Virtual Toys
The Mediatization of Play on YouTube

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The author analyzed popular YouTube toy play videos, reviewing the range of storylines and their impact and influence. She argues that, although such videos may contribute to the commercialization of toys and play, they may also facilitate development of fine motor skills, socialization, and learning. She notes that, as with all Internet content, YouTube viewing is subject to algorithmic influences, and parents must oversee their children's use and regularly communicate with them about video content. **Key words**: media and play; YouTube Kids; YouTube Partner Program; YouTube and play

Introduction

Launched in 2005, YouTube is now the second-most visited website in the world (following only its parent company, Google), generating billions of daily views. Although many users may assume YouTube to be simply a website for video playback, the range of its technological advancements have improved its content and significantly affected media socialization. YouTube is one of the more complete social networks because it allows users to register, create channels, post videos, modify their profiles with personal information, add images, write, comment, and share the videos on other platforms (Burgess and Green 2018; Neumann and Herodotou 2020). Given its popularity, YouTube today has essentially replaced television as the primary conduit of entertainment media (Tolson 2010; Strangelove 2015; Burgess and Green 2018).

According to a study by the Pew Research Center (Auxier and Anderson 2021), an estimated 81 percent of adults and 95 percent of young adults (ages eighteen to twenty-nine) in the United States watch YouTube. A prior Pew study (Perrin and Anderson 2019) found that users are turning to YouTube for much more than entertainment. Half of its users called YouTube very important in

American Journal of Play, volume 16, numbers 2 and 3 © The 2024 Strong
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helping them learn to do things they had never done. About 20 percent of the users reported it very important in helping them understand news and current events. Most new content gets posted by a small percentage of YouTube channels with high numbers of subscribers, and most daily uploads occur in languages other than English. Many parents visit YouTube to learn something or to stay informed, and they also allow their children access to YouTube videos. Roughly 80 percent of parents with children under twelve years of age let them watch YouTube at least occasionally, and 34 percent allow their children to watch YouTube regularly (Perrin and Anderson 2019).

The most popular videos include content aimed at children. SocialBlade, an U.S. media analytics website that compiles viewer data to track progress and growth, has created a noteworthy list of the top one hundred made-for-kids YouTube channels (SocialBlade n.d.). Today, kids' viewing is mostly facilitated by the YouTube Kids app, a child friendly interface launched in 2015 that operates on-view history and recommended content, similar to its parent version except that it requires no registration. In a study in the United Kingdom of children seven years old and younger (Marsh et al. 2019), an estimated 80 percent used YouTube, and 59 percent used YouTube Kids. Although most children under age thirteen likely use their parents' accounts, 11 percent had their own YouTube accounts, and 16 percent had registered with the YouTube Kids app. On average, children in the study spent 1.39 hours each weekday and 1.47 hours each weekend day viewing YouTube videos, approximately four to nine minutes in length each. The most popular content consumed by children included videos of play, toys, nursery rhymes, television interests, funny videos, and animal videos.

YouTube Kids itself developed in the shadow of many years of YouTube children's content, beginning with cartoons primarily uploaded from other produced content. Children's content on YouTube has historically been treated negatively. Beginning in 2016, some children's channels were flagged for containing kid friendly key words, but in fact they included content that was not suitable, such as videos of characters acting violently or being scary. YouTube banned many of these creators and made the worst content no longer available. In 2019 YouTube created a category of videos labeled "made for kids," which it deems absent of any not kid friendly portrayals. The YouTube Kids app only permits content in this category and claims to monitor carefully all content posted under this category.

In this article, I analyze the range of videos within a popular genre of YouTube content aimed at children that I refer to as toy play videos. I considered a

sample of the most popular YouTube toy play videos to highlight the dynamics of mediatized play. First, I review the scholarship concerning theories of play, YouTube creators, and mediatized representations. Next, I discuss my data and methods, and report the emerging themes of the videos in my sample. I then present the implications of my findings for children's development, and, in my conclusion, discuss how to address children's unregulated media exposure to improve critical media literacy.

Literature Review

The Purposes of Play

From a sociological perspective, play and adventure are necessary for individuals to handle the humdrum of routine life and to cultivate leisure time (Simmel 1911). Individuals develop a self-identity rooted in what they enjoy playing and doing (Goffman 1959). Play facilitates self-realization, problem solving, and working together in community (Henricks 2020). Huizinga's (1934) concept of ludic play emphasizes its intrinsic motivation and instinctive development of culture. Sutton-Smith's (1997) typologies of play highlight the distinctions in performance and stylizations across time, space, and place. Play is also essential for children's development (Grimes 2021). While virtually all child development scholars agree on the positive benefits of play, they also point to a range of particular reasons they think it important.

Through play, children achieve the final stage of self-awareness by learning how to follow rules, expect challenges, solve problems, and take on social roles (Mead 1934). Play facilitates neural connections beginning in infancy. In Piaget's (1959) theory of cognitive development, after the sensorimotor stage (up to age two), in which children develop a conceptual understanding of toys and how to manipulate them, the preoperational stage (ages two through seven) fosters pretend play, dramatic play, and symbolic play. At this stage, play becomes more concrete, more concerned with rules and social aspects, and allows for more hypothetical and abstract forms of play such as drama and fantasy. Symbolic play allows children to use objects, actions, and ideas to represent other objects, actions, and ideas, and encourages the development of social skills, academic abilities, early literacy concepts, and behavioral self-regulation.

As children observe and imitate others, play socializes them to new behaviors (Bandura 1986). Vygotsky (1978) saw the purposes of make-believe play to

be helping young children overcome impulsive habits and learning social rules as a necessary behavior facilitating higher mental function. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development distinguishes between a child's ability to do something with or without help. The ability to complete a task independently allows for developmental growth. Therefore, role play becomes an entry point into the adult world (Tudge and Winterhoff 1993; Bodrova and Leong 2015).

Playing with children involves connecting with them and building their self-esteem. Through play, children develop their cognitive and fine motor skills. They learn new information, practice social skills, and develop effective communication skills. They learn self-regulation skills, develop the ability to resolve conflicts, and work on problem-solving skills. They learn to cooperate with others, explore roles, interests, skills, and relationships. And they learn about themselves and their place in the world. Play is, indeed, the true work of childhood.

Players on YouTube

The most successful YouTube videos—those that involve personal lifestyle vlogs, video game play, do-it-yourself (DIY), makeup and fashion tutorials, technology reviews, or health and wellness—differ from the legacy of established television and constitute a new space for user-generated media that is both interactive and audience centered (Cunningham and Craig 2017). Content creators, also known as social media influencers and potentially as today's media opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), are native social media users who generate original online social media content in close interaction and engagement with their communities (e.g., Abidin 2020; Cunningham and Craig 2021; Jaakkola 2020). For example, there exist growing YouTube communities who follow creators and content that affirm the experiences of people in marginalized groups, as noted by the scholarship concerning online communities for Black women (e.g., Neil and Mbilishaka 2019; Sobande 2017) and LGBTQI+ folx (e.g., Adams-Santos 2020; Horak 2014; Lovelock 2019).

After its purchase by Google in 2006, YouTube initiated its Partner Program. Originally available only to major media production companies, the program was eventually extended to popular creators, allowing them to share in YouTube's advertising revenue based on the popularity of their new content. Through the commercialization of YouTube, these once amateur creators produce the content that generates the most views and the most revenue. In 2015 YouTube introduced the Trending Tab, an algorithm-based compilation of the most popular videos, which in turn allows content to garner exponentially more views and shares (i.e.,

going "viral"). Partners earn on average between $0.30 to $2.50 CPM (cost per one thousand views) on a video, while the most popular creators earn up to $10.00 CPM. With similar programs across all social media platforms, the Partner Program has turned creators into emergent media professionals who influence content and generate corporate revenue shares (Tabares 2019).

While originally the program facilitated the popularity of singular stationary vloggers, content today requires high entertainment value. As a result, content creators employ their creativity and innovation in the service of quantity and popularity rather than of quality. These profit-driven dynamics have influenced the ways in which YouTube has developed as an alternative space for entertainment and leisure consumption. Like most popular media, social media too is heavily influenced by the corporate business practices that "incentivize performativity and monetize authenticity" (390). Such influences are evident among all varieties of content creators.

Some of the scholarly literature talks about the many popular kid fluencers (children content creators, helped by their parents) who have been influenced by—and have also influenced—the corporatized Internet video model (Abidin 2020; Jaakkola 2020; Lange 2014; Ramos-Serrano and Herrero-Diz, 2016; Ruiz-Gomez et al. 2022). Ramos-Serrano and Herrero-Diz analyzed the content and brand placement in videos by YouTube creator EvanTubeHD. They identified a wide range of scenarios that appeal to kid viewers—including outdoor excursions; challenges (including video game play); unboxing videos; and storytelling involving kids alone, with family members, or with celebrities. In Spain the current iteration of the popular Nancy Doll sells on Amazon and in toy stores with the tagline of a promise, "to help girls make their dream of being a real YouTuber come true," and includes creator accessories—a microphone, a ring light, and a companion app—capitalizing on the association between fame and happiness (Ruiz-Gomez et al. 2022).

Jaakkola (2020) analyzed mediatized forms of commodification focusing on the channel Ryan ToysReview (now RyansWorld), hosted by Ryan Kaji, who was YouTube's highest earner in 2019 at over $26 million. Ryan ToysReview was among the first to use advertising sponsorship, eventually receiving a complaint filed with the U.S. Federal Trade Commission for not differentiating its entertainment content from paid advertising. This case led to new requirements for creators to disclose corporate sponsorship of their content as, for example, including the "#ad" hashtag.

Content creators aimed at children have the potential to affect their identity

development and foster authentic affinity spaces through the vicarious enjoyment of observing other children. Lange (2014) highlighted the concept of cyberflâneurs, a codependent consumer on which content creators rely. Children look up to kid fluencers and tend to believe they are like minded, share the same interests, and are otherwise ordinary kids just like them (De Veirman et al. 2019). These highly sympathetic forms of viewing can also have significant impact on the development of young children's consumer values.

Mediatization of Play

Hjarvard (2013) described mediatization as the move of solid and tangible experiences to immaterial and virtual worlds as one result of developing visual technologies. For centuries, toys were generic and material. Beginning in the 1980s, deregulation led to the increased commercialization of toys, evident in branded material goods and subsequent television representations of these branded concepts. With technological developments, commercial toys seamlessly made the move to platforms such as video games and eventually to online video content (Hjarvard 2013). The mediatization of play can be understood to mean a social activity (like play) assuming a mediated form—either the action of play, the structure of the story, or the developmental impact.

Within toy play videos, there exists a subgenre formatted similarly to the electronics and subscription "unboxing" videos that are popular among adult viewers (Mowlabocus 2020). In toy unboxing videos, creators unbox or unwrap a toy, assemble the product, and act out play. These videos provide both technical information (showing how products work or how they can be used) and also communicate emotions and experiences (showing spontaneous reactions of enthusiasm or disappointment). Most unboxed toys are clearly branded, representing the more popular products of the day. Jaakkola (2020) discusses how these toy review videos can more appropriately be called "revues," along the lines of a theatrical production, intended to celebrate the joy of consumption. Unboxing videos can also allow viewers to enjoy the product without spending the money (yet). As such, these examples of mediatized play can also influence consumption habits and aspirations (Nicoll and Nansen 2018).

Data and Methods

For this study, I was interested in understanding the ranges of play and prod-

ucts in YouTube toy play videos. I developed the following research questions: What types of toys and play are present among the most popular YouTube kids toy play videos? And in what ways do YouTube toy play videos socialize and acculturate kid viewers?

To identify popular toy play channels, I used the YouTube search feature and typed in various combinations of the terms "kid," "toy," and "play." I selected ten active channels, defining "active" as those channels that had posted content within the last month of data collection. Trawick-Smith and colleagues (Trawick-Smith et al. 2014), in their study of materials that facilitate high quality play, define toys as "any concrete object that children can manipulate to carry out self-directed and meaningful play activities that are enjoyable for the process and not because they result in a product" (41). In line with this broad definition, I included channels focused exclusively on children's toys and objects. To focus specifically on toy play, I excluded channels with content that focused on content creators or arts and crafts, because I was more interested in videos where toys were featured. I also excluded video game play channels, because these are simulated rather than tangible portrayals.

Figure 1 presents key metrics about the channels I selected. Here I include a brief description of each channel's content. Because only a few details about the creators are available on YouTube, I included biographical information that was readily available on their channel's description or through a cursory web search. Asterisks indicate that the channel appears on SocialBlade's list of top one hundred "Made for Kids" YouTube channels at the time of data collection.

Channel (Location)	Subscribers	Videos	Views	Founded
Genevieve's Playhouse (USA)	35.8M	621	26.3B	January 6, 2016
CookieSwirlC (USA)	20.4M	3.8K	23.8B	November 3, 2013
Come Play With Me (USA)	14.3M	416	16.8B	January 23, 2014
Nat and Essie (USA)	12.2M	1.1K	7.3B	February 7, 2015
PlayToys (UK)	7.65M	1K	3B	February 19, 2015
Tooy Egg Videos (USA)	1.71M	1.6K	1.4B	March 21, 2017
Princess Fun Place (USA)	1.04M	615	744M	October 15, 2015
Carrie Hands (USA)	880K	249	334M	July 2, 2017
Kid's Toys Play (Canada)	580K	1.1K	645M	April 6, 2016
Bunya Toy Town (Australia)	532K	198	265M	December 20, 2020

Data as of September 29, 2023

Figue 1. Sample of YouTube Channels (n=10)

Of the ten channels in the list: *Genevieve's Playhouse is a popular channel aimed at young kids and toddlers; many videos are dubbed in other languages including Spanish, Hindi, and Vietnamese; and CookieSwirlC is now an independent v-tuber, well known for doll play videos from five or more years ago that remain popular. Recent content includes Let's Play videos of popular kid's video games *Roblox, Minecraft*, and *Animal Crossing*. *Come Play with Me is an educational toy doll channel focused on Elsia and Anna, based on the two main characters from Disney's *Frozen*. Its storylines revolve around typical kid scenarios. Nat and Essie was founded by two nurses and moms who saw the therapeutic value of toy play on their pediatric patients. Its content deals mostly with unboxing and sensory videos. PlayToys is a subsidiary channel of the popular PlayDolls channel that posts primarily toy play and doll play. Tooy Egg Video is a learning video channel, mostly using unboxing and playing with dolls and other girl-branded toys. Princess Fun Place is aimed at young girls and plays with "cool" toys like Barbie, Disney dolls, Shopkins, Peppa Pig, and My Little Pony in familiar storylines. CarrieHands uses the voice actor Ms. Hands from the popular channel The Fizzy Show and engages with dolls and dollhouse settings, providing adult perspectives on kids' scenarios. Kid's Toys Play is a channel created by a dad and his sons exclusively of toy trains, specifically Thomas and Friends and other branded train sets. And finally, Bunya Toy Town is a newer channel of play with toys from the ABC Kids cartoon *Bluey* that uses some videos, including Peppa Pig and other characters.

Within each channel, I identified the top ten most viewed toy play videos. Because YouTube serves as an infinite video repository, I chose the most viewed videos as a way to identify the most popular content. By not choosing recently published videos, my analysis is limited in its ability to expose any emerging trends from this genre. Among the list of most viewed videos for each channel, I identified the top ten that include portrayals of handled and manipulated toys. I omitted videos of the creators or kid fluencers, video games, arts and crafts, or animated videos. I also excluded LEGO and DUPLO build videos that did not incorporate play. I omitted repeat videos posted by Genevieve's Playhouse in languages besides English because the English-language versions of those videos already appear in the sample. I labeled each video in the sample with two numbers—the first number representing the channel and the second number representing where it appears among the top ten most viewed videos. I discuss examples in the Results section of this article and include this numbering to indicate each exemplar video or case (e.g., video #.#). I collected and analyzed the sample of one hundred videos

between July and September 2023. I should note that, in reference to the Association for Internet Researchers' guidelines for research ethics (Markham and Buchanan 2012), I contend that creators assume no guarantee of confidentiality by sharing content on their public YouTube channels.

For this study, I used qualitative content analysis, operationalizing the representations in the videos to include the types of toys, play, and skills presented so I could extrapolate larger themes around cultural norms (Bell 2003; Gray 2017). Because the media, broadly conceptualized, influences our socialization into dominant social norms, I situate my analysis in the scholarship of cultural studies (Hall 1997) and netnography (Kozinets 2015). Cultural studies emphasize the impact of cultural artifacts, like toys, on the construction of society. Netnography broadly encompasses the effects of online culture on individual consumers. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes (1972) focuses on the signifier to include *mise-en-scene* (scenery, settings, surroundings), camerawork, and editing, discussing a semiotics that I find useful for its holistic approach to analyzing the layering of meaning in video data. The field of visual analysis as discussed by van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2003), particularly visual cultural studies, is an emerging field that combines the foundation of semiotics with the advances in imaging and visualizing technologies since the late-twentieth century (Lister and Wells 2003).

YouTube scholarship is situated in the emerging field of platform studies (Burgess 2021), which emphasizes the influence of Internet platforms in shaping the function and operation of these information and creative-content industries. Platform studies highlight their evolution in terms of the technologies, interfaces, ownership structures, business models, media and self-representations, and governance of these entities. Beyond YouTube and a myriad of other social media platforms, this new screen ecology of platforms, content, creators, and cultural and entrepreneurial practice has become broadly conceptualized as social media entertainment (SME) (Cunningham and Craig 2021). From its overarching reach, YouTube has had significant influence on our society and culture.

Results

Overall, the YouTube toy play videos in my sample have some key similarities. First, these videos rely on popular branded characters and their accessories. The most frequently featured toys in my sample videos included L.O.L. dolls (19 percent, in three channels), Anna and Elsa from *Frozen* (12 percent, in three

channels), Barbie (11 percent, in four channels), Peppa Pig (10 percent, in three channels), Thomas and Friends (10 percent, in one channel), and Bluey (10 percent, in one channel). Most of the toys in these videos were relatively small figures (six inches or shorter). As noted in their descriptions, toy play channels range from focusing on one toy brand to incorporating many toy brands (sometimes in the same video).

Of the one hundred videos, 33 percent (in eight channels) included a component of unboxing, specifically including products and packaged items to reveal and then play with. (Many of CarrieHands' videos begin with a short introductory reel of two L.O.L. dolls and one L.O.L. Surprise ball that then cuts to show the doll from inside. I did not include these video introductions on their own in the tally of toy unboxing videos.) Half of the videos by Kid's Toys Play in the sample include an unboxing and building of Thomas and Friends train sets, including one video (09.02) of a train set build with the opening lines, "This video is an ad for Thomas and Friends by Fisher Price." Such product placements were common on this channel. Many videos by Tooy Egg Video portray extensive storylines with L.O.L. Surprise dolls, included one (06.05) of the dolls going to the hospital, then a playground, and then getting married, interrupted by an unboxing, dressing, and water effect testing of a wrapped L.O.L. Surprise doll ball. Once finished, the new L.O.L. doll disappears from the screen, and viewers return to the conclusion of the wedding storyline.

Thirteen percent (in seven channels) included portrayals of toy assembly. For example, a video by Princess Fun Place (07.01) begins with the assembly of a large doll castle based on Disney's *Frozen*. Additionally, 6 percent of the videos (in four channels) included a similar element of surprise, in which the reveal was not of a packaged commercial toy but of learning materials to teach concepts such as naming colors, counting numbers, or labeling items. One video by Genevieve's Playhouse (01.09) used surprise colored eggs to name and reveal matching color characters from the PBS series, *Sesame Street*.

Many of these videos incorporate various forms of sensory play. For example, a common form of play with videos using L.O.L. Surprise dolls involves engagement with many of their water features, including changing color in hot or cold water and the so-called surprise of being able to drink water and either cry, spit, or tinkle. In one video (02.10), CookieSwirlC opens a haul of L.O.L. Surprise balls and tests each for its water and color-changing effects. Toys are also played in tandem with other branded items like Play-Doh, Kinetic Sand (or real sand), Orbeez, and Slime. In one video by Come Play With Me (03.02),

Elsia wakes up in the middle of the night and puts slime at the foot of Anna's bed as a prank. As in these two examples, videos under this theme either focus on manipulated sensory play or integrate sensory materials into the storyline.

Some toys are able to squish, spin, or make noise. Many videos by Nat and Essie also include these types of toys, such as the video (04.06) in which the creator unboxes Paw Patrol squishy toys and demonstrates the ranges of motion. Related, many of these toy play videos also emphasize sensory items as intermediaries for learning. For example, most of the videos posted by Genevieve's Playhouse emphasize bright colors with shimmer, shine, and texture using an overlaid musical accompaniment (a melody included in virtually all of its videos). The channel's most popular video (01.01), with 1.9 billion views at the time of writing, runs through color-themed containers and surprise eggs to display a range of branded, color-coordinated, motion-sensing toys.

Many videos focus on everyday scenarios acted out by the toys and often typical to their characters' storylines. Six of the ten channels in my sample specialize exclusively in this form of pretend play. The various toys are set up alongside their dollhouses or other settings, and include a variety of accessories. Most of the videos from PlayToys follow this format, including one video (05.06) showing a full dollhouse assembly, which involves making beds and putting clothes on hangers. Many of the character toys begin storylines by waking up in their beds and making themselves ready for the day—brushing their teeth, taking a bath, getting dressed, preparing and eating meals, and going to school or the store. For example, videos posted by Bunya Toy Town rely on humorous stories involving characters from the ABC Kids series, *Bluey,* such as the video (10.07) in which dad Bandit clogs the toilet (displayed as oozing blue Play-doh foam).

Toys are also played with collectively as families or friends—with some occasional cross-brand play—for example, with L.O.L. Surprise dolls as kids and L.O.L. O.M.G. or Barbie dolls as care givers. One video by CarrieHands (08.03) portrays a pool party at which the Barbie doll lifeguards indicate that no unsupervised kids are allowed. The L.O.L. Surprise dolls must then unbox the L.O.L. O.M.G. dolls to find their big sister chaperones. Many toys are also played as interacting with teachers or getting services at the doctor or dentist. One video by CookieSwirlC (02.06) uses the Play-Doh Dentist Kit for a dentist scenario, played by "Dr." Barbie. Another video by Tooy Egg Video (06.01) shows L.O.L. Surprise dolls as kids going to school, while their teacher is portrayed as Shimmer from the Nickelodeon series *Shimmer and Shine*.

Nearly all of these types of play follow a storyline that transpires throughout

the entirety of the video. Some videos focus on scenarios that require problem solving. For example, one video posted on Come Play With Me (03.01) shows Anna and Elsia at a miniature Claire's accessory store to buy school supplies and beauty items. During the course of the video, the cousins encounter another girl who antagonizes them by claiming that the items they chose are hers. The video follows the cousins as they discuss their frustrations and strategize how to interact with the girl. They eventually compliment the girl's outfit, which softens her behavior toward them.

To execute most of this play, the creator must use fine motor skills to handle the toys. Many videos demonstrate manipulating miniature accessories, dressing dolls, or moving and positioning figures to act out scenarios. In one video by Tooy Egg Videos (06.06), various L.O.L. Surprise dolls are each shown trying on a set of doll clothes from a large pile. Occasionally, creators will edit videos to minimize the time and effort needed to manipulate toys, or they will occasionally make a very quick point about a manipulation gone wrong (e.g., a head popping off or a product not opening correctly). In general, toy play videos portray a spectrum of product manipulation, with well-known characters, using familiar themes and scenarios.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, I analyzed popular toy play videos on YouTube to identify some overarching themes and the potential for their impact on socialization and learning. First, toy play videos frequently displayed play through commercial items. Toys like Barbie (Mattel), L.O.L. (MGA), Paw Patrol (Spin Master), Peppa Pig, and Bluey (Moose Hasbro) are but a few of the many branded toys from the most popular toy producers. As noted by Jaakkola (2020), these videos have the tendency to feel like commercials. As critical toy researchers have noted, these items are heavily packaged, made of plastic, and mostly manufactured in China, thus struggling to meet emerging standards for material sustainability and contributing to the environmental impact of the global supply chain.

The toy play videos in this study used play to reinforce familiar scenarios. Most of the videos portrayed forms of situational play between kid characters and moms, teachers, babysitters, and medical professional characters. The reliance on branded toys and inherent themes may limit creative play, because they replicate storylines that correspond to the branded content. To be sure, Mummy

Pig figures are always played as Peppa Pig's mom and so forth. At minimum, it could be said that these videos help activate play. As children tend to seek out videos of the characters they know and love, they are self-selecting their consumption and enriching their own interests through affinity spaces (Lange 2014; Burroughs 2017). The familiar toys and storylines may give children somewhere to start.

Finally, toy play videos rely on mediatized representations of play, such as sensory play and fine-motor play. The Internet has long facilitated mediatized forms of play, including the virtual spaces where play can happen (Grimes 2021). Like real-life play, toy play videos also have the potential to socialize children by teaching them how to play with these products independently and with developed fine motor skills. Additionally, toy play videos contribute to the mediatization of toys through their reliance on branded products (Hjarvard 2013). These mostly unregulated forms of marketing may lead to brand reinforcement for young viewers. As such, the dynamics of play for young people are strongly informed by consumer values, now more than ever.

Toy play videos also create mediatized creators, as evident from the popularity of the channels in this study as well as those channels discussed in prior research (Abidin 2020; Jaakkola 2020; Ramos-Serrano and Herrero-Diz 2016). Two of the YouTube channels included in this sample are on Social Blade's list of top one hundred channels "Made for Kids": Genevieve's Playhouse (fourteenth) and Come Play with Me (eighty-seventh), according to the SocialBlade rankings of March 22, 2024. The exponential growth in popularity of YouTube content aimed at children has led to their overexposure to social media algorithms—predictive exposure to content, informed by patterns of previous consumption such as viewing history, trending videos, likes, subscriptions, and other information the user or browser may provide (Burroughs 2017). As most children consume videos independently, these algorithms end up serving as a kind of surrogate parent that shapes children's viewing habits and has the potential to inform their consumer values.

Evidence also suggests that the corporate profit structure of YouTube creates segmented consumer experiences. Through YouTube's Partner Program, creators cultivate content to propel their profit. Multichannel networks (MCNs) are management firms that work with content creators to provide production support, talent development training, and networking opportunities in return for a percentage of the creators' profit. Examples of popular kid fluencer MCNs include pocket.watch and Family Video Network (FVN). FVN's marketing

strategy specifically acknowledges that the YouTube algorithm positions Black content creators less frequently than White creators with similar content and is more likely to display Black creators' content in searches alongside other Black creators (Walczer 2021). As evident, my study sample is also severely limited by a lack of diversity among the content creators. Of the ten YouTube channels identified from an inductive search, all but one of the people were White presenting (as evident by the phenotype of the hands manipulating the toys). The overrepresentation of White creators in content aimed at children functions to maintain normative ideologies of Whiteness and has the potential to alienate children consumers of color from their important affinity groups.

YouTube videos can, as they do for adult users, simulate for children a range of emotions such as happiness, excitement, humor, love, and empathy. They can inspire children's play, creativity, and curiosity; help children research and prepare for school projects about a range of exciting and interesting topics; and offer tutorials for activities and experiments. However, because children may be more susceptible to direct messaging, care givers must find opportunities to engage with children concerning what they watch (Neumann and Heredotou 2020). Recognizing the ubiquity of media exposure for children of all age ranges, the American Academy of Pediatrics in April 2024 released revised guidelines for children's screen time that moves away from timed recommendations, suggesting that parents take into account the "five Cs" in their child's media consumption—the child's nature and personality, the media content, the ability for children to develop calm feelings without media exposure, the extend to which media exposure crowds out important family time, and the need to communicate with children about what they are watching (American Academy of Pediatrics 2024). Adults are the best guides to help children with their understanding and interpretations, cultivating self-guided media literacy. As the algorithms fail to protect children, communication and oversight remain necessary to maintain the positive learning and experiences that online media content has the potential to facilitate.

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