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# Unboxing the child influencer paradoxes: a research agenda

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## ABSTRACT

Child toy unboxers unintentionally and intentionally participate in paradoxical practices. The child influencer industry, shaped by ideological conflicts, is a foreign topic in the marketing domain despite its popularity. Drawing upon paradox theory, this conceptual article investigates three main paradoxes of child toy unboxers by addressing the following research questions: What are the paradoxical tensions that manifest in child toy unboxing industry? What research directions will prove fruitful for advancing our understanding of these paradoxical tensions and its implications for child toy unboxing marketing? Departing from the traditional perspective that positions opposite elements as separate and exclusive worlds, the disposition of these paradoxes provides new insights into the complex world of child influencers. This paper presents new research prospects and implications that promote socially responsible child influencer marketing.

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Child influencers; paradox theory; influencer marketing; toy unboxers; research agenda

## Introduction

Child toy unboxers create videos where they unwrap toys and demonstrate them to their viewers (Craig & Cunningham, 2017), becoming internet-famous children promoting brands and sponsoring products on their social media. Child influencers often experience paradoxical tensions – situations where contradictory elements coexist and can be challenging to navigate (Mick & Fournier, 1998). The term ‘tensions’ pertains to elements that appear logical in isolation but become incompatible when juxtaposed (W. K. Smith & Lewis, 2011). Actors in the child toy unboxing industry constantly encounter tensions requiring them to prioritise one demand over another, such as choosing fame over a child’s privacy (Kokshagina & Schneider, 2023). Other paradoxes in child influencer marketing include balancing genuine self-expression with the commercial interests of brands (Masterson, 2020) and the fine line between providing meaningful educational content and promoting products or brands to young audiences (See Beser, 2022).

Drawing on paradox literature, we propose an alternative approach to viewing the contradictory tensions inherent in toy unboxing. This is done by embracing paradoxical thinking to facilitate creative solutions that simultaneously address contrasting demands (Lewis, 2000). By exploring the intricate relationships between the opposing elements

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underpinning child influencer marketing, our goal is to stimulate future research on this multifaceted contemporary marketing phenomenon. The paradoxical tensions associated with child toy unboxing remain a theoretical *terra incognita* in marketing literature despite unboxing content being a popular and influential form of advertising (Lieber, 2019). To illustrate, the databases used in the search were EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, JSTOR and ScienceDirect using keywords 'child or children or kid or tween' in combination with 'influencer', 'kidfluencer', 'Playbour', 'digital labour', 'content creator', 'TikTok star', 'child social media star', 'social media celebrities', 'YouTubers', 'Instagram influencer' or 'toy unboxing' within leading marketing and consumer research journals yielded only five articles examining child influencer marketing. Among these limited studies, marketing scholars have focused on how advertising disclosures affect child viewer responses (De Jans & Hudders, 2020; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2020), parental advertising literacy (Evans et al., 2018; Freeman & Dardis, 2022) and mediation strategies (Ahn, 2022). Expanding beyond the marketing discipline, we identify several overarching themes in child influencer research, which are elaborated in the subsequent section. From our review, two critical issues emerge. First, there is insufficient attention to child content creators and their parents, who are significant industry players. Second, while existing research has identified certain paradoxes, a gap remains in fully theorising the range of paradoxical tensions and offering a fresh perspective within the child influencer marketing industry. We uncover unrecognised tensions or dynamics that can drive creative solutions by extending these existing paradoxes. We advocate for further exploration by proposing a future research agenda grounded in a paradoxical lens to develop a new line of research.

Our conceptual article draws insights from sociology, psychology, marketing, and law to develop a new understanding of the tensions within the child toy unboxing industry through a paradox lens. These fields were chosen as they offer relevant theoretical and practical perspectives needed to develop a framework addressing the complexities of child influencer marketing. Our research questions are: What are the paradoxical tensions that manifest in child toy unboxing industry? What research directions will prove fruitful for advancing our understanding of these paradoxical tensions and its implications for child toy unboxing marketing? We explore three paradoxes in child toy unboxing marketing, examining their interrelationships and the links between the contrasting elements. Our conceptual article makes three contributions. First, in response to Yadav's (2010) concern that 'the decline of conceptual articles [in marketing] weakens the theoretical core of the discipline' (p. 17), we undertake this theoretical investigation to problematise existing thinking surrounding child influencers. We aim to explore how these influencers' sponsored activities blur the line between labour and play, assess their level of autonomy and the parental control involved, and explore how the concept of the privacy paradox applies to child toy unboxers. We address the limitations of current non-empirical child influencer research, which is dominated by opinion pieces or essays that often lack a comprehensive research agenda, an essential component of a conceptual article. Second, we advance the literature by spotlighting child toy unboxers and their relationship with their parents, who serve as their manager. We offer theoretical insights into the paradoxes of child toy unboxing and showcase a distinct perspective when applying a paradox lens to understand toy unboxing, constituting a core contribution of a conceptual article (MacInnis, 2011). Such knowledge is lacking in the marketing

literature yet is crucial for advancing current theorising on child toy unboxing. Lastly, we develop a comprehensive research agenda that promotes socially responsible child influencer marketing. We also recommend methodological insights for conducting rigorous research, a crucial aspect when involving child participants.

## A review of child influencers research

We performed a topic search (title, abstract and keywords) of peer-reviewed scholarly articles in English, using the following keywords: 'child or children or kid or tween' in conjunction with 'influencer', 'kidfluencer', 'Playbour', 'digital labour', 'content creator', 'TikTok star', 'social media star', 'child social media celebrities', 'YouTubers', 'Instagram influencer' or 'toy unboxing' of the same databases mentioned in the introduction. In total, 23 articles were selected during the literature review. The goal was not to exhaustively cover every publication on the topic, similar to a systematic literature review, but rather to present an overview of various conceptualisations of child influencer marketing.

Table 1 presents an overview of the selected articles, categorised into five themes. Themes emerged by analysing recurring concepts and disputes in the literature, with the collaboration among the authors to ensure a broad and nuanced selection. The rationale for presenting general themes stems from establishing a comprehensive framework that serves as a base for exploring paradoxes evident in the literature. Some of these themes are well-developed, while others are supported by only a few papers.

The first line of research revolves around the impact of child influencer content on young viewers, such as children's exposure to unhealthy food advertising, branded products (Fleming-Milici et al., 2023; Martínez-Pastor et al., 2021; Meyerding & Marpert, 2023), product placements, and ad disclosures in child-targeted videos (Choi, 2023). These investigations primarily offer descriptive impacts on child viewers without explaining the mechanisms underlying the influence of child influencer programmes. The second research stream concerns parents' perspectives on child influencer content, focusing on their advertising literacy and mediation strategies (Ahn, 2022) as well as their understanding and responses to sponsored child influencer videos (Evans et al., 2018; Freeman & Dardis, 2022). The second research stream take an advertising perspective. The third group of studies adopt a material cultural perspective to examine children's engagement with child influencers and their online practices (Marsh, 2016; Martínez & Olsson, 2019). The findings from Marsh (2016) and Martínez and Olsson (2019) illustrate that children combine their roles as consumers, learners and peer collaborators making them engagers and contributors to online content. Fourthly, a growing group of scholars are focusing on child influencers and their parents' practices and how authenticity exists (Van den Abeele et al., 2024) and the production style that child toy unboxers adopt (Nicoll & Nansen, 2018). These studies show a struggle between commercial demands and genuine content creation among child influencers. Lastly, some scholars address regulatory and protective legislation issues about child labour and toy unboxing (e.g. Craig & Cunningham, 2017; Edney, 2022; Fishbein, 2022; Yates, 2023).

Examining the current body of work, a few notable issues arise. Firstly, the current research appears isolated and discipline-specific, lacking cross-referencing, hindering a holistic understanding of the child influencer phenomenon. Thus, integrating this diverse literature through an appropriate theoretical lens is crucial (Khamitov et al.,

**Table 1.** An overview of child influencer research.

References	Discipline	Methods	Focal actors	Focus	Key insights
Child influencer content and its impact on young viewers					
Fleming-Milici et al. (2023)	Medical	Content analysis	Child influencer	Descriptive <sup>1</sup> study of children's exposure to unhealthy advertising/branded product placements.	Branded products appeared 592 times, with significant increases in candy brands. Videos featuring non-branded healthy food also increased, but 70% showed unhealthy branded and/or unbranded foods.
Meyerding and Marpert (2023)	Nutrition & psychology	Content analysis	Child influencers	Descriptive study of child influencers and junk food featured on YouTube.	70% featured food/beverages, with 220 being branded (e.g. McDonald's, Coca-Cola) and 178 unbranded products.
Choi (2023)	Media & comm. studies	Content analysis	Child influencers	Descriptive study of implicit brand integrations and ad disclosures in child-targeted YouTube videos.	Brands are subtly integrated as props with minimal advertising disclosure. Brand integration with influencers who actively engage with branded products follows the advertising disclosure policy the most.
Martínez-Pastor et al. (2021)	Multidisciplinary open access	Content analysis	Child influencers	Descriptive study of health-related food advertising on kid YouTuber channels.	Non-essential and unhealthy foods are most common (71%), with the highest percentages in the US, followed by the UK and Spain.
Alruwaily et al. (2020)	Medical	Content analysis	Child influencers	Descriptive study of unhealthy branded products promoted by kid influencers.	Most food/drinks featured were unhealthy branded items, followed by unhealthy unbranded, healthy unbranded and healthy branded items.
Rasmussen et al. (2022)	Media & comm. studies	Survey	Child viewers	Moderating influence of materialism on child influencer exposure & product purchase.	Teenagers' exposure to child influencers fuels desires to emulate and purchase child influencer-sponsored products among more materialistic individuals.

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Table 1. (Continued).

References	Discipline	Methods	Focal actors	Focus	Key insights
Archer and Delmo (2023)	Media & culture	Case study	Child influencers	Commodification, privacy, gendered & 'stealth' marketing of toys	Continued promotion of gendered toys and adult 'toys' blurring the line between children's playthings and adult objects of desire.
Evans (2020)	Medical	Opinion piece	Child viewers	Discusses Alruwaily et al.'s (2020) paper on the impact of advertising/child influencers.	Viewers may develop parasocial relationship with influencers, affecting purchases despite parental screen restrictions.
Van Reijmersdal et al. (2020)	Marketing	Offline experiment	Child viewers	How sponsorship disclosure timing affects children's attitudes.	Disclosures before videos enhances awareness of sponsorship, fostering critical attitude toward sponsored content, less favourable views of the brands, videos & influencers.
De Jans and Hudders (2020)	Marketing	Offline experiment	Child viewers	Influence of types of disclosures on children's responses toward the sponsored content and the influencer.	Both influencer-generated (IG) and platform-generated (PG) disclosures increased children's recognition of vlog advertising. IG disclosure was more favourable for brands, whereas PG disclosure decreased brand effects.
<b>Parents' responses to and perspectives of child influencer content</b>					
Ahn (2022)	Marketing	Interview	Child viewers' parents	Parents' advertising literacy & their mediation strategies of influencers' videos.	Parents with higher affective and moral literacy use restrictive or active mediation.
Freeman and Dardis (2022).	Advertising	Online experiment	Child viewers' parents	The role of parental awareness of and reactions to persuasive unboxing videos.	For some parents, advertising recognition led to greater perceived adverse effects of advertising and unfavourable brand outcomes.
Evans et al. (2018).	Marketing	Online experiment	Child viewers' parents	Parents' understanding of and responses to sponsored child influencer videos.	Sponsor pre-roll advertising positively impacted parents' perceptions of sponsorship transparency, which in turn mediated attitudinal and perceptual outcomes.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

References	Discipline	Methods	Focal actors	Focus	Key insights
<b>Material cultural perspective of engagement with child influencers</b>					
Martínez and Olsson (2019)	Media & comm. studies	Interview	Child viewers	The role of microcelebrities in children's everyday lives.	Children's negotiations around the YouTuber's celebrity status, Misslisibell's YouTube practices, and various interpretations of the video as advertising, tips and as a space for learning.
Marsh (2016)	Education & cultural studies	Case study	Child viewer	The nature of Gareth's (case study) literacy practices across home and school spaces.	Discusses children's online practices and their relationship to material culture before analysing the growth of interest in peer-to-peer digital production and consumption.
<b>Child influencers practices and their production style</b>					
Van den Abeele et al. (2024)	New media & society	Interview	Child influencers and their parents	Exploring how parents of child influencers employing authenticity management strategies.	Parents balance the expectations of their children, followers, and brands, resulting in inauthentic child influencer profiles.
Nicoll and Nansen (2018)	social media & society	Content analysis	Child influencers	Descriptive study on child and adult toy unboxing videos practices.	Child content creators aiming for amateur-like toy unboxing content are inspired by established video production methods. This reveals how fun and commercialisation merge in toy unboxing videos, bridging amateur and professional content creation.
<b>Regulatory and protective legislation issues</b>					
Fishbein (2022)	Law	Note/essay	Child influencers	Child influencers, child labour & the need for protective legislation.	Challenges insufficiency of advertising & child labour laws in UK for protecting child influencers and examines legal framework for addressing this concern.
Masterson (2020)	Law	Note/essay	Child influencers	How child influencers fit in the child labour regime.	Proposes that states should enact laws, akin to child actor Coogan Laws, to financially protect kidfluencers. A tailored legislation is needed.

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Table 1. (Continued).

References	Discipline	Methods	Focal actors	Focus	Key insights
Yates (2023)	Entertainment & Technology Law	Note/essay	Child influencers and their parents	The role of sharenting and how present legislative frameworks protect children while including parental rights.	Regulating sharing involves complexities related to parental rights. An effective regulatory approach would restrict profiting from harmful content sharing.
Edney (2022)	Law & Public Policy	Note/Essay	Child influencers	Lack of protections for child content creators.	Provides alternative ways to avoid exploitation and encourage society to rethink social media influence.
Winckler (2022)	Law Review	Note/Essay	Child influencers	Current regulations leave child influencers vulnerable to exploitation.	Expansions of the law are necessary to safeguard the financial earnings and protect child influencers from labour abuse.
Craig and Cunningham (2017)	Media & comm. studies	Essay	Child influencers	Toy unboxing phenomenon, content creator labour & media regulation.	Examine toy unboxing videos as creator labour in social media entertainment, suggesting a need for nuanced regulations.

2020). Secondly, marketing discipline largely ignores child influencers research, focusing only on parental advertising literacy, mediation strategies (Ahn, 2022), the effects of disclosures on parents (Evans et al., 2018) and child viewer responses (De Jans & Hudders, 2020; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2020). Thirdly, existing studies primarily focus on either parents or child influencers or child viewers, neglecting the nuanced experiences and interactions between child influencers and their parents. Only one study explicitly examines child influencers and their parents' practices of authenticity (Van den Abeele et al., 2024). Most current empirical studies utilising interviews (Martínez & Olsson, 2019) often overlook the nuances of fieldwork involving child participants and rely on a single case (Marsh, 2016). Non-empirical work predominantly takes stage, such as opinion pieces critiquing legislation and demanding expansion in current laws (e.g. Edney, 2022; Winckler, 2022; Yates, 2023). These law pieces emphasise the role of parents in managing child influencers and highlight the need to protect child content creators with improved regulations. However, there is a lack of dissecting of the specific nuance and challenges for child content creators. Without offering future research opportunities, there is an oversight in the suggestion of an improved regulatory framework as it is not influenced by empirical evidence of the unique experiences of influential children.

Child influencer marketing often ignites paradoxical tensions due to ethical concerns surrounding children's privacy, potential exploitation, and mental well-being (Masterson, 2020), yet it lacks academic attention addressing these inherent contradictions. Managing marketing efforts entails balancing conflicting demands, rendering the concept of



paradox a well-suited framework for understanding child influencer marketing (O'Driscoll & Brodie, 2008). The paradox lens has been used in marketing to understand contradictions in technological products (Mick & Fournier, 1998), transitional consumption experience (Skandaliset al., 2016), and sustainability in buyer-supplier relationships (Blome et al., 2023). The paradoxes discussed in this paper stem from our review of the current literature shown in Table 1. We integrate the fragmented literature through paradox theory to identify the inherent paradoxes within child toy unboxing.

## Paradox theory – theoretical lens

Paradox theory, rooted in organisational behaviour and management, can guide researchers in identifying and managing contradictory tensions (Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015). Instead of attempting to reconcile conflicting objectives (Lewis, 2000; W. K. Smith & Lewis, 2011), paradox theory seeks solutions (Kober & Thambar, 2022). Paradoxes are incompatible and interrelated elements co-existing and persisting (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989) which appear logical on their own but irrational when colligated (W. K. Smith & Lewis, 2011). While a contingency mindset considers situations to determine the suitability of either A or B, a paradox mentality seeks synergy between opposing poles (Vafeas & Hughes, 2020). Rather than opting for an either-or strategy that potentially creating a vicious cycle (Keegan et al., 2019), embracing a virtuous cycle is encouraged to view conflicts as opportunities for creativity (W. K. Smith & Lewis, 2011). In essence, managing paradoxes is not about controlling or eliminating the tension but coping with or working through the tension (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Paradox theory is valuable for considering wicked situations that traditional techniques cannot solve (Camillus, 2008).

Drawing on organisational literature, all relevant stakeholders should accept the contradictory nature of the child toy unboxing industry and understand the interrelationships of the paradoxical elements that makeup child toy unboxing (Keegan et al., 2019). This paper presents research ideas and implications that pave the way for cultivating virtuous cycles to master the paradoxical tensions in the child influencer phenomenon. Instead of adhering to either-or thinking, such as categorising child toy unboxers' behaviours as play or labour, autonomy or control, and privacy or online success, we advocate for identifying and embracing the inherent tensions.

## Paradox 1: labour and play

Hardly ever would one label something that a child does pure work or pure play. (Johnson et al., 2019, p. 265)

Sponsored child content, as a form of child labour in the digital world, presents a complex and unique topic. The labour and play paradox involves a tension between fun and purposeful activities. What constitutes this tension as a paradox fits the criteria from W. K. Smith and Lewis (2011) that the elements 'seem logical in isolations, but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously' (p. 382). Children engage in playful activities while being compensated, concealing the lines of play and professional obligation (Bakioğlu, 2024; Nicoll & Nansen, 2018), labelling it as a 'grey zone' (Boring, 2020).

Playing with sponsored toys can constitute as play since child influencers consider it fun. While sponsored content creation shares some characteristics with play, it cannot be solely categorised as such because of its labour-like aspects. Thus, this demonstrates its interdependence, showing how it is two sides of the same coin (Lewis, 2000). Conversely, labelling it strictly as labour is inadequate due to its playful features. Ongoing debates argue that child influencers are working as a defensive actor response to reduce the negative effect of tensions (Lewis & Smith, 2014). We propose that they engage in a paradox of play and labour, suggesting the need for a new framework that captures these nuances to foster an acceptance of these conflicting elements.

### ***Work, labour and play***

There is no universal definition of play: it is broad with various perspectives (Hurst, 2019). Play is broadly understood as fun, freedom, childlike, and an intrinsically motivated activity (Eberle, 2014). Through play, children think creatively, learn cooperation, solve problems, and gain deeper self and world knowledge (Bento & Dias, 2017). Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that ‘every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in culture life and the arts’ (United Nations, 1989). This fundamental right of play for children is important, including in the digital space (van der Hof et al., 2019). While play is a common childhood practice, Garwood (1982) describes it as an essential type of ‘work’ of being a child. The ideology of play includes notions of liberation, fun, and ‘not like work’; however, work is never purely work, nor is children’s play purely play (Hurst, 2019). Similarly, Masterson (2020) argues that the production of child influencers content ‘cannot just be considered play – it is work’ (p. 592). Viewing child play as pure play reinforces the binary of work and play rather than a ‘both/and’ mindset.

The conversation of work and play co-existing amongst children is not new. Hurst (2019) found that the relationship between work and play in Australian schools is complex and not a simple binary where play often includes work-like activities. Wing (1995) discovered that first and second-grade pupils felt both enjoyment and pressure when their teacher urged them to complete the colouring assignment. In the case of child influencers, media spaces argue that working for brands deprives them of their childhood (Latifi, 2024). Nevertheless, work is a typical childhood activity that contributes to the development of children (Bourdillon, 2013). Participating in work-like activities can boost children’s confidence, provide learning opportunities, and contribute financially to their households (Sabates-Wheeler & Sumberg, 2022). Child work such as cooking, housekeeping, or caring for family members can offer personal and social benefits (Bourdillon & Carothers, 2019).

Associating children with work can spark controversy in political and media spaces. The common belief is that to protect children, they must be kept from employment until a particular age (Bourdillon, 2006). This may explain why parents of child content creators often claim their child is playing rather than working (Masterson, 2020). The terms ‘work’ and ‘labour’ are often used interchangeably but have different meanings. Karl Marx distinguishes work as a free, vital activity for all societies, while labour is a purposeful, value-creating activity where the worker loses ownership of production and must sell

their labour power (Marx, 1867). The sale of labour power is the commodification of labour, where workers exchange their ability to work for a commodity from the capitalist. Marx argues that when labour becomes a commodity, it results in the alienation of workers from their work processes (Ollman, 1976). Exploitation and alienation are closely related, with alienation being both a condition and a result of exploitation. This is a fundamental aspect of capitalism (Fuchs & Fisher, 2015).

People who produce content and upload it on social media are involved in labour in the capitalist economy (Paakkari et al., 2019). The process of commodification is present in the digital capitalist system, activating alienation for content creators on YouTube (Bakioğlu, 2024). While YouTube allows content producers to make money, interact with their audience, and express their creativity, the creators are also subject to algorithmic systems and laws of the platform (Bakioğlu, 2024). Digital labour exploitation arises when YouTube gathers and manipulates user data to provide personalised content (Ding & Chai, 2023). Child toy unboxing videos are popular on YouTube Kids, a leading platform for children. However, children creating these videos depend on YouTube's digital systems, which can involve the exploitation of digital labour. Therefore, child toy unboxing videos can be considered as a form of labour for these types of children.

The term 'child labour' denotes the exploitation of children, depriving them of their childhood, education, and development (Kaur & Byard, 2021). Essentially, child labour is harmful to the physical and mental development of the child (International Labour Organisation, 2013). Like traditional child performers, children in the social media space are exposed to risks such as financial vulnerability, health hazards and extreme loss of privacy (Masterson, 2020). Yet existing child labour laws do not perceive child influencers as child labourers (Winckler, 2022), despite their time and effort in content creation are essentially forms of labour (Bakioğlu, 2024). While influencer work may not carry hazards or immediate dangers compared to children working in mines or sweatshops, there are potential long-term harmful effects of children being in the public eye (Bakioğlu, 2024). This reinforces the notion that contemporary child labour manifests in this new form of child labour (Masterson, 2020).

The authenticity of play adds to the tension of labour and play, revealing a transversal paradox. De Veirman et al. (2019) claims 'the influencers does not pretend to play, and have fun with toys, he/she really does' (p. 5). However, toy unboxing content often has a 'staged' aspect as advertisers control the child influencer's content (De Veirman et al., 2019). Despite this, children genuinely derive excitement from the toys they promote (Choi, 2023). Child influencers need to satisfy advertisers' expectations by following scripts, meeting campaign deadlines and getting approvals from brands. The paradox of authenticity in play shows genuine enjoyment in toy unboxing, creating an appearance of authenticity. However, the authenticity of play is entangled with commercial interests and parents managing their child's authenticity towards followers (Van den Abeele et al., 2024). This orchestrated spontaneity of sponsored child play could be cultivated from children wanting to meet parental demands, which leads to emotional labour. Emotional labour is the process of modifying one's feelings and expressions to match the mental and emotional requirements of a work or setting (Morris & Feldman, 1996).

In digital capitalism, child toy unboxing blurs the conventional boundaries of traditional child labour, operating in a realm that defies easy categorisation as purely labour or play. To better understand the possibility of play and labour co-existing, it is necessary to

explore the digital labour realm and how it may make sense for child toy unboxers' practices.

### ***Playbour***

Digital labour is concealed as play labour (Fumagalli et al., 2018). Playbour, the merging of 'play' and 'labour', is an online activity that is simultaneously fun and work (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013). To illustrate, gamers who modify games ('modding') are involved in unpaid labour that is still considered a leisure activity (Kücklich, 2005). Nevertheless, modders contributing labour for gaming firms do not profit from it (Hjorth, 2018), revealing the exploitative nature of digital labour in the gaming industry. Playbour thus presents a paradox since modders may become empowered through their work while simultaneously being exploited. As Playbour is primarily voluntarily given and unwaged (Terranova, 2000), when applied to child toy unboxers, it leaves an unresolved dilemma – how can strategies be developed that foster empowerment and, at the same time, protect child content creators from exploitation?

Traditional definitions of Playbour highlight secrecy, instability, and unpaid labour (Kücklich, 2005). In recent years, the concept has become increasingly applicable to content creators on social media platforms (Törhönen et al., 2019), who earn money by creating content online. However, applying Playbour to child toy unboxers proves complex due to the intricacies of 'child labour', parental involvement, lack of financial protection, and absence of the child's legal consent as an influencer. Unlike traditional Playbour definitions emphasising corporate gains from modders' activities (Kücklich, 2005), child toy unboxers and their families often directly benefit from sponsorship deals. While Playbour is an illustrative example of the inherent tension of work, labour and play, Playbour simplifies the complexities of child toy unboxers. It helps capture the paradoxical tension when adults consciously engage in such activities and expose the concept's limitations for child influencers.

Adopting a 'learning to live with the paradox' mindset (Vafeas & Hughes, 2020, p. 597) entails developing a synergistic response that reconciles opposing pressures and fulfils competing needs (W. K. Smith & Lewis, 2011). This approach preserves the unique values of play and labour, achieving synergy by 'coordinating distinct contradictory elements in ways that are mutually advantageous' (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2017, p. 324). Applying this insight to our core premise, achieving a balance between protection and empowerment for child toy unboxers demands a nuanced understanding of labour and play that embraces the intricacies of being a child influencer. Innovation, characterised by tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions (Lewis et al., 2002), presents opportunities for creative solutions when stakeholders embrace the 'paradox mindset', which could contribute to effective management for safeguarding children's digital well-being (Yap & Lim, 2023).

Creative solutions in paradox management highlight the need for research on strategies to help parents embrace the dual role of child toy unboxers. The debate on 'child labour' often contrasts concerns about education with research indicating that 'work' does not always impede education (Edmonds, 2008). Exploring how play-labour practices might improve children's education offers a promising avenue for further study. In sum, viewing play and labour as being incompatible misses the complexities of the child influencer industry. Instead of an 'either/or' decision, future scholars should adopt

a paradox lens to explore the inherent tension in this dynamic. Acknowledging the limited understanding of the labour-play conflict for child toy unboxers, we encourage scholars to explore strategies for navigating this paradox, as outlined in [Table 2](#).

## **Paradox 2: autonomy and control**

Van den Abeele et al. (2024) found a parental authenticity paradox in influential children with highly controlling parents, revealing tensions between the child's desired content and what their parents posted. This reveals the genuineness of creator authenticity (Abidin, 2017) and the tension between the child's autonomy and parents' control in sponsored content creation. We build on Van den Abeele et al. (2024) work and present the 'autonomy and control' paradox. The opposition factor is shown as the child's need for independence and self-expression conflicting with the necessity of parental or guardian oversight and regulation. Moving beyond authenticity, we identify how a child's overall autonomy is directed by the parent's control, presenting a critical dimension of the autonomy-control paradox, seeming 'absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously' (Lewis, 2000, p. 760). Parents curate social media accounts for children under 13, with parents responsible for cultivating their influential children online by producing, posting, and supervising content (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020). Advertisers do not directly engage with child influencers; it is the responsibility of the parents. This form of content creation occurring in the child's home under parental supervision raises questions about parental autonomy (Masterson, 2020). Interdependence is when opposing elements must be inextricably related (Lewis, 2000). Therefore, the child's ability to create sponsored content relies on a balance between their expression, need for independence and boundaries set by their parents. Even if a temporary solution is established, such as agreeing on certain boundaries or decision-making processes, autonomy-control tension may resurface in other scenarios (producing of content, privacy settings, brand collaborations), suggesting the persistent nature of the paradox (W. K. Smith & Lewis, 2011). We advocate that child toy unboxers and their parents face the paradox of autonomy and control. Further research is needed to explore ways for involved actors to thrive in this tension.

## ***Power imbalance***

The power imbalance between child influencers and their parents presents the child's autonomy and parental control paradox. This relationship is further complicated by the paradox of Playbour, which typically focuses on individual content providers rather than the collaborative efforts of child influencers and their parents with varying power and motivation. Parental support is essential for a child to become an influential star, highlighting the motivational complexity and dependency (Harman et al., 2021). Winckler (2022) emphasises that child influencers cannot operate without parental involvement, as parents manage most behind-the-scenes aspects of content creation. This involvement may extend to parents appearing in videos alongside their children. Balancing parents' responsibilities and the needs of their children poses a challenge for legislators, considering parents' rights as to how they raise their children (Jayroe, 2024). Despite legal protection for parental freedom in the United States Constitution, there is limited

**Table 2.** Future research agenda for paradox 1.

Gaps & Opportunities	Research directions
Insights into the intricate dynamics that underpin the relationship between labour and play within the sponsored child toy unboxing industry.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What are the nature and dynamics surrounding ‘exploitation/empowerment’ duality associated with child toy content creation?</li> <li>● How can paradoxical thinking disentangle the opposing perspectives of labour and play concerning child toy unboxing?</li> <li>● What shapes the contradictory psychological needs (i.e. competence, relatedness, and autonomy) co-produced by child influencers and parents as they navigate tensions between labour and play?</li> <li>● How can parents and child influencers deal with motivational tensions caused by the labour-play paradox in sponsored toy content creation?</li> </ul>
Exploring the role of authenticity in child toy unboxing and its long-term impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How do child influencers balance authentic play with the scripted requirements of sponsored toy unboxing videos?</li> <li>● How do child influencers perceive and experience the paradox of genuine enjoyment and commercial obligations, and how does this impact their emotional labour?</li> <li>● What are the long-term effects of balancing authenticity and commercial interests on the cognitive, emotional, and social development of child toy unboxers?</li> </ul>
Balancing the dynamic between parental involvement and child influencer within the paradox of labour and play.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What parental mediation tactics or negotiations can be used in the lives of child toy unboxers to maintain a balanced labour-play dynamic?</li> <li>● How can parents and children negotiate and create boundaries to preserve a virtuous cycle of labour-play?</li> <li>● What strategies can be employed by parents and child influencers to manage the potential stressors associated with simultaneous engagement in labour and play?</li> <li>● How are perceptions and practices related to labour and play shaped by diverse cultural contexts for both parents and child toy unboxers?</li> </ul>
Labour-play tensions associated with sponsored toy content creation practices and its influence on the educational journey of child influencers and their viewers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How do the conflicts between labour and play affect child content creators’ educational experiences and learning processes?</li> <li>● What are the possible measures to mitigate the influence of sponsored content creation duties on a child’s participation in conventional educational pursuits?</li> <li>● How can child toy unboxers effectively manage the opposing demands of labour and play while balancing educational pursuits?</li> <li>● How might child toy unboxers positively influence their viewers’ educational experience through their sponsored content, considering the labour-play tensions underpinning content creation practices?</li> </ul>
Investigate the long-term impact of engaging in the tension of labour and play on the well-being of influential children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How can understanding the dynamics surrounding the conflicting demands between labour and play contribute to child influencers’ digital well-being?</li> <li>● When does engagement in both labour and play activities foster positive versus adverse long-term well-being outcomes for the child influencers?</li> <li>● How can stakeholders, such as parents, companies, and platforms, collaborate to balance labour and play for child toy unboxers’ well-being?</li> </ul>

academic attention on the social implications and conflicts at the intersection of constitutional rights, parental authority, and online information sharing in the context of child influencers. Children are left in the hands of their parents, who manage their commercial success. This creates a complex dynamic between parental responsibilities and the child's monetary offering, presenting a power imbalance.

Parents must guarantee their child fulfils advertising obligations, using play as a strategy to achieve serious goals (Statler et al., 2011). Within the socially constructed realm of child toy unboxing, where fun and labour merge, children create content often directed by parents and advertisers to attract viewers and generate income. This creates a trade-off between attaining economic (monetary rewards) and social (building followers and advertiser relationships) goals (Berti & Cunha, 2023). Play is thus intentionally transformed into a consumeristic act. This intent, driven by parents' efforts to meet advertiser demands, may impact the child's motivation for content creation and the authenticity of their engagement (Statler et al., 2011).

Power imbalance between child influencers and their parents raises important considerations. As children grow, they become more aware of their digital presence while still being managed by their parents, raising questions about their true agency. This dependency creates a top-down relationship from parent to child (De Mol & Buysse, 2008). Unfortunately, instances of exploitation and abuse, such as those seen in family vlogging channels like 'DaddyOFive' and 'FamilyOFive', highlight how excessive parental authority can harm children's autonomy and well-being (John, 2021).

### **Autonomy**

Whilst parents play a crucial role in shaping their child's online presence, ultimately, the child's image often drives product sales (McGinnis, 2022). Though Van den Abeele et al. (2024) explain how parents' commercial interest may conflict with the child's desire for authenticity, the child's monetary contribution reverses the traditional parent-child power structure where parents may feel justified by exerting more control. A mother of three child influencers told WIRED about her influential children, 'If there's days they're totally not into it, they don't have to be ... Unless it's paid. Then they have to be there. We always have lollipops on those days' (Ellis, 2019). This conditional autonomy contradicts genuine autonomy, suggesting that choice may be influenced by advertisers or personal obligations rather than the child's preferences alone. This complexity suggests that children need parental assistance to exercise their freedom of expression, which is a child's right (van der Hof et al., 2019), emphasising the unique co-creative, mutual dependence relationship between child influencers and their parents. While parental control is recognised, future research should explore how child influencers' autonomy can be preserved. Furthermore, exploring the potentially conflicting motivations driving parents and child influencers is warranted. The parent-child relationship often resembles a power contest (Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990), with parents generally wielding more authority, though influence can operate from both ends (Bugental & Happaney, 2000). With few policies designed to protect child influencers or grant them a legal voice when parental control is involved, this paradox illuminates the dynamic power shift between the two players, displaying the fluidity of sponsored toy unboxing practices. Table 3 outlines potential research avenues related to Paradox 2.

**Table 3.** Future research agenda for paradox 2.

Gaps & Opportunities	Research directions
Insights into the nuances of the paradox of autonomy and control in child toy unboxing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What ethical considerations arise from the paradox of a child's autonomy and parental control in monetised toy unboxing content?</li> <li>• What are the long-term psychological effects on child toy unboxers who experience varying degrees of autonomy and control in their sponsored toy unboxing content?</li> <li>• What strategies can be employed to reconcile the paradox of autonomy and control in sponsored toy unboxing?</li> </ul>
Examining motivational conflicts arising from power dynamics inherent in the child toy unboxing space and the interdependence between child influencers and their parents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do children's motivations for engaging in sponsored toy unboxing differ from those of their parents, and if so, what are the distinctions?</li> <li>• How do parents manage power dynamics and conflicts when co-creating with their influential children, and how does this management influence their child's engagement in sponsored content creation?</li> <li>• What impact does the power imbalance in the child influencer space have on the authenticity of sponsored child content creation?</li> <li>• How does the interdependence between child influencers and their parents affect the decision-making process and their motivations to engage in toy unboxing activities?</li> <li>• How can child content creators be protected without compromising parental autonomy?</li> <li>• What are effective strategies to support child influencers and parents in co-creating content effectively?</li> <li>• How can understanding the power dynamics in child toy unboxing contribute to developing ethical guidelines and best practices for the industry?</li> </ul>
Legal and regulatory ambiguity concerning child content creation and parental responsibilities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent do legal and regulatory ambiguities pose challenges for parents and guardians managing child influencers in complying with content creation guidelines?</li> <li>• What are the potential risks and consequences for child influencers and their parents in the absence of clear legal guidelines in the child content creation space?</li> <li>• What gaps exist in the current legal framework designed to protect the well-being and interests of child influencers?</li> <li>• How can policymakers create an effective legal framework that includes the interests of child influencers, parents, and the larger online community?</li> </ul>

### Paradox 3: privacy and online success

Paradox three involves the interplay between privacy and online success, which entails balancing personal boundaries with the need for public exposure to achieve online success. The openness for success and privacy for the safety of the child content creator is not simply a tension, but they are mutually exclusive. When a child unboxer shares more to gain popularity, their privacy is compromised, leading to online risk. Alternatively, maintaining privacy hampers the level of openness needed for online success. This creates a paradox described by Lewis (2000), where privacy and online success make sense on their own but seem inherently incompatible when pursued simultaneously. Paradox three reveals the ethical challenge for parents, making it a practical dilemma for vulnerable creators.



The privacy and online success paradox is built from the conflict between the online vulnerability of child content creators and the friction between parental attitudes and actions, creating a gap in sharenting (Ní Bhroin et al., 2022), known as the privacy paradox (Norberg et al., 2007). This paradox exists because parents have a dual duty to safeguard their child's privacy while sharing information that could compromise it (Cino & Formenti, 2021). Although typically applied to personal information disclosure (Hunter & Taylor, 2020), the privacy dilemma is subtly expressed in sharenting (Fox et al., 2022). This practice, involves parents sharing child-centric content, including stories, images, and videos, on social media platforms (Steinberg, 2016). Child content creator practices represent a profitable type of sharenting where children promote their talents, services, and products (Holiday et al., 2022). However, concerns often arise concerning children's privacy (Feller & Burroughs, 2022). While sharenting is a contemporary research topic that often emphasises concerns for children, we lack knowledge in understanding the vulnerability of children in the influencer industry (Van den Abeele et al., 2023). A critical inquiry is how the privacy and online success paradox amplifies the vulnerability of children, prompting analyses into its repercussions on children's well-being in the digital sphere. Gaining insights into the intricate dynamics, such as the vulnerability and authenticity of the paradox within the framework of child influencer marketing, becomes crucial.

### ***Vulnerability and authenticity***

Children, as global citizens and consumers, are particularly vulnerable in marketing contexts (Spotswood & Nairn, 2016). Vulnerability, defined as susceptibility to harm (N. C. Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997), is conceptually distinct from risk; it is a manifestation of risk (Baker, 2009). Children are more prone to transitory situational-based vulnerability compared to adults (Kennedy et al., 2019), making them more prone to online risks as they explore the Internet (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009).

Parents commercialising their child's images, with or without consent, raises ethical concerns. This practice introduces a conflict between the child's best interests and privacy protection, reflecting an unbalanced power dynamic (e.g.: paradox two – autonomy and control paradox) (Barnes & Potter, 2021). Children often have limited control over how parents use their personal information (Steinberg, 2016), and parental promotion of their child's activities online can inadvertently harm them by compromising their privacy (Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2022). Parents face a conflict between preserving their child's online privacy and the desire to share content on social media (Gligorijević, 2019). While parents of a child toy unboxer could safeguard personal information by creating a brand-like enterprise separate from the child's offline identity (see Archer, 2019), posting the child influencer's face still risks privacy invasions (Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2022). Irrespective of the parent's intentional efforts to maintain privacy, the child is exposed to potential risks. In fact, the separation between children's online and offline identities can have a detrimental impact on a child's future well-being (Van den Abeele et al., 2024).

Perceived authenticity, such as sharing intimate details, serves as a catalyst for content creators' success (Khamis et al., 2017). Personal details such as the child's real name, age and day-to-day activities are used to retain their authenticity and build their social influence (Van den Abeele et al., 2024). However, authenticity's priority can threaten privacy for child content creators, enhancing vulnerability. Do the benefits of being

online, such as sponsorship offers and satisfying followers' wishes, outweigh the cost of privacy violations? The privacy openness paradox discusses the conflict faced by 'momfluencers' (influential mothers on social media sites sharing their experiences of motherhood) who seek to safeguard their children's privacy while also capitalising on the advantages of sharing their lives on social media (Van den Abeele et al., 2023). In contrast, the privacy and online success paradox shifts the focus to child influencers who actively pursue success online, leading to more challenging collaborative decision-making between parents and the child influencer. The child's growing role and autonomy further complicates the balance between maintaining privacy and success.

Monetising child influencer content presents a double-edged sword regarding online safety. The active online presence of child influencers is crucial for attracting brand attention and opportunities. However, fragmented protections for child influencers expose them to online risks. There is a pressing need for upgraded legislation addressing online privacy for children (Prakash & Aswathy, 2019). As child content creators engage in monetised sharenting, they learn to become socialising agents. Yet, through consumer socialisation, children become more vulnerable, particularly during their initial stages as consumers (Kennedy et al., 2019).

Current literature lacks an understanding of the vulnerability of children in marketing (Kennedy et al., 2019), particularly regarding sharenting and privacy concerns. This knowledge gap underscores the need to consider children as vulnerable producers, especially in the privacy paradox and privacy openness dilemma. While parents must protect their children, government bodies must establish appropriate policies and legislation (Venis, 2022). Notably, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act lacks comprehensive policies for children in sponsored content, making it imperative for researchers to investigate the vulnerability of child producers and their role in sponsored sharenting and privacy paradoxes. Such insights, summarised in Table 4, can guide the development of policies to navigate the privacy and online success paradox for child toy unboxers effectively.

## Theoretical implications

This conceptual article extends the emerging research on child influencer marketing by introducing new perspectives and theoretical considerations that bring forth a more nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in child toy unboxing. Armed with this knowledge, we lay a theoretical foundation that benefits scholars and practitioners, fostering an enriched dialogue that propels the field forward.

Our contributions are threefold. First, we identify paradoxes that manifest for child toy unboxers using paradox theory to illuminate the nuanced practices that child toy unboxers undertake. Despite child content creators' influential role in contemporary marketing to children, current studies tend to have descriptive analysis of child influencers or largely call for the advancement of current regulations. Though these research pieces are important in building our understanding of child influencer marketing, we instead join the trend of not only investigating the practices of child toy unboxers but also exploring their relationship with their parents, presenting an additional stakeholder.

As discussed earlier, the major themes in the current literature focus on policy concerns, impacts on food-sponsored content by child influencers and parents' understanding of child-sponsored content. Responding to De Veirman et al. (2019) call for research

**Table 4.** Future research agenda for paradox 3.

Gaps & Opportunities	Research directions
Investigate how the actors in the child toy unboxing system, rely on and interact with one another, contribute to the appearance of the privacy paradox.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How do child content creators, parents, platforms, advertisers, and regulators interact and influence each other concerning the privacy paradox?</li> <li>● How do partnerships among stakeholders in the child influencer system influence the privacy boundaries of child influencers?</li> <li>● How can the child influencer ecosystem be restructured to mitigate the privacy paradox and better protect the interests of child content creators?</li> <li>● In what ways do the collaborative interactions between players in the child influencer industry impact the creation of the privacy paradox?</li> <li>● How can stakeholders collaborate to address the privacy paradox in child influencer marketing?</li> <li>● How do stakeholders' views on privacy, ethical considerations, and legal obligations vary, and how do these differences contribute to the privacy paradox within the child influencer ecosystem?</li> </ul>
Examine how various stakeholders influence the privacy paradox and develop strategies for navigating it while addressing child vulnerability in the realm of child toy unboxers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How do parents of child influencers balance between sharing their influential children's lives and ensuring their privacy?</li> <li>● In what ways do brands and advertisers influence the privacy paradox within the child influencer system?</li> <li>● What is the role of audience engagement in shaping the privacy paradox for child influencers?</li> <li>● What are effective strategies for navigating the privacy paradox in the domain of child influencers while addressing potential issues related to child vulnerability?</li> <li>● What role can social marketing campaigns play in developing effective strategies for navigating the privacy paradox while prioritising child influencers' well-being?</li> <li>● What are the ethical and legal frameworks that guide strategies for addressing the privacy paradox in the child influencer domain?</li> </ul>
Investigating the effects of vulnerability and the privacy paradox on the socialisation of child toy unboxers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How are child toy unboxers socialised, and how do these experiences impact their vulnerability levels?</li> <li>● How can studying child toy unboxers' socialisation help address vulnerability and privacy issues in the child influencer domain?</li> <li>● How does the vulnerability and privacy paradox influence child toy unboxers' attitudes, behaviours, and coping mechanisms during socialisation?</li> </ul>
Explore how policies or government bodies can empower and protect child content creators in their online practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How can privacy policies be reformed to enhance the online well-being of child toy unboxers and reduce their vulnerability?</li> <li>● What legal, technological and normative frameworks are necessary to achieve a harmonious balance between empowerment and protection within the child influencer industry?</li> <li>● How do various actors at micro, meso and/or macro levels contribute to privacy policy intervention in the child influencer industry?</li> <li>● What factors shape the involvement and contributions of various actors in the planning and implementing privacy policies?</li> </ul>

on child content creators, we build on the work of Nicoll and Nansen (2018) that uncovered toy unboxers' play performances are influenced by the idea of 'mimesis', blending play and commerce within unboxing videos. What sets this paper apart is our application of paradox theory to capture the dualist perspective of child toy unboxer practices, unlike Masterson's (2020) paper that focuses on child influencers as simply 'working'. The dualist perspective is also applied in paradox two. Building on the work of the parental authenticity paradox (Van den Abeele et al., 2024), we add a layer to examine the specific dynamics at play, including the co-creative and mutual dependency relationship between parents and child influencers. The autonomy and control paradox suggests that authenticity is not primarily about the content, but rather about the tension of who controls the content. Paradox two remains unresolved because it is intrinsic to the roles and activities of a child toy unboxer, requiring continuous balancing and negotiation. Similarly, paradox three (privacy and online success) extends the work on the privacy paradox and the privacy openness paradox, introducing a new dimension of economic incentive-driven and dual motivations of protection and achievement.

Second, we offer theoretical insights into all three paradoxes manifesting in the child toy unboxing world. This enriches our understanding of the challenges faced by child content creators that potentially harm their welfare. By highlighting the limitations in the current understanding of these paradoxes and proposing a research agenda to address these gaps, we aim to promote an investigation into these tensions rather than trying to eliminate them (Lewis, 2000). Exploring the paradoxical experiences is crucial for meaningful contributions to the ongoing discourse in child influencer marketing literature, specifically child toy unboxers.

Thirdly, we unveil a key stakeholder perpetuating the existence of the child toy unboxer system: parents. While this research is not the first to highlight the important role of parents, it builds on existing work by providing a comprehensive theoretical investigation of the relationships between child content creators and their parents in the context of toy unboxing.

Our paper uncovers the intricate power dynamics that drive the paradoxical tensions, including those related to labour-play, autonomy-control, and privacy-online success. By reviewing these dynamics, we offer a multifaceted interpretation that contributes to the complex interplay of child content creation. The insights presented shed light on previously overlooked aspects of child influencer marketing, enriching the discourse and providing new perspectives on the role of parents and children in the digital economy.

## **Methodological consideration**

A diverse range of methodological approaches is imperative to bolster the research agenda focused on child toy unboxers. Like Fowler and Thomas (2023), we argue for interpretive methods that facilitate in-depth insights into the child influencer phenomenon, encompassing their practices and underlying motivations. While emphasising interpretive research, we do not intend to downplay the importance of quantitative approaches. In this section, we offer some methodological ideas for future scholarship. The recommendations provided are not exhaustive but rather serve as a starting point.

Viewing child content creation practice as a social and cultural phenomenon can advance our understanding of child influencer marketing. We suggest ethnography, a methodology that studies the meaning, behaviours, languages, and interactions among individuals in a culture-sharing group (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Ethnographic studies involving in-depth observations where researchers are immersed in the real-world culture of child content creators can shed light on questions such as: How are child toy unboxers socialised, and how do these experiences impact their vulnerability levels? As observations are a core part of ethnography, being an observer-as-participant, where researchers collect observational data which are then used to develop (or triangulate with) in-depth interviews, would be useful. Video ethnography is where participants share their everyday lives performatively and co-document them being recorded by a camera in a natural setting (Empson & Conus, 2021). Video ethnography proves ideal for capturing an uninterrupted way of streaming information and has the potential to reveal 'reality' and hidden 'truths' of participants' experiences. This approach is particularly valuable for exploring research questions such as: What is the role of audience engagement in shaping the privacy paradox for child influencers?

A longitudinal study would be ideal for investigating the long-term implications of the labour-play paradox on the well-being of child toy unboxers. Timelines, participant diaries, and storytelling methodologies can provide in-depth temporal data and individual narratives that are produced within societal structures and processes (Crivello, 2017). While children aged 3–6 can express their own perspectives and ideas about their surroundings and outlook, interviewing children can be complex and challenging (Einarsdóttir, 2007). Researchers should consider the power dynamics between children and parents, as parental presence can prevent children's voices from being heard in the interviews. To encourage children to articulate themselves freely, opportunities for their voices to be heard and creative research methodologies should be implemented. Projective techniques, such as picture drawings, use of dolls, and other visual methods, can be employed to retrieve information from children's subconscious minds that may not emerge directly through interviews (Cameron, 2014). Projective storytelling, a way to tap into deeper realities by exploring the symbolism conveyed by stories, could be an appropriate method for child influencers to share their experiences.

Mixed methods research, incorporating psychophysiological methods (e.g. eye tracking system, facial electromyography analysis, skin conductance) into an ethnographic study to obtain objective measures of participants' emotions and spontaneous responses, can offer a deep and broad understanding that a single approach cannot provide (Li et al., 2018). Future research could integrate sentiment analytics (i.e. application of machine learning capabilities to extract massive textual data) with experimental designed studies to investigate consumer sentiments towards child influencer phenomenon.

Process-oriented theorisation would be appropriate for research questions that explore the socialisation process underpinning child content creation. Process theorisation is about 'how and why things emerge, develop, grow or terminate over time', and can capture an in-depth, multi-layered qualitative data set that identifies the interconnections between historical events, activities, and choices (Giesler & Thompson, 2016, p. 498). Scholars could collect data (e.g. interviews, social media content, diaries) in addition to meso-level data from sources including institutional documents, samples of contracts, influencer media leaflets from toy advertisers, and talent and creative agencies.

Discourse analysis can be an alternative to the traditional narrative and/or thematic analysis. The purpose of seeking to understand how discourse affects the meaning of a sentence is explored in both spoken and written language in their social and psychological contexts (Jørgensen & Philips, 2002). Discourse analysis is useful in seeing how meanings are structured and how people create, preserve, and understand social reality (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Discourse analysis would be useful for unpacking often taken-for-granted family practices and their interplay with child influencer practices.

## Future research

A conversation on child influencers is necessary and timely since child influencer marketing 'is here to stay' (Fishbein, 2022, p. 155). We acknowledge that conceptual pieces have limitations despite their critical role in stimulating new thinking that can advance current theorisation. We call for further research to explore how marketers could embrace paradoxes in the context of child toy unboxers. We observed the need for a clear theoretical foundation to explain the child influencer phenomenon and practices and its paradoxes. This theoretical shortcoming may stem from the current fragmented research scattered across various fields. We call for future work to build a solid theoretical framework that integrates the divided literature on child influencers and thoughtful methodological considerations.

We also advocate for expert insights that focus on policies and the legal framework governing child content creation. Participation with consultations with policymakers and regulatory experts is essential, providing an opportunity to tap into their wealth of knowledge and experience. Collaborating with these professionals enhances our understanding of the intricacies surrounding child content creation.

In closing, pursuing a research agenda on paradoxes associated with child influencer marketing is vital. Our conceptual investigation lays a foundation for ongoing research and stimulates new thinking around sponsored child content creation. One challenge is that current scholarship in this area remains siloed within specific disciplines. The field needs to progress using an interdisciplinary approach that involves synergistic integration and collaboration between various schools of thought. Our theoretical work can serve as a springboard for future research to continue unboxing the controversial phenomenon of child influencers.

## Note

1. Descriptive study refers to an approach that concentrated on describing occurrences, traits, or trends without attempting to establish casual linkages.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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