, generally speaking, to mentally operate on the same level as an (able-normative) adult purely due to the fact that the human brain is not yet fully

developed. While the adult and teen brain are roughly the same size, a child produces

myelin, a fatty-protein casing insulating nerves including the brain and spinal cord.

Myelin is produced in the back of the brain starting at the stem, and must make its way to

the final frontier—the frontal lobe, essential for decision-making, empathy, and impulse

control—according to neurologist Dr. Frances Jensen; the process completes in a

person's mid-20s (Laliberte 2018). Imperatively, adults are given access to the societal

structures through which legal decisions are made whereas children have little to none.

The child and adult are therefore likely unevenly matched, whether from an emotional,

cognitive, experiential, or social power perspective. However, this should not lead to an

"all or nothing" view of public participation wherein one's role in citizenship

participation is ignored until the day s/he is seen as a "legal adult" in the eyes of that

person's nation-state. Rather, as Roche (1999) contends, "children's citizenship should

not be viewed as precisely the same as that of adults: while children should be regarded

as having human rights, they can also be seen to have special rights, *as children*"; Lister

(2007) proposes a "differentiated citizenship," while Jans (2004) asserts such approaches

"remain underpinned by the familiar social construction of the importance of children's

'natural' differences from adults" and "can still, therefore, only ever be child-sized"

(James 2011:171).

> "Therefore we can use the capability approach to understand children's
> place in society:
> 1. To consider the resources available to children, which include adult
>    care and concern for their present and future well-being, as well as
>    resources that support their autonomous action;
> 2. To understand the 'conversion factors' (personal, social and
>    environmental) that turn those resources into capabilities, including the

propensity of the adult world to take account of children's own views and support their autonomous action;

3. To analyse the evolution of capabilities in individual cases and on a broader group or societal level;

4. To understand how local and global inequalities are maintained and how they can be challenged, including inequalities between adults and children" (Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:80).

The capability theory infers that life is 'lived' through manifested 'doings' whereas the recognition approach centers around a confirmation and acceptance by others of one's self-perception, whether regarding love, rights, or solidarity (Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:81-2). As Thomas and Stoecklin pointed out, "[i]t remains unclear, or contested (Nesbaum, 2010; Sen, 1992), how far 'capabilities' can be generalised and how far they are self-defined" while "applying either model to children and childhood raises the old question of one childhood as a structural formation or multiple childhoods as social constructs (Qvortrup, 2009)" (Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:81). It is therefore critical that we evaluate our conceptions of childhood, especially as they relate to participation and autonomy, if the stalemate of "adult versus child" is to be replaced by a model that incorporates and embraces the messiness of human growth and self-actualization. The more we understand childhood—not as a large, homogenous yet ambiguous canopied forest but instead acknowledging the individual trees of varying heights and types that together create an interdependent ecosystem—the better able we'll be to construct a world in which all people can participate.

## Not Just Child's Play

Benefits to accessing social media and the wider web are vast, from creating and maintaining communities to participating in new worlds, as described herein. And while

potential risks of the internet like those discussed in this study are also well-acknowledged, just how "real" or common are these dangers? Several themes were uncovered during the research.

**Commodifying "Sexy": Risks and Rewards**

While extremely difficult for caregivers to acknowledge and discuss—"I can't even think about it, I won't even say it aloud" (Amani)—potential risks of accessing the digital world are well-known. Perhaps the most recognized is the space between a young person exploring one's sexuality and emotional boundaries, in part through risky behaviors, as Livingstone (2010b) discusses as steps each of us takes in our maturation process, and this new and powerful technology that allows strangers to enter one's bedroom in digital droves. Chanel talked about how these two can collide:

> "Well one day the girls were over and talking and laughing and that and they started talking about iPhones. iPhones?! They're too little to be thinking about iPhones! But apparently not, because when I brought it up later just the two of us she said that girls at school are giving BLOWJOBS—for money!!!—so they can go out and buy themselves this phone. And I…was…shocked…[exasperated sigh]…How do they even know about what that is? I tell ya. It's sick. I mean, these girls doin' this stuff are just in middle school. And I asked how these boys can pay for it. Cuz they don't have jobs. And she said they're not boys, they're men."

In these instances, the ability to connect with others virtually was hijacked for nefarious means, just like the girls' exploration of sexuality. Both the initial connection and payment were claimed to be made online via (unnamed) apps and sites. When asked what this caregiver did with this information, she replied, "I mean, what CAN you do? Take their phones? Tell their moms? The kids won't say who's doin' it but they seem to know.

And it's like, by talking about it are we putting more ideas in their heads? I don't know. I called the school, so they know, but I haven't heard nothin' since."

Rain also discussed concerns of young people's sexuality—and even physical bodies—being hijacked by predators using web technologies.

> "It's just way too scary, I mean just the fact that, I don't know if you know, I'm sure you do, but the human trafficking has increased because of your social media. Yep. They have stickers in bathrooms, like ladies' rooms on the back of stall doors and by the mirror that says human trafficking hotline. Yep. Oh, it makes me sick to my stomach that this is the world we live in, I thought things were going to be better [with technology]. They [children] think it's all fun and games, makin' friends, not thinkin' of the dangers, and before ya know it they're meeting up for real and you maybe never see them again."

What parallels exist between these described behaviors and that seen on Lexi Rabe's Instagram? Here we see that girls are receiving cultural messages of their "prized" adolescent sexuality—where "cute" meets "sexy"—by the time their ages reach double-digits. Technology cannot only link youth with predators online, in some instances it dangerously led to people meeting in person where abuse allegedly occurred. In effect, this pandora's box also allegedly provided an avenue for young girls to create a small business, seemingly to benefit from this illegal and predacious behavior that would gain them further access into instantly connecting and sharing online, from bodies to bank accounts. Is this early entrepreneurship, albeit in this instance illegal and predatory, another result of young people having access to technological tools, including ideas, apps, publications, and people?

**Suicide and Stalking**

Unfortunately, additional themes were uncovered of technology providing an avenue for spreading harm. This includes those under and over 18 leveraging technology to perpetuate damaging behavior. Karen shared a tragic example:

"Well, a very close friend of ours, her boyfriend had decided to commit suicide in front of her via, I don't know what you call it, Facetime? Or, ya know, like live video? She was 15 years old, he was 15 years old, and at that point she wasn't much about Facebook because she was younger and too cool for school, and they say Facebook is for older people. And basically, the father of the young man basically was accusing her of causing his son's death because she had broken up with him. That was incredibly tough for her. And she was not treated well at her high school because people can see these stories. With her name, ya know, directed on it. And she ended up having to enroll to a different high school because he was callin' her out. And as her healing was moving forward, his father was, I don't know if you call it stalking her, but kind of stalking her via Facebook and stuff like that. He messaged her from his son's phone and accusing her of causing his son's issues and saying, 'it was your fault, and you know it. You will get yours. I'm not going to forgive you and you need to watch your back.' He was keeping kind of a close eye on her. He was threatening her on Facebook. He was watching for her in different places because he knew where she would be, whether school games or something like that, cuz he could see where she was…

She [the friend]'s in [college in another location] now but doesn't go on Facebook, and almost never online anymore. Because she was communicating with friends about where they were going to go and sharing pics of places they frequented. And checking in to different places, so that basically shows literally where you are at that time and if you have like a weekly, bowling, or something like that, then someone trying to find out about where you are, social media can make it so much easier to find that stuff.

And especially with teenagers because it's nearly impossible for parents to protect their kids without that kind of info and with kids putting info out there, they're literally free game. So he would stalk her, and his car would be sitting outside the places where she was. So that's really scary and ya know, I don't like kids being on social media at all. But I'm old fashioned. But if I was to have kids [growing up] right now, they wouldn't be able to have social media accounts at all, even ones I could watch and keep an eye on. Even with the permissions and all that. It puts them in a potentially dangerous situation.

I wish I could say the world uses it for good things, but I don't feel that's true. Of course, it was meant for connecting with friends. But the kind of people that human beings can be, it's kind of scary. Especially with kids."

While not all prospective risks can be mitigated, by acquainting ourselves with the platforms and other places these young folks inhabit and talking openly about the potential rewards and risks of the online world, we can empower our up-and-coming generations to not only continue to connect with one another innovatively but do so in healthy and conscientious ways.

# CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

The internet is a modern-day wild west where children and adults interact and partake in this untamed digital frontier. Can it be a space wherein children, alongside adults, could recreate conceptions of childhood and citizen participation? Can this technology be used to empower members of society to help integrate interdependent approaches to benefit all internet users, regardless of age?

To begin, understandings of "childhood," "children's rights," and even "the internet" must be consciously unpacked and analyzed, work upon which this research attempted to expand. As people and nation-states around the globe continue to rely more heavily upon the world wide web for their social, health, economic, national security, and public educational needs, so, too increases the need to investigate how children are portrayed, received, contested, empowered, and endangered online. The mixed-methods approach outlined herein allowed for the investigation of re/conceptions of childhood in online spaces through content analyses of posting habits of adult caregivers and their social networks (Facebook); an Instagram account of a Disney-Marvel child model and actress (where children and adults are likely to interact); and YouTube Kids home page (a child-specific space modeled after the 'parent' site, created by adults and

reinterpreted and 'uploaded' by children), analyzing three of the most widely used

social media sites on the planet. Additionally, interviews with caregivers

attempted to probe into the habits and rationales for sharing the photos and videos

of their children online, responses to those images by their close and loose social

networks as well as strangers, and the digital learning and user habits of adult

caregivers and the children for whom they are responsible. In doing so, I

attempted to provide a better grasp around the process of re/creating notions of

childhood online, mainly by adults, and some ways in which childhood

socialization is impacted by our increasing reliance on, and in some cases

addiction to, the internet and social media.

Moreover, because of the pandemic, school for millions of children all over the

world became virtual. Children as young as 4 and 5 years old were handed a device

(tablet, phone, computer, sometimes all three) and a large part of the responsibility for

their own learning while many parents felt themselves pulled between their own screens

(working remotely) and their own children. The amount of oversight, house rules, and

school guidance varied greatly, as did parents—and therefore likely children's—attitudes

and behaviors regarding COVID-19, internet use, and posting habits. Sharing photos and

videos of one's brood online for family and friends became a primary way of keeping in

contact while quarantining, whether across the nation or neighborhood, including real-

time via video chatting.

Across my Facebook "Newsfeed," parents posted pictures of some of their most

private, precious, precarious, and proud moments. I saw newborns only seconds old and

slathered in placenta, high school prom and graduation photos, and videos of girls'

gymnastic competitions. I saw babies naked for bath-time, sick teenagers, sleeping

toddlers, adolescent sisters sharing s'mores over a campfire, and many other memories

moms uploaded. With internet technologies, we can digitize and immortalize private

moments for a global public with a push.

As a mother, typically much of one's time is dedicated to the care of one's

children. It's unsurprising, then, that the digital portrayal of one's life, including the

omnipresent role of parent, could include images focusing on the child, themselves, or

both. Moreover, moms can be expected and/or excited to partake in the posting of their

offspring to show their love and care for their children, and as a way to maintain

memories. Durkheim discusses the status quo on sharing as a social function of deviance.

These are socially identified ways of proving one is a "good" parent, by posting pics of

(what their social networks hope are young and vibrant) children, celebrating and

commiserating the roller coaster ride of parenting, gaining advice and approval, all the

while taking note, however unconsciously, of what may/not be socially acceptable

behaviors per others' comments and reactions. Interviewees divulged that they received

relief, confirmation, support, and affirmation of parenting via comments and likes on

posts, which was rewarding on multiple levels. Participants identified the images

portraying "fun" "cute" "activities" as garnering the most attention; by looking at their

FB accounts, this was confirmed as a trend.

Another pattern I saw, which was not identified by participants, was the

relationship between a child's youth and the level of response by their FB community.

Pictures of newborn babies received the most attention, regardless of gender. Of course, a new life and family member warrants celebration! However, another reason for this apparent trend could be in part because updates on FB may serve as modern-day birth announcements. Images of girls, from infancy through adolescence, seemed to be uploaded much more often, and also received more comments than compared to photographs of boys. For example, in digital photo albums containing siblings, photos of the brother (8) only received less likes and comments than images of the sisters (6 and 10), whether the girls were together or solo. In advertisements including children (such as for mommy's online coaching business), a girl was featured in seven of them while boys appeared in two. This supports Cook's (2004) link between the level of dependency of the child and what Zelizer (1984) refers to as the "sacralization" of children, where to be fully dependent is to be sacred. Historically and today, girls are seen as more vulnerable. However, the example of including one's children in the (adult) workforce, like child actors such as Lexi Rabe, also convolutes Zelizer's (1984) social demarcations of the economically worthless but sentimentally priceless child. As children are being used in advertising, modeling, acting, even becoming early entrepreneurs—activities supported by internet technologies—we may see conversations and contentions around children's place in the economy reignite. Moreover, this issue may be catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic which has changed our professional, educational, and social landscapes.

With so many goals, roles, and responsibilities which guardians are charged, it could be easy for a parent to post without considering how the child might be portrayed in the photo. Moreover, it may be more difficult to consider how people in society, from

playmates to potential employers, may view them in the future. Current and/or potential desires of their children, and indeed the future versions of self they may want to portray, may not be taken into account. Images like those described above speak to a child's emerging self and social norms around what is acceptable to share and when children are seen as autonomous actors. For example, tagging Grammy in toddler's bubble bath would not elicit the same response if the child were a teenager. Similarly, parents typically knock before entering an adolescent's room but not an infant's. How do we draw these boundaries? And do parents want limitations drawn for them?[6] When making decisions, parents often rely on social schemas like the child's grade, age, and reading ability for reference. Several participants also shared their preponderance to see their children as more adult-like if the parent views their child's technological ability as high. Parents reported seeing their children as more "adult" as children were seen as "digital natives" of technology whose children became more self-sufficient and independent on themselves and less dependent upon their parents, for play and socialization, learning, and exploring future possibilities in a world that their parents may admittedly not understand. Parents professed, "I've actually learned a lot of things about the internet and stuff from my children!" (Chanel). Livingstone (2010a) warns that technological ability is just one of many and does not automatically align to cognitive or emotional ability, for example; thus, care should be taken when eliciting this belief. In the digital world, these boundaries may become less clear through the blending of what feels like private and

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[6] See, for example, Barry Schwartz *The Paradox of Choice* (2004)

even intimate spaces on what is a privately owned company that is publicly accessible to a global audience of billions.

Another sentiment that arose in interviews was the belief that "this is my kid, and because they would not exist without me, I am entitled to share my creation." Legally, a parent is granted authority and responsibility over their child's decisions. Herein, we see parallels to historical practices of patriarchal ownership of children and other human beings. These sentiments are also akin to religious doctrines wherein God as creator has the right and authority to write the rules for humanity to unquestioningly obey; herein mom is god. The parent, perhaps because of this creator status, can feel as though they know the child better than the kid knows him/her/themself, a false narrative that can be potentially difficult to navigate and even harmful, though I would argue the most harm is likely to come from the lack of addressing such beliefs.

As for much of human history, children were viewed as patriarchal property rather than autonomous beings, they were granted little to no moral status nor moral rights (Beauchamp and Childress 2012:63).[7] "Rights are not innate; they are learnt conventions" (Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:86). Thus, a 'right' must be explained and experienced (Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:87). Given this,

> "…we should not only try to better understand the dynamics that enable children or impeded them in realizing their potential value as members of societies. We should also consider that this problem itself reveals something about the social construction of childhood: the very fact that children can be thought of as valuable participants to democratic processes of governance, that will in turn enhance their own capability, is only

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[7] See also Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, 1958.

possible along the modern individualistic vision of the 'common good.'"
(Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:86).

Thomas and Stoecklin declared "(1) children do belong to the class of morally responsible persons and are therefore holders of rights and entitled to respect; and (2) children are people with talents and capabilities, who contribute in a variety of ways to society and culture, and so are deserving of esteem" (2018:77). The theory of recognition can thus be applied to the case of children's participation by asking contextual questions around ways in which reciprocal recognition has been achieved as love, respect, and esteem since "the model invites us to look at children not only as recipients of care and affection but also as givers of care and affection, *and* as rights-bearers and rights-respecters, *and* as potential, if not actual, members of a community of solidarity built upon shared values and reciprocal esteem" (Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:78).

Children's rights, then, are inescapably "an adult-driven habitus" since the internalization process of this socially constructed 'right' is necessarily entrenched in education as an ontological requirement (Dewey 1910 referenced in Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:86). "The rational-legal domination associated with human rights, extended to children through a binding normative instrument such as the UNCRC, should logically include children as stakeholders in the implementing of their own rights. But how much capability do they really have in this process?" (Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:86). Lasting and inclusive institutional change would require children to be acknowledged as a group worthy of participation and *legal freedom*, *moral freedom* and *social freedom* (Honneth 2014 as cited in Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:91). In addition, the public would be much better served if the emphasis of child's participation were less dependent upon what the

child has to offer the global consumer culture and more focused on character development including forgiveness, love, goodness, respect, critique of power and control, and a belief that "power can be divided without decreasing it" (Arendt 1958:201). Furthermore, James (2011) highlights how adult-held idea/ls regarding childhood can stifle so-called "*minors*"', or young people's, agency and actions—and as a result, children are not granted citizen status.

> "This is an attempt to reconstruct the values implicit in social institutions in order to critically illuminate precisely how they fail to deliver, or enable, true freedom, and what would need to change in order to make that implied promise a reality. That of course involves struggle—a struggle in which we contend that children can and should be understood as playing a full part" (Thomas & Stoecklin 2018:91).

Many questions remain regarding the extent to which children can and should be involved in civic participation, including whether and how to gauge one's readiness and ability, itself a form of privileged access. It is also important to note that civic participation is not a right afforded to refugees and other stateless people. How can we guide and empower children without stifling them, expanding their horizons while ensuring their safety and wellbeing, or prepare them to be stakeholders in a world that does not yet exist? One thing is certain; children cannot learn if not provided an opportunity. By including children in social, civic, educational, and other institutional processes without shutting down their ideas, it is possible to create new procedures, practices, products, and perspectives.

When contemplating an expanded framework of child participation, it may be helpful to remember "ways in which we can differentiate childhoods according to

political, economic and cultural contexts. Within these contexts we can identify different conceptions of childhood" (Wyness 2018:65). Wyness (2018) argues that the conceptual diversity within which participation occurs can be broadened to encompass the new expanse of sites, technologies and other contexts to foster impactful partaking by children. Institutional avenues of involvement can politically engage children in self-organization and policy formation, seen in Scotland's inclusive educational policy-making process (Wyness 2018). This participatory diversity also encompasses children's domestic and other informal work such as mediating for the family in various capacities and caring for family members (Wyness 2018). As Cook (2004) demonstrated, children have also become significant contributors to a global consumer culture (Wyness 2018). Research is another area in which children are experiencing increased involvement, now playing "a much more formative role" throughout various stages of the process (Wyness 2018:63).

Finally, Wyness (2018) advocated for a participation model emphasizing the relational and embedded nature of children's contributions in order to shift unequal power relations rather than merely being treated as a token. Much opportunity exists to foster ongoing dialogue across age, education, and other factors that often serve as barriers to communication and participation. With this approach, "[t]here is a more eclectic approach to the meaning of participation with less of an emphasis on hierarchical approaches, which are drawn on in making judgements about the authenticity of participatory initiatives and practices (Wyness 2018:64 referencing Hart 1997). In studying preschool children, Moss and Petrie (2002) discovered children's relational

approach to understanding their surroundings, wherein "[t]he child is not regarded as an autonomous and detached subject, but as living in networks of relationships, involving both children and adults (cited in Wyness 2018:64). Seen this way, a consultative approach is not automatically less participatory; here again context is key (Wyness 2018).

Paradoxically, while many minors remained at home in self-quarantine, internet-enabled children have in many ways been given more freedom than in any other time in history through the access, knowledge, and capabilities of internet-based technologies coupled with an increase in children's self-moderating of behaviors. They can buy and sell, post content, and "meet" 'friends'. Children can even start their own YouTube channels, broadcasting from their bedroom to billions instantly as an "influencer." But does this agency translate to rights? Is this freedom leading to endangerment and/or empowerment? And what can we do to support greater self-expression while promoting safety, especially for internet users who are not yet adults.

"As a highly dynamic system, capitalism destabilizes both the economy and the family. The more shaky things outside the family seem, the more we seem to need to believe in an unshakable family, and failing that, an unshakable figure of mother-wife" (Hochschild 2004:15). As we have seen, children are used as objects in order to sell products and services, from tangible items to hopeful dreams. When combined with a tendency to view the fantasy world as being better than reality, confusion can ensue regarding boundaries and responsibilities of those involved in a child's care, and who this encompasses. What is the social responsibility of social media companies to screen and secure content, for example? And how does one hold an anonymous avatar legally

responsible for committing crimes against children? These complex queries expand beyond this study but warrant imperative attention.

There is also a tendency to portray modern-day children as both "cute" and "sexy." This is especially true when the child is an aspiring model and/or actress, and is compounded when the caregiver's source of income is also directly tied to the child's performance. This is the case for Lexi, whose manager-mom's career depends upon her dependent daughter's. Not only does this impact Lexi herself; as a Disney actress she has joined the idealized celebrity elites like Ariel and Snow White (two white princess child brides). In addition to thousands of followers, Lexi's movie was watched by millions around the world. All of this adds to the normalization of these sexualized and exploited constructions of childhood. Even if this is a choice the child has made, can that ever be true given the financial burden of the family upon the kid? Moral and ethical questions emerge regarding this tricky dance between roles. Moreover, even at the age of seven, Lexi and her followers receive the message "sex sells" as the payoff increases with risk, including showing more skin and provocative poses, hinting at pedophilic fans willing to spend money 'supporting Lexi's career' again echoing questions of ethics as they relate to privacy, security, and the 'joys of childhood.' According to Livingstone (2010a:6) :

> "As children, it seems, are getting older younger (because of marketing, commerce, the sexualization of culture, and because of the competitive pressures exerted by what's been termed the offensive middle class) while also staying younger longer (because of extended education and delayed employment and financial independence). They are held for longer than ever before in a tension between childhood and adulthood, dependence and autonomy. They seem too knowing, too confident, to submit to the authority of teachers and parents, yet the expectations on them to compete, to achieve are ever greater" (Livingstone 2010a:6).

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More discussion and agreement on these important issues is needed in our society, with a focus on health, safety, empowerment, and prevention. We are also reminded that "although media are ever more privatized (experienced in bedrooms, listened with headphones, carried in pockets and kept under pillows), the digital intersects with an ever-widening array of social activities and spheres of life, public as well as private" (Livingstone 2010a:2). For Arendt (1958), one commercialized conglomerate "social life" rather than a public (separate from private) sphere to mediate, critique, and spark dialogue between society and the state can pose dangers to the dialogue necessary to maintain democracy; as such, she argues, the public sphere must be redesigned.

Finally, it should be pointed out that although children are not seen as moral or autonomous beings per many theories and definitions, the responsibility has been placed upon them to act as soon as warning signs are identified and boundaries crossed, assuming an agency, if not morality, on the part of the child. Alongside the invention of the internet, this past century was marked by its encompassing commercialization of childhood. "The market-culture of childhood represents a monumental accomplishment of twentieth-century capitalism," specifically "the rise and proliferation of a children's consumer culture throughout American society" unlike anything historically seen; Cook claims "the child consumer is its enduring product and legacy" (Cook 2004:2; see also Schor 2003, Cross 2004, and Schor & Ford 2007). Essentially, our children have the right to consume, but are given little say in the routines and structures that form much of their daily lives, like what time school starts.

How can this cognitive dissonance be understood? Whether or not children have autonomy may be contested, but one point remains clear: it is the responsibility of adults to care for, protect, and empower children. Whether we are parents, as society members we should collaborate to ensure health, wellbeing, and equity for all children so they can fulfill their human rights and potentials. Yet despite the ability for prevention education to help to expose and prevent illegal and harmful acts against children such as digital abuse, and a widespread global consensus that indeed an extensive problem exists and must be addressed with urgency through educational, practical, collaborative, and institutional methods, it appears the social stigma of discussing this phenomenon may be preventing the implementation of such programs, leading them to be designated as merely optional. Health policy, as an example, encompasses the capacity to help society overcome this stigma by requiring and enforcing education and prevention trainings into K-12 curriculum, as was the aim of Virginia's Senate Bill 101. If there is to be a chance of eradicating harmful longstanding beliefs and behaviors and replacing them with empowering people and structural processes, it is the positive obligation of adults to empower our most valuable resource—the leaders, parents, teachers, and citizens of tomorrow—to explore and actualize their voice, choice, personhood, agency, rights, and participation.

# APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW #1 TEMPLATE

1. How many adults and children are in your home at least 12 hours per week?

2. What are the ages and genders of the children?

3. How many devices able to connect to the internet does your household have?

4. How many of these are portable?

5. Do any of these belong primarily to the child/ren? If so, how many?

6. How would you describe the internet to someone who is unfamiliar with it?

7. How do/es the child/ren like to spend their time online?

8. How are these times and activities decided?

9. Have there been any surprises in terms of your child/ren's internet use?

10. Do you share images of your children online? Where?

11. What kinds of images do you share online? With who?

12. Which videos and pictures seem to get the most attention, and from who?

13. Do you have friends and family who post pictures of their child/ren or
    grandchild/ren online?

14. What kinds of things do they share?

15. What's your least favorite thing about the internet?

16. What's your favorite thing about the internet?

# APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW #2 TEMPLATE

1. Have you thought much about our previous interview?

2. If so, what kinds of things have you reflected on?

3. Did you talk to any friends or family members about the interview? If so, can you tell me about that?

4. Since this project started, our world has experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. Can you tell me about some of the changes this has brought to your life?

5. Has there been any change to the number of people in your household? If so, please provide details.

6. Has your internet usage changed since the start of the pandemic? If so, how?

7. Has your social media usage changed since the start of the pandemic? If so, how?

8. Since our last interview, about how often have you been sharing photos or videos of your child/ren online?

9. What kinds of photos have you been sharing that includes the child/ren? Could you provide some examples?

10. What responses, if any, do you get when you post these? How does that make you feel?

11. Has/have your child/ren asked you to remove any image/s you've posted of them? If so, can you tell me about that?

12. Does your child access the internet, including for school? If so, can you tell me what that looks like, including daily usage?

13. If your child has attended school online, was there any usage guidelines, directions, standards of conduct, or other guidance provided by the school regarding the switch to online learning? What did that look like?

14. If your child has attended school online, have there been any issues? Can you tell me about that?

15. If your child has attended school online, have there been any conduct-related issues that you're aware of, either with your child or another in class?

16. What, if any, downsides have you witnessed or experienced regarding people generally being online more due to the pandemic?

17. What, if any, upsides have you witnessed or experienced regarding people generally being online more due to the pandemic?

18. What's your favorite thing about social media?

19. If you could change one thing about the internet or social media specifically, what would it be?

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**BIOGRAPHY**

Lili Deveneau has a passion for social justice and human rights. Through research, policy, and collaboration, her goal is to eradicate child sexual abuse via collaborative education and multi-pronged preventive efforts. She received a bachelor's degree in Sociology from The University of Southern Mississippi and a bachelor's degree in French from the University of Wisconsin—River Falls, both with honors. She also earned certifications in Communication & Media Studies and Women & Gender Studies.

Lili served as the president of the Graduate Student Sociological Association (GSSA) and of GMU's graduate student advocacy body, GAPSA (Graduate and Professional Student Association). She's consistently held organizational leadership positions since the third grade and is the member of multiple national and international professional organizations. She is the winner of GMU's College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHSS) Dean's Challenge Award Scholarship, Presidential achievement awards from multiple universities, a National Truman Scholar finalist, Ronald E. McNair Scholarship, and many others. She also had the great privilege of providing Teaching Assistantship to Dr. John Dale in an undergraduate Sociology of Human Rights course and remains grateful to her students.

Deveneau is the coauthor of four chapters in an undergraduate nursing textbook discussing public and holistic health, health ministries, and violence. She has over two decades of experience in various health care roles, especially caring for society's most vulnerable populations. She also served as the exclusive editor of James Madison University's School of Nursing (SON), assisting the SON professors and director in obtaining publications, grants, and awards for their impactful research and initiatives. Lili also coauthored several articles and book reviews on population health, public policy, access, human rights, and interprofessional collaboration. In fact, she recently created a model to promote successful population health initiatives, by analyzing the actions of US nursing founders, published in a premier nursing journal, promoting evidence-based practice, collaboration, and advocacy to build a more equitable world for all.

Lili is also a survivor of sexual abuse, both as a child and an adult. She now shares her experiences and advocacy as a transformative speaker, coupling her story with cutting-edge research to empower survivors and allies to build a better world. She is also a volunteer for RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network), the largest U.S. anti-sexual violence organization. Deveneau has been featured in Medium, Thrive Global, Associated Press, ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX, and many others. She appears on podcasts,

summits, and other events hosted nationally and internationally. Ms. Deveneau also works with students, teachers, clients, and corporations to foster healthy, productive, and fulfilling workspace environments and interpersonal relationships. Lili has inspired and helped many people to up-level their habits, relationships, and self-worth to live their purpose, not their pain.