
Reality and Hyperreality Behind the Kidfluencer Phenomenon

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Abstract

Social media does not only function as a medium of communication, but it also becomes a tool for some people to earn money. Currently, adults are not the only ones who use social media to earn a living. Children are also present on social media as objects to make money by becoming kidfluencers or child influencers. This becomes a controversy because social media platforms limit their users by age rules to avoid various dangers and negative impacts lurking that will create impact on children in the future. However, parents and relatives of the kidfluencers choose to neglect and continue breaking the rules on social media so their children could be kidfluencers. This study aims to examine the phenomenon of kidfluencers and their relation to the hyperreality theory by Jean Baudrillard. By becoming kidfluencers, these children are displayed in such a way on social media complete with their cuteness on a daily basis that eventually invite various responses from their followers and influence them in most of the things they do. Yet, the actual reality does not always match what is present on social media. By using content analysis, I investigated this phenomenon to find out whether what the kidfluencers show is the actual reality or only a representation that refers to themselves, not to others. The result shows that there is indeed hyperreality behind the kidfluencer phenomenon. This hyperreality may not be realized by the audience or the kidfluencers themselves, because it was created by the people behind the kidfluencers.

Keywords: Baudrillard, hyperreality, kidfluencer, social media

INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, the world is filled with various information that makes it difficult for people to choose which ones are real and which are not. Reality and simulated reality blend into one. This causes the presence of hyperreality in which people are no longer able to distinguish reality or more than one reality, since the real and the projected have their own versions. This phenomenon has been existent on social media because we can find various aspects of life on it, ranging from birth, death, career, education, culinary, tourism, spiritual, political, economic, psychological, to intimate problems. We can never tell whether the social media posts are real or just simulated ones just by reading or looking at them. But it doesn't deter people from using social media intensively on a daily basis. According to data reported by We Are Social (Kemp, 2022a), as of January 2022, of the

total world population of 7.91 billion people, as many as 5.31 billion have mobile phones. While in Indonesia, as many as 191.4 million people are active social media users (Kemp, 2022b).

The rapid development of social media creates opportunities for some people to be famous on social media and were later referred to as influencers. The name is attached to the figure of social media celebrities because they are able to influence followers in behaving, including buying and using products and services (Martineau, 2019). Some influencers are ordinary people who are able to create interesting content and have loyal followers on social media. However, there are also celebrities or public figures who already have their own fans that use social media to expand their reach and interact directly with fans (Khamis et al., 2017).

Influencers generally have a following ranging from 1,000 people to hundreds of thousands or even hundreds of millions (Maheshwari, 2018). They are able to gain popularity which leads to additional income, ranging from tens of thousands of rupiah for nano influencers to billions of rupiah per month for mega influencers by using their popularity to promote products or services to their followers. Their testimonials or remarks are trusted by followers and are able to add credibility to the products or services they promote (Juntiwasarakij, 2018).

Furthermore, Sadrabadi et al (2018) mentioned that cyberspace provides new tools to increase efficiency by conducting interpersonal communication with potential online consumers. Other studies reveal that Instagram and Youtube influencers are considered credible sources of information (Młodkowska, 2019). Their followers or subscribers are more likely to see it whenever they need a product review. Positive or negative reviews on Instagram and Youtube are also a consideration for consumers in choosing the right products. The relationship between influencers and their followers is also very important in maintaining marketing potential (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Such relationships are of interest to corporations and brands, which become potential business partners. This proves that Instagram and Youtube are powerful marketing tools. It turns social media into a marketing tool because of its effectiveness. Collaboration with influencers can also generate new customers, share positive information about new products, and increase sales (Młodkowska, 2019).

The lives of influencers and the lure of additional income are indeed tempting for social media users. Many people also want to get a taste of income from social media, including parents. Some kidfluencers are the result of parents who love to share their family content on social media which is often referred to as sharenting or sharing parenting. Initially, sharenting brought many benefits to parents, especially those who had just become parents, such as building an identity as a parent, maintaining social and familial relationships, supporting each other while providing information and guidance, storing

memories, rallying debates around controversial issues in public such as postpartum depression, breastfeeding and pregnancy, and advocating for children's rights (Locatelli, 2017; Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017). Since the digital world became a highly commercialized world, sharenting as a personal narrative and interpersonal relationships has transitioned to a more productive, intentional, and commercial form (Abidin, 2015).

Financial gain has been a motivation for many parents, especially mothers, who use various social media to create content, gain followers, engage with various brands and companies, and promote their own digital brands (Cunningham & Craig, 2017) related to tips on becoming a parent in the public eye for various goods and services (Chess, 2015). To maximize their visibility in the so-called attention economy, some parents then turn into microcelebrities (Senft et al., 2013). They present an authentic and friendly side of themselves to attract followers, then treat these followers as fans (Marwick, 2015). When influencers share content about their children with a sizable audience, the children themselves also automatically become microcelebrities (Abidin, 2015). These children inherited fame and felt a lack of privacy since their parents' followers on social media were able to store, republish, and recirculate information about them (Abidin, 2015).

In addition, some kidfluencers emerged as a result of adult influencers getting families and having children. Today's influencers are expanding their reach to the family and child categories. In Hollywood, one of the best examples is The Kardashians who have a dedicated Instagram account for their children. Likewise, with other influencers who create accounts for their children since they are still in their mothers' wombs. The goal is to upload funny photos and of course, attract additional income from various products with a target of children (Archer, 2019).

There is no distinction between the daily lives of these little influencers in the real world and on social media. The kidfluencers go about their daily activities as children as well as stars in private homes where parents also participate in them. The kidfluencers perform normal activities in front of the camera, such as playing, eating, and studying, instead of working like child actors when performing in a film or theatrical performance (Masterson, 2020). Thus, it will be difficult to distinguish the reality and simulations that kidfluencer practice on a daily basis because all of them are mixed together. This study aims to find out what is presented in the kidfluencer phenomenon, whether it is reality or a hyperreality, especially in the Indonesian context. Currently, research about kidfluencers in Indonesia associated with hyperreality theory has not been found. I hope this study might provide implications that are able to awaken parents and audiences from false awareness of the phenomenon of kidfluencers.

There are two concepts used in this article as a literature review, hyperreality and kidfluencer. The first one, hyperreality, is a theory by French cultural theorist, sociologist and philosopher, Jean Baudrillard. Through simulacra and simulation, Baudrillard (1994)

seeks to examine the relationship between reality, symbols, and society. Simulacra (plural) or simulacrum (singular) means a replica, imitation, or representation that displays things that did not exist in the real world from the beginning or no longer have their original form, while simulation is an imitation of the course of a process that exists in the real world or system. The term hyperreality is used by Baudrillard to explain the meaning of representation. In hyperreality, the marker becomes a sign in itself because the facts have been simulated. In the simulation, reality becomes more real than it should be so difficult to distinguish which is real and which is not.

Baudrillard mentioned that today's society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs. Thus, human experience is a simulation of reality. According to him, simulacra is not just a mediation of reality, or even a deceptive mediation of reality. Simulacra is not based on reality nor does it hide reality. Simulacra simply hides that there is nothing like reality that is relevant to our current understanding of life (Baudrillard, 1994).

Simulacra is the meaning and symbolism of culture and media, which builds the perceived reality as well as the understanding gained so that our life and existence can be read another. Baudrillard believed that society has been saturated with simulacra and life has also become saturated with the construction of society so that all meanings become meaningless because they can change infinitely. He referred to this phenomenon as the "precession of simulacra". According to him, hyperreality and simulation are opposites of reality. Many times the two even turned against this reality for a while. Finally, hyperreality destroys every reference, flipping through the rules, until it rejects all single truths and binary opposition. When 'reality' is a reality compared to the real reality, it will also liquidate and annihilate all use value, with amazing manipulation ability. At certain moments, hyperreality can multiply the signs and speed up the simulation game until people are sure of what they see or hear (Baudrillard, 1994).

Thus, hyperreality is not reality, but rather merely a representation of reality itself. In other words, hyperreality by way simulates another reality and is actually a kind of copy of something that does not exist. It can also be described as an "absolute falsehood", which seeks to correct reality itself (Eco, 1986). Baudrillard also divides representations as part of hyperreality into four categories, (1) signs and images are reflections of basic reality; (2) signs and images are basic deviations of reality; (3) signs and images mask the absence of a deep basic reality and pretend to be replicas; and (4) the signs and images have no relation to anything and are pure simulacra. Here, simulacra have no connection with any reality. The signs reflect only other signs and any claims of reality on the part of the image or signs are derived only from the sequence of other claims. Cultural products no longer need to pretend to be real because the consumer's life experience is so dominated by false and artificial things that even claims of reality are expected to be revealed artificially.

Baudrillard also mentions that the beginning of the era of hyperreality was marked by the disappearance of the map and metaphysics of representation; the collapse of ideology and the bankruptcy of reality itself, which is taken over by duplication from a nostalgic and fantasy world, or "(reality) becomes a reality in lieu of reality, the fetish of the lost object is no longer the object of representation, but the ectase of denial and extermination of its own rituals" (Piliang, 2010).

The second one is kidfluencers. If we look at history, the presence of kidfluencers on social media is actually similar to the child actors who have graced the world of cinema since the 1920s in Hollywood. These child actors have existed to fill the gaps in the needs of children on the big screen, both in adult films and children's films. Child actors are represented by their parents because legally, minors do not have the legal competency to arrange schedules or contract matters with companies, producers, and film directors.

The same also happened to kidfluencers. All social media platforms have a minimum age limit for their users. Most social media require users to be at least 13 years old to have accounts on their sites (O'Keeffe et al., 2011), including Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, Twitter, and Tiktok. So how can children become kidfluencers on social media? Parents as the controller of children's presence on social media certainly have a very dominant role. Like parents who share photos of their children using the sharenting method or share parenting, that's also what they do when creating their children as kidfluencers.

Parents are willing to break the rules on social media platforms by creating accounts in the names of their children. Not only that, generally they also regulate which content is displayed on the child's social media to match the image they want to display. Sometimes, parents have to add, subtract or adjust content according to the requests of their children's followers on social media. This is in keeping with what digital expert Karen North said about the stark difference between child actors and kidfluencers. According to her, child actors only pretend or act as someone in a movie, show, or spectacle, so they still have a different set of identities to the role played in front of the camera. On the contrary, on social media, the object of the spectacle is the kidfluencers themselves and their own lives (Martell, 2020).

Advertisers need little influencers to become brand ambassadors or commercial models of their products. To promote products with children as the target market, of course, the models used here are children. This dates back to much research that found a relationship between children's advertising exposure and their consumer behavior (Strasburger et al., 2009). Today, much of the advertising to which children are exposed occurs online, including via exposure to social media influencers (De Veirman et al., 2019). By using kidfluencers, products that are subtly advertised, or endorsed, will appear real and take the form of more convincing testimonials to the public. Many social media influencers are then compensated by corporations to post content about certain products and brands, and in

return, children are influenced by exposure to this type of content (De Veirman et al., 2019).

Although initially not all parents aimed to find income when sharing photos and videos of their children on social media, the needs of these advertisers were warmly welcomed by them. As a result, kidfluencers also emerged into the sub-category of influencers who, despite their very young age, were able to generate income as generous as the adult influencers get. In recent years, kidfluencers have catalyzed the advertising industry on social media for \$8 billion. There are even child influencers who are able to earn up to \$26 million per year through advertising and various sponsored content (Masterson, 2020). These big numbers are the result of exposure to advertising, including sponsored content promoted by social media influencers on social networking sites, that has the potential to alter youths' consumer behaviors and aspirations of fame, especially for youth high in materialism (Rasmussen et al., 2021). The influence of wanting to be like a famous role model has been shown to influence adolescents' purchase intentions (Martin & Bush, 2000). Some researchers even found out that kidfluencers is a very big thing in the advertising industry because exposure to kidfluencers may intensify children's susceptibility to sponsored content from social media influencers for several reasons. Among these reasons is the way that children's learning during childhood is facilitated by socially meaningful characters (Rosaen & Dibble, 2008), the attachment children are likely to develop with them (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019), and the feelings of similarity with them that children may experience (Cohen et al., 2018).

METHOD

This research used a critical paradigm to understand the complexity of the kidfluencer phenomenon. In general, critical paradigm defines social science as a critical process that is able to investigate and reveal the real structure in the material world to help people to change their condition or create a better world (Neuman, 2014). Critical paradigm research seeks to empower society by revealing hidden truths (Neuman, 2014). Qualitative method in the form of content analysis is used to analyze Raffi Ahmad's Instagram account @raffinagita1717 which displays both of his sons as kidfluencers.

In qualitative research, several analytical methods can be used, for example phenomenology, hermeneutics, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenography, and content analysis (Burnard, 1995). The content analysis method is not related to any particular science and there are fewer rules to follow. Therefore, the risk of confusion in matters about concepts and philosophical discussions is reduced. Throughout the content analysis process, the researcher must adhere to a qualitative perspective, and the main issue is to achieve the thoroughness and credibility that makes the results trustworthy. However, in content analysis, different concepts of credibility can be chosen in the discussion of trust. It is possible for researchers to use the same concepts as in quantitative

studies, a choice that is not accepted when conducting analysis using other qualitative methods (Long & Johnson, 2000). Content analysis generally refers to any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings (Patton, 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the critical theory perspective, the kidfluencer phenomenon can be seen through the concept of commodification that connects cultural studies and the perspective of media political economy (Mosco, 2009). The main thing is the commodification of workers, in which children are made as workers by their own parents who serve as managers, directors, producers, editors, scriptwriters, and accountants. Generally, the kidfluencers are organized and directed by their respective parents because they start from the smallest scope, unlike child actors who work together with producers, directors and professional teams in film or theater production.

In addition, kidfluencers can also be seen with the theory of symbolic violence formed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986). Ideally, family is a comfortable place for all its members. Parents should be able to protect and care for the child. While the child respects and is able to actualize themselves. But in the kidfluencer phenomenon, parents can ask the child to film even if he refuses, using power relations in which the parent becomes a figure that must be respected and obeyed by the child. Parents can also use the power relationship to ask children to do various scenes, try toys, taste food, and so on, which the child does not necessarily like, for the sake of advertising or endorsement content. All those actions will be seen as normal and reasonable actions carried out by parents to their children for various reasons.

Meanwhile, if we use Baudrillard's concept, the kidfluencer phenomenon can be seen as a hyperreality. The children who became kidfluencers were doing activities while being recorded and the results were shared with the wider community through social media accounts. What they did seemed normal like any other children. However, the reality is not like that because there is a series of teams consisting of several people and professions, ranging from videographers, scriptwriters, directors, stylists, makeup artists, to marketing and sales. These kidfluencers are presented in the concept of a reality show on television. Although the reality show seems real and authentic, there are a number of falsehoods present. Reality show programs often maintain the illusion of reality, deceiving gullible people into thinking that the program is real.

One of the famous reality shows is "Keeping Up with The Kardashians". The audience is treated to the daily life of the Kardashian-Jenner family which is imaged as if it were a true and natural story. In reality, the story shown is arranged through a script, and the cast is also dressed up by makeup artists and fashion stylists to appear charming on the TV

screen, even in the wake-up scene. The true picture of reality does not correspond to what is real. Due to this simulation of reality, viewers begin to believe that the reality depicted in this format represents the real reality. From this, the blur arises from what is actually true and from what constitutes a simulation of reality.

That's also what the kidfluencers present in various content that their parents/families share on social media. Even the production team and the adults behind it did not hesitate to stimulate or direct the kidfluencers to respond more than they are used to. Thus, the reactions present on social media and witnessed by the public will appear more real than the reality that actually happens. For example, a kidfluencer is asked to eat a food endorsement product or play with a toy but he does so with lack of enthusiasm. The production team will certainly ask and persuade the kidfluencer to repeat the recording or photo session several times to get a reaction that is in line with expectations. Not to mention if the kidfluencer is classified as introverted and shy, which is actually common for children but considered "dangerous" if he is a kidfluencer who has to regularly produce content on social media. Parents and the production team must be smart enough to persuade and find loopholes in order to display the kidfluencers according to the desired image. As a result, their appearance on social media is blurred and unclear, which ones really become reality and which ones are just pretends or simulations.

This was acknowledged by Raffi Ahmad when interviewed by Deddy Corbuzier. He recounted that Rafathar, his eldest son, protested many times because he did not want all of his actions and talks with his parents to be recorded on camera which later, inevitably ended up on his parents' Instagram and Youtube accounts. Raffi and his wife, Nagita Slavina, admitted that they often persuaded Rafathar to do the photo session or shooting, especially if they had already signed contracts with clients and advertisers (Kapanlagi, 2020).

Some kidfluencers appeared on social media from such an early age. But some are even younger and become stars since they were still in their mother's womb, and manage to gather fans as well as income. The newest one is the second son of Raffi and Nagita, Rayyanza Malik Ahmad. Since he was in his mother's womb, he had been present on his parents' social media accounts when they announced Nagita's pregnancy. The post managed to attract millions of likes, comments, and endorsement projects with a test pack product. Since then, Rayyanza's presence was constantly immortalized as content on his parents' social media, be it Instagram or Youtube, even though he was not born yet. This is an example of hyperreality because the real form or reality alone does not yet exist but it has become content and is popular everywhere. Even from the content and endorsements, according to Raffi, Rayyanza's income from before birth until now is equivalent to the income of his father in the first 10 years of his career in the entertainment world (Nabilla, 2021).

Rayyanza's emergence as a kidfluencer is certainly not 100 percent spontaneous and natural without planning. It is known that Raffi and Nagita run RANS Entertainment

company, a production house and content creator agency. RANS Entertainment is working on the entire video production and all the content on social media owned by Raffi and Nagita, including those featuring Rayyanza and Rafathar. Thus, the whole action and content about both Rafathar and Rayyanza on social media is certainly worked on by RANS Entertainment, which has a professional team behind it.

For example, for the akikah event which is a common procession for babies in Muslim families, was carried out in a program called "Syukurans Aqiqah Rayyanza Malik Ahmad". The show was broadcasted live on television as well as Instagram account @raffinagita1717 belonging to Rayyanza's parents. The process of akikah, which in reality is simply slaughtering goats as a sign of gratitude for the birth of a baby, is simulated into a grand procession of entertainment and attended by prominent figures, with food and the concept of an event that is more than the akikah procession in general. Events are organized in such a way that they seem real with a team of professionals who organize the course of events with immaculate details.



Figure 1. Akikah Event Called Syukurans Aqiqah Rayyanza Malik Ahmad

Source: www.instagram.com/raffinagita1717



Figure 2. Photo of the Akikah Procession
Source: www.instagram.com/raffinagita1717

Phenomena like this are reminiscent of the film “The Truman Show” which features various simulations of reality on the character Truman Burbank. In the film, the main character, Truman Burbank, was born and lives like a man in general. He falls in love, gets his heart broken, loses his parents, works, and socializes like a normal human being. But without his knowledge, the life he lives is a simulation of reality aired on television with millions of loyal viewers watching it 24 hours every day. All the acts, even the intimate moments, cannot be separated from the viewer's monitoring. In the midst of the reality simulation, various promotional content ranging from soap, toothpaste, to ready-to-eat food is also inserted.

The world in which Truman lives is a vivid example of hyperreality, since it is a simulation of a world that seems real but does not actually exist. The key to hyperreality in “The Truman Show” is its apparent authenticity, as every element in Truman's world is designed to mimic its original look. It is this replication of the appearance of reality that constantly deceives Truman, preventing him from knowing the truth for many years and blurring the boundary between reality and fiction.

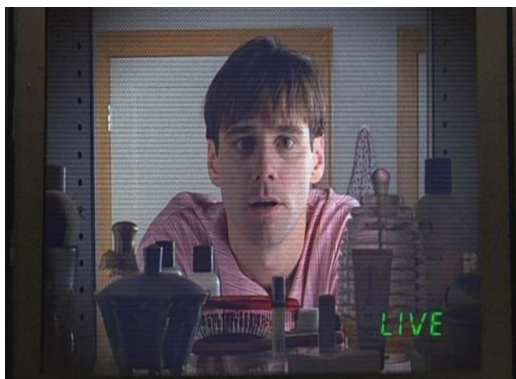


Figure 3. The Truman Show
Source: www.imdb.com

From the explanation of “The Truman Show”, it can be seen that there are similarities with the lives of the kidfluencers. The difference is, Truman lives a life consisting of 100 percent simulation. Everything, including his parents, best friends, and his wife, is fake, played by the actors chosen by the producers without Truman's knowledge. The life he lives is “embraced” through hidden cameras so Truman acts naturally without pretending.

While the kidfluencers, be it Rayyanza, Rafathar or other kidfluencers, live with their respective families and parents. It is this family that becomes the production team who creates a simulation of reality on the social media of the kidfluencers. The kidfluencers also consciously go through the filming or shooting process at the request and persuasion of their parents. If the result is less natural or too rigid, the production team will ask the kidfluencers to repeat it, to match the expectations of a child's “daily activity”. Furthermore, the action still has to go through the editing process first before it is broadcasted on social media. Thus, what is present on social media is a simulation of reality, aka not a real reality.

Another interesting thing both in “The Truman Show” and the social media accounts of the kidfluencers is the placement of paid products or endorsements. In “The Truman Show”, the placement of the paid product is done in disguise and not done by Truman as the main character, but by supporting characters such as his wife and family and relatives. The payoff from the covert ad also goes into the producer's pocket because Truman really doesn't know what really happens.

While in the kidfluencer phenomenon, there are two variations of paid product placement. The first is done overtly with the kidfluencers holding or posing with the product and then the manufacturer of the product is tagged and mentioned in the photo text. The second, it is carried out in disguise by slipping the product between the items belonging to the kidfluencers or placed in the background “casually”. The brand remains clearly visible but the manufacturer is neither tagged nor mentioned. Thus, the advertising process is more

like reality because it seems as if the product is really used by the kidfluencers regularly. This will certainly trigger people to buy more, especially those fans who want to get closer to the idol.

For this problem of consumerism, Baudrillard mentions that contemporary media including television, film, print media, and the internet are responsible for blurring the boundaries between the products needed for everyday life and products created for commercial imagery (Baudrillard, 1994).



Figure 4. Picture of Raffi Ahmad's Family Showing Product

Source: www.instagram.com/raffinagita1717

In this postmodern period, hyperreality becomes a thorny issue. The media spreads simulated reality in various forms. From mobile phones to computers, we are exposed to an enormous amount of content in our daily activities to the point that we spend more time in the world of hyperreality than in the real world. This is the point when the simulation turns reality into a simulacra. The "demise of reality" occurs when the simulation becomes more real than it should represent. Audiences also have difficulty distinguishing which content is real and which is just a simulation. If they believe that what Rafathar is showing on social media is 100 percent reality, they will be disappointed to find out it is just a simulation. This can spill over into psychological issues such as cyberbullying. People who can't tell whether Rafathar is cranky because he was stimulated by people around him to appear excited on Youtube will continue to bully him in the comment section, for example. This will certainly create psychological problems in the kidfluencers that can hinder their mental and psychological development.

This is the reason why cyberbullying can cause more damage to a person, especially children. A victim of cyberbullying is attacked in his life and in a simulation of his life.

Cyberreality, in this context, steps into reality as the internet and social media gain more power in our lives because hyperreality is the inability of consciousness to distinguish reality from simulated reality, especially in technologically advanced societies (Zompetti & Moffitt, 2009).

In addition, social media also causes the kidfluencers to also have difficulty distinguishing which are real and which are not real as a human being. Since their early ages, these children are used to presenting parts of themselves that will be liked by others and can get attention. In fact, according to child psychologist, Dr Saliha Afridi, childhood and adolescence are the moments in which children form identities and personalities (Mercer, 2019). If a child only has an online personality created by simulating reality, they will have a very weak understanding of themselves. Instead of asking "what do I like?" they will ask "what would people like?" and that is the self-image they would create, a simulation of reality that doesn't necessarily match their own reality. This will create a person who has a perfect personality and image from the outside, yet does not understand anything about what he really wants or believes in himself. This will certainly have an impact on the mental health of the kidfluencers when they grow up, as well as their ability to establish relationships and make decisions throughout their life (Mercer, 2019).

CONCLUSION

From the analysis and discussion above, it can be concluded that there is indeed hyperreality behind the kidfluencer phenomenon. This hyperreality may not be realized by the audience or the kidfluencers themselves, because it was created by the people behind the kidfluencers. However, observant audiences and people will certainly be able to distinguish and see behind the content presented. For the kidfluencers themselves, parents as the people who control and direct their child in the real world and the world of hyperreality, should be able to provide boundaries and understanding so that the child can understand which ones are simulated and which are real so that they are not constantly trapped in hyperreality.

For future research, I would recommend that the kidfluencer phenomenon also be studied with different aspects from identity protection, cognitive behavior of the kidfluencers themselves, child protection law, and privacy, especially for kidfluencers in Indonesia. Thus, parents and relatives who want to expose their children to social media to earn some money and popularity can get a whole perception and insights on what kind of world they would send their children into.

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