

Financially priceless: Exploring child-centred content creation

Introduction

Digital platforms change the landscape of work in myriad ways. They create new opportunities for monetisation, whether it's converting a family vehicle into a taxi via Uber, selling excess clothing from an overflowing closet on Vinted, or renting out a flat while on holiday on Airbnb. Each of these changes our relationship to the things we have and how we value them as assets. Suddenly, buying the latest fashions is not a one-off purchase but an investment in an item with resale value. In a similar fashion, social media platforms create new streams of income through monetised content in areas like lifestyle, hobbies, food, and just about any area one can think of. However, once monetised, genres of content creation invariably impact practices, alter the value structures surrounding them, and force us to rethink our relationships.

Placing a desire to monetise our idle assets, our time, and our lives in the context of 21st-century work points to a shift toward digital hustling as a form of entrepreneurship. Hustling is the constant pragmatic search for alternative structures of digital opportunities outside of formal employment (Thieme, 2018). As an approach to economic survival, hustling has served as a way of life for various groups, often from minority backgrounds, who do what they need to get by (Watkins, 2019). Often, hustling conjures images of the type of quasi-legal activity that takes place in grey areas of the economy (Duneier, 2000), such as pool room hustling (Polsky, 1967), drug dealing (Bourgois, 2003; Whyte, 1943) and prostitution (Dalla, 2006). However, scholars are increasingly using the term to denote an approach to work in contexts where opportunities for income generation are limited or highly uncertain, which is an alternative way to navigate through self-driven entrepreneurial activity (Anwar et al., 2023; Thieme, 2013, 2018). In this brief research-in-progress piece, I explore one form of digital hustling, focusing on content creators and children. I do this to explore precisely the question raised above: how content creators illustrate various values around children when monetising them online.

Children, from the time they are in utero, are valuable for social media content, reliably driving high engagement and revenue. For instance, publicist-turned-reality star Lindsey Hubbard banked 28,000 USD from a paid Instagram partnership with Clearblue to announce her first pregnancy (Cardoza, 2024). Justifying her decision, she clarified, *"Why not? I'm gonna make the announcement, anyway, why not make money from it? [...] This is how I make my money. I'm not doing PR anymore; I'm not sitting behind a desk"*. This is the reality of hustling as a content creator, where pregnancy announcements, ultrasounds, births, and parenting tap into relatable themes of hope, vulnerability, and family, thereby increasing engagement and income. In the same month as her announcement, Hubbard gained 37,000 followers, steadily increasing her following until and following the birth of her daughter in December. Children on social media are powerful stories; they create ongoing narratives, importantly drawing in audiences' attention and engagement.

At the same time, this sudden financial potential raises critical questions about how content creators are making decisions about monetisation of their children in a social media age. The question Hubbard poses above, *'why not make money from it?'* acknowledges that financial decision-making was implicit in her practice as a soon-to-be parent. For someone with a significant social media presence, announcing her pregnancy on Instagram was inevitable. There is an understanding that doing so brings engagement,

followers and income. Her coming child had monetary value and the ability to earn before it was even born. The question is not *if* she should exploit that income stream but specifically *how*.

This project is very much in its early stages of exploration. It is something I have had on the back burner, bubbling my curiosity for a long time, without fully working through it. This is my first attempt to explore, from a future-of-work perspective, how content creators balance economic and emotional logics when monetising their children online. I am interested in exploring the grey areas and nuances when the logic of modern parenting intersects and conflicts with business decision-making. I have so far relied on desk research, doing online fieldwork in spaces influencers and their critics hang out over the past several years, trying to assess for myself how I would empirically tackle this subject. This draft should be read as a conversation starter, raising critical questions about these new forms of entrepreneurship in the 21st-century digital work.

Theoretical Background

I am taking the outset in Viviana Zelizer's book *Pricing the Priceless Child* (Zelizer, 1994). Her work is a historical-sociological analysis of how the economic and moral value of children in the United States was transformed between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Zelizer shows that children shifted from being viewed as economically useful contributors to family income, e.g., as an additional set of working hands to support and feed the family, to being emotionally "priceless" dependents whose value lay outside the market. This transformation underpinned key institutional changes, including the rise of child labour laws, compulsory schooling, child welfare policies, and new legal frameworks for compensation and insurance. Zelizer's argument is that a growing moral rejection of treating children as economic assets reorganised monetary valuation, rather than eliminating it. Financial transactions involving children persist but are reframed through morally acceptable categories such as protection, care, and love. My point is not to disprove Zelizer's arguments, but more to see the ways social media content creation nuances this, creating a space where children are extremely valuable, both morally and economically, and how content creators are navigating a space where this can come into tension.

Preliminary Findings

In the following, I explore the idea of changing children's values in more depth through two composite vignettes of influencers who monetise their children in different ways (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014). Both centre on American families, a context selected because of its high level of individualism, where costs such as daycare, schooling and healthcare are costs borne by families, leading to an increasing need to hustle for income. While preserving vital details, I fictionalise certain aspects to keep them anonymous. While all the information is obtained in publicly available domains, they have not consented to research in this fashion and thus anonymisation is important.

Kelly: Illness and intellectual property

Kelly is a stay-at-home mom of four living in the rural US. Her oldest son, Lucas, was diagnosed with cancer at the age of four. After two years cancer-free, unfortunately, it returned, leading to his entering hospice and ultimate passing around a year later. Kelly has run social media accounts on Instagram and Facebook associated with her son since his diagnosis, using various monetised activities, including

affiliate marketing, sponsored posts, merchandise sales, Amazon wishlists, and direct payments to the family via Venmo. Her story is sadly not unique and represents an increasing amount of content creation around gravely ill children, existing in a predatory American healthcare environment abundant with personal financial risk.

Kelly's content also highlights the challenge of a family becoming financially dependent on this revenue stream, in which moral narratives coexist with financial concerns. For instance, accompanying a photo of Lucas on a town outing, a wheelchair is captioned with:

"What does it feel like to live with the thought that your child may not wake up again—that the last thing you heard could be their final sound, the last thing you saw their eyes opening, the last expression they ever made? That fear follows us constantly. For the past two days, Lucas has been almost entirely asleep. He isn't in pain, but he is overwhelmingly drained, barely able to hold his eyes open for more than a fleeting moment. Whenever he manages to stir, even briefly, we rush closer and leave him with the words we never want left unsaid: I love you. Always remember that".

The photo, however, is obscured, aggressively watermarked with various phrases, including "no posting without permission!" three times, as well as the link to their official social media profiles, repeated four times. In her post caption, she apologises for the watermarks, citing their necessity due to the increasing amount of "copyright infringement" content being stolen and monetised by someone else. This is not the only post calling out others for using her images. In an Instagram story several months later, she shares a TikTok account that has taken her content and set up a GoFundMe, which has already earned 3,000 USD in donations, asking her followers to report and have it removed. The implications of this policing are explicitly financial. It is her intellectual property and ability to earn income from it that is stolen. However, this must coexist carefully with more dominant emotional arguments, such as the post's caption.

Kelly's content consistently displays a tension between economic and emotional concerns, balancing income generation with the maintenance of dominant moral narratives that portray her child as priceless. For example, another post shows Lucas curled up under a blanket holding a tablet, captioned with "he mostly slept today, but he still wants to add stuff to his (Amazon) wishlist". As critics of Kelly are quick to call out (she is the subject of so-called snark groups online whose sole purpose is to critique influencer practices), she must strike a delicate balance. Those who bemoan her point to the continual financialization of Lucas's illness, such as his adding items to a wishlist or aggressive policing of her image use elsewhere, as morally deplorable, exhibiting a failure to parent her child with love and protection, instead focusing on his earning potential. However, Kelly relies on her content creation to fund the family's lifestyle on a single salary, which directly supports her child's care. This is indeed a difficult position to navigate.

Alana: Hope and simple fixes

Alana originally got into content creation as an infertility blogger, suffering from a combination of medical conditions (endometriosis and adenomyosis, combined with an ovulation disorder) that leave her unlikely to conceive without in vitro fertilisation (IVF). However, Alana is openly opposed to this procedure, citing it as not the right option for her personally. Given her strong Christian faith, many followers speculate that her religious beliefs are a driving factor in that decision, although she does not

openly discuss this. Alana earns her income solely from content creation, with her husband working full-time. Despite that, she has a beautiful, large home in an affluent neighbourhood in Phoenix, AZ. Alana operates in a growing sector of the content-created internet, offering medical advice based on personal experience and engaging in affiliate marketing for various private treatment providers, as well as supplements and other holistic medicines.

During her time trying to conceive, Alana repeatedly monetised the potential of a child, keeping her audiences engaged with a range of natural treatments to target problems, such as uterine infection and microbiome issues, thyroid problems, and inflammation across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube. For instance, she was given paid sponsorship by a private company for fertility vaginal microbiome testing and rinsing during an all-expenses-paid trip to their European headquarters. Promoting the company across multiple channels, she invited her followers to join her on the trip for their own fertility issues.

“Visit the link in my bio on TikTok and fill out the interest form. This collects all your personal details, builds your infertility story for the clinic, and then they will send you a specific plan for your week. From there, you can decide if you want to join the trip with us. Bear in mind the company has a huge waitlist, but they’re going to prioritise us that week and do all our testing while we’re there [...] I understand if you, or maybe your significant other, feel sceptical... It’s a financial commitment and a time commitment, but truly, from what I’ve seen from the company, it’s been such a positive and incredible experience”

This promotional content consistently borrowed images and narratives from Sydney Rae Bass (Sister of singer Jessie James Decker), who, after struggling with infertility for four years, was tested for the common bacterium of ureaplasma. After being treated with two courses of antibiotics, Bass proudly shared how *“after four years of unexplained secondary infertility, I got a positive test 🥰 and am now pregnant!”*. By reusing Bass’s announcement photo in her promotional content, a black and white still of her smiling and clutching her rounded belly, Alana sells the treatment trip through the dream of pregnancy, and in turn, a child. She directly states that the trip has given her *“A new sense of hope. Hearing stories where the fix is really simple!”*, a repeated theme in Alana’s content when trying a new treatment. With a price tag of 1,637 USD per person for 7 days, excluding flights and the fertility treatment itself, and a two-week deadline to decide on attendance, her content relies on an emotional appeal, glossing over the many different causes of infertility she and her followers face, selling a vision of an easy, self-paid fix to complex problems and the pursuit of the priceless child. Companies, such as the one Alana promoted, are a grey area in infertility treatment. Operating outside of public healthcare systems, they use slogans such as *“therapeutic options for couples with recurrent miscarriages and unexplained infertility”* through various forms of testing, much of which is only vaguely evidence-based, and/or only useful for specific diagnoses. With paid plans, those struggling with infertility, often finding their options exhausted elsewhere, can buy their way into new diagnostic avenues, with the potential hope of an easy success.

While the potential of children was the mainstay of Alana’s content for many years, drawing followers through iterations of failed cycles and alternative treatments, suddenly, in 2024, Alana declared she was no longer trying to conceive and was pursuing adoption instead. Within a few short months, Alana was the proud mother of a four-week-old baby girl, obtained through a high-cost Christian adoption agency with infant placement times far quicker than through conventional services. Her content now centres

heavily on her children, their medical issues, developmental milestones and everyday lives. Since the announcement of her adoption and the placement of her daughter, her followers have only grown.

Closing Note

The aim of these vignettes is not to condemn Kelly or Alana for their practices, although such emotional responses are common. As a reminder, the success of their content does not happen in a vacuum; viewers, sponsors, and others who engage with it contribute to its creation. Simply put, our eyeballs, clicks, and shares are just as implicated in why increasing amounts of content centre on narratives around children, and in some cases, exploitative content. I chose Kelly's case to explore the way she protects her intellectual property, in this case, content about her terminally ill child, from someone else's financial gain, while packing it in a moral understanding that upholds her child not as a financial asset but as priceless. Alana's case, on the other hand, unpacks how hope and the dream of a priceless child justify all means necessary to reach that end, including individual financial choices beyond one's means of living.

While still in its early phases, my plan for this research is to explore this form of child-centred content creation as a form of digital hustling in the internet age. By doing so, we see the complex socio-economic reasons this phenomenon exists now. From neoliberal capitalism in the United States, and the individualisation of risk, creating a reality where exploiting children is a path to economic survival (of which there is certainly a pre-digital history). Building on themes in my previous work, this research also illuminates the correlation between platformisation and the legitimacy of quasi-legal online activities, in which an increasing number of grey-market activities are being made digital. Finally, this research calls attention to the digital ecosystem of apps that render this possible, from social media platforms to crowdfunding sites and financial transfer services like Venmo. In this reality, it becomes easier to reach a sociological explanation why and how this form of hustling has emerged in the present moment.

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