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Lights, Camera, Anxiety: Comparing 1940s Child Stars and Modern Child Vloggers

Family vlogging, or the posting of a family's daily experiences in the form of "video blogs," has rapidly grown as an entertainment medium over the past decade. Of the largest twenty YouTube channels in 2019, *BusinessApps* reported that four were family vlogging channels and that the top earning family vloggers, The ACE Family, earned \$17,500 daily and \$6 million for the year from the views of their 17.7 million subscribers ("YouTube"). With the rapid increase in popularity of family vlogging content over the past three years, many parents, fellow YouTubers, policymakers, and child psychologists have taken on the role of anti-child labor activists to call for the application of Child Entertainment and Labor Laws to YouTube and its family vlogging content. These laws, formally known as the Coogan Laws, were established in 1939 to reserve a child star's financial earnings until they reached adulthood, to limit the number of hours they worked each week, and to protect them from work abuses (such as being given illegal substances, physical abuse, and hyper-sexualization) ("Kidfluencers"). Despite these laws applying to traditional entertainment platforms (including film, theatre, and television) for over 80 years, little progress has been made to implement them on YouTube.

The growing movement advocating for the application of Coogan Laws to the work of child vloggers, or "kidfluencers," continues to emphasize that these minors are too young to understand the consequences of child stardom on YouTube and the potential damage to mental health that accompanies early fame. However, parent vloggers continue to argue that YouTube is unlike conventional entertainment platforms, because child vloggers do not face the same intense

psychological consequences that accompany the hours of training and performing of conventional child stars. To apply Coogan laws to YouTube, it must be discerned that the platform's viability as an entertainment medium matches that of conventional theatre and film. While data compiled by *BusinessApps* in 2020 evidenced that family vloggers gross similar amounts of money to minor filmmakers (typically in the tens of thousands of dollars range), previous literature fails to compare the physical and emotional distresses of family vlogging to that of traditional child stars ("YouTube"). However, evaluations of the most prominent child vloggers and child stars of the 1930s (the Pre-Coogan Law Era) reveals that, despite a lack of physical distresses in "kidfluencers" (when compared to 1930s child stars), both populations experience emotional distresses based on insecure attachment patterns and anxiety from external sources that suggest a necessity for the implementation of Coogan Laws on YouTube.

#### PHYSICAL DISTRESS

Prior to the Coogan Laws protection against strenuous hours of filming and rehearsing in the late 1930s, child stars experienced frequent instances of physical distress related to overworking. According to historical writer and journalist Stephanie Buck, after the studio Metro-Goldwin-Mayer (or MGM) spotted her in 1935, Judy Garland began to show numerous symptoms of bodily fatigue, weight fluctuations, and substance abuse. At the age of thirteen years old, Garland "worked six days per week, sometimes 18-hour shifts of ... singing and dancing" (Buck). Her employers "supplied her with... amphetamine uppers to keep her perky and alert all day" to exploit her and focus on their goal: "to pump out as many movies as possible" (Buck). Buck emphasizes that the pills both provided Garland with energy after grueling hours of work and became a staple in her diet as she sought to lose weight and maintain her youthful appearances later in her career (Buck). Garland's experiences with substance use were the result of both studio pressures to physically achieve a certain thinness and intense, tiresome rehearsal

processes. This evidences the potential for physical fatigue and unhealthy weight standards that accompany film and television (if Coogan Laws are not enforced).

While Garland most notably experienced physical distress, the remarks of fellow 1930s child stars, such as Shirley Temple, indicate intense work environments and long studio hours which likely elicited similar physical effects on the body. In her autobiography, *Child Star*, Temple detailed the performance mentality film executives taught her: “time is money Wasted time means... wasted money. Wasted money means trouble” (Temple, 96). In addition to Garland’s life, Buck also detailed Temple’s experiences working an average of 40 hours per week and 15 hour shifts before she turned 12 in 1940, and she filmed 23 movies during the Great Depression (Buck). These hours are comparable to Garlands lengthy shifts and, given that Temple was also a well-versed dancer, it is likely that she experienced physical fatigue and stress at levels similar to Garland. This further highlights the necessity of Coogan Laws relating to work intensity in the film industry.

Contrary to the experiences of 1930s stars, children participating in vlogging content exhibited virtually no signs of physical distress and do not indicate a need for the specific Coogan Laws that limit the hours that a child star can work on YouTube. By analyzing the ten most recent videos of three prominent family vlogging channels (The ACE Family, Eight Passengers, and The LaBrant Fam), one can see virtually no signs of child vloggers experiencing physical fatigue (including excessive tiredness, irregular sleeping patterns, or frequent irritability). In the ACE Family videos, where 17.7 million subscribers follow the lives of parents Austin and Catherine and children Elle, Steel, and Alaia (all under the age of five), the only evidence of physical tiredness was found in early morning or late evening hours of vlogging (“ACE”). This seems to resemble less instances of fatigue from long hours of filming- as was the case in the 1930s- and more natural, day-to-day sleeping patterns of nightly exhaustion and

morning grogginess. This also appeared to be true in the Eight Passengers channel (where six children with ages ranging from five to sixteen are featured) (“Eight Passengers”). While 1930s child stars were required to rehearse for physically taxing singing, dancing and acting performances, the work of child vloggers is based in their natural, daily interactions. This difference suggests that parent vloggers are valid in claiming that Coogan Laws limiting work intensity are more applicable to conventional theatre and film than vlogging.

Though review of the three most popular vlogging channels’ content revealed that (in terms of physical distress) YouTube is much less viable as an entertainment platform than traditional entertainment mediums, there was one vlog clip that suggested child fatigue. Of all content viewed, slight signs of abnormal fatigue appeared in the LaBrant Fam video, “Why We Haven’t Been Seeing Everleigh as much Recently” (“LaBrant”). In this vlog, the LaBrant parents detail their oldest daughter, seven-year-old Everleigh’s busy competition dance schedule (“LaBrant”). While Everleigh may exhibit signs of physical fatigue in rehearsals, these are more so associated with her competition dance schedule than family vlogging. In most vlogs, Everleigh is not seen dancing or practicing. Therefore, fatigue associated with her dance schedule does not corroborate the conclusion that child vlogs are as physically distressing to children as traditional entertainment platforms.

#### EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

*Attachment Insecurity Pattern.* While child vloggers experienced far fewer physical distresses than Pre-Coogan Era film stars, evidence has revealed that both eras of child stars experience work-related attachment insecurities that lead to emotional distress. In an NCBI study, Psychology Professor Benjamin Hankin of the University of Denver and Psychiatrist Dr. Adabel Lee of the University of Michigan explained that attachment insecurities develop whenever a child becomes either too emotionally attached to a source and cannot operate independently of it

or whenever a child is emotionally neglected by a source (Hankin & Lee). Given that “a significant association [exists] between insecure attachment and depressive symptoms in children,” it is highly likely that attachment insecurities emotionally distress a child (Hankin & Lee). An assessment of two prominent child stars of the 1930s (Elizabeth Taylor and Judy Garland) in comparison to four well-established family vlogging channels (The ACE Family, The LaBrant Family, Eight Passengers, and DaddyOFive) revealed that children of both eras experienced a general, four-step process for developing attachment insecurities (replacement of the parent as the attachment source, neglect or extreme attachment, loss of the source, and emotional distress). This solidifies YouTube’s viability as an entertainment platform in terms of emotional distress.

In 1930s child stars, the insecurity attachment pattern related greatly to physical appearance. In addition to physical distress resulting from ideal body standards, child stars experienced emotional distress that, ultimately, followed the attachment insecurity pattern. For example, Judy Garland entered the first stage of this pattern (replacement of the parent as the attachment source) naturally as she rehearsed with MGM studios. Buck emphasized Garland’s thinness as the mechanism that enabled her to continue to appear childlike (a prerequisite for her to continue performing and her new attachment source). Garland entered stages two and three of the insecurity pattern (neglect of the attachment source and loss of the source) in 1947 whenever fasting and sleeping pills could no longer stunt her womanly frame and MGM promptly labelled her as “too plump for the studio” (Buck). Garland’s later recounts of her child stardom indicated stage four of the attachment insecurity pattern (emotional distress). In an interview in 1968, Garland recounted this trauma and emphasized that “Every day when [she] went to work it was with tears in [her] eyes, resistance in [her] heart and mind” (Buck). Though it is not clear whether her death related to a barbiturate overdose the following year was due to this emotional

distress, Garland's attachment insecurities still emphasize the need for Coogan Laws in the film industry related to substance use and the emotional distresses of being overworked as a child.

In terms of sexualization, the 1930s child stars were far more apt than child vloggers to follow the attachment insecurity pattern. Most notably, stars such as Elizabeth Taylor experienced intense sexualization both on camera and in the press. In her 1965 autobiography *An Informal Memoir*, Taylor emphasized the studio's sexualization of her youth explaining, "I learned how to look sultry and pose provocatively. I developed sex appeal, even though I knew that, somewhere inside, the child had still not completely grown up" (Taylor 68). Here, Taylor emphasizes her own experiences with replacing her parental security with her work and sexualization (step one of the insecurity pattern). According to Brittany Dalton, a Licensed Public Counselor, as "[Taylor] began to realize that it was only her beauty that kept her career going," she became attached (step two) to her sexualization as a mechanism to continue her career (Dalton 36). This manifested in an eventual attachment to her heavily publicized relationships. With the public ending of each relationship, her security as a desirable woman waned (step three). As is congruent with step four of the pattern, Dalton postulates that Taylor's suffered emotional distress from her value being "contingent upon her looks" especially after "her first husband Nicky Hilton....took to beating and abusing her" (Dalton 37). Taylor's experiences with attachment insecurities due to sexualization magnify the potential for the film industry to consequently damage a minor's self-esteem due to early objectification.

The few instances of sexualization of child vloggers followed less of the attachment insecurity pattern, because instances were too infrequent for the children to be defined by such behavior. Instances included the Eight Passengers' oldest daughter, Shari Franke, at age 16 being asked by her mother, while filming a family vlog, to try on a swimsuit in front of the camera or else she "would not be allowed to swim during summer vacation" ("Eight"). Franke was visibly

upset by her mother's insistence, but this was only one instance that was not frequent enough to reach step one of the attachment insecurity pattern (replacing the parent as the attachment source). In another instance in a YouTube video on the ACE Family's channel, Austin McBroom is seen filming his six-year-old daughter, Elle, in a store as she curiously picks up a lollipop shaped like male genitalia. Though he instructs her to put down the lollipop, he continues to laugh and film her as she consumes the candy ("ACE"). Despite McBroom facing backlash over encouraging Elle's unintentionally suggestive actions, the video clip alone is not enough for Elle to replace her parents as the attachment source with sexualization (step one). This indicates that, while child vloggers may experience some instances of hype- sexualization, these events alone do not rival traditional platforms in terms of attachment insecurities related to objectification.

Despite the modern vlogging child not experiencing insecurities related to body standards and sexualization, the attachment insecurity pattern still applies to their processing of negative comments from audience members. Comments on Eight Passengers' daughter Shari Franke's video "RESPONDING TO HATE COMMENTS TWO" such as "Shari [one of the daughters] should diet," and "Abby [another daughter] dresses like she is seven," offered audience members' opinions on the children's lives (Franke). The way they valued the opinions of their audiences evidences a replacement of their parents with viewers' positive comments as their attachment sources (step one of the insecurity pattern). Whenever the attachment source (uplifting comments) slowly became less frequent (step two) and were eventually lost (step three), the girls were seen in the video crying, visibly upset, and explaining that they wanted to take a break from vlogging (step four or emotional distress) (Franke). Veronica Barassi, author of *Activism on the Web*, explained that children do not have the capacity to consent to family vlogging, because they do not understand how audience's comments may affect their self-

concept. The emotional distress that the girls experienced from insecure attachment to positive YouTube comments is comparable to the insecure attachments of child stars. This suggests that Coogan Laws- like those of conventional platforms- that allow a child to consent to filming (after they understand the emotional toll of audience criticisms) should apply to YouTube.

*Insecurities Outside of the Pattern.* Though child vloggers experience instances of attachment insecurity related to the four-step insecurity pattern, other parentally instigated emotional abuses also lead these children to attachment insecurities. These abuses do not follow the attachment insecurity pattern, because the parents are never replaced as the attachment source (step one). Instead, the parent as the attachment source either neglects or abuses their child leading to emotional distress. This largely occurs as parents prank their children to increase their channel's views. In their 2019 April Fools Family vlog, the LaBrant Family tells then six-year-old Everleigh that they are giving away her puppy. This prompts Everleigh to cry and hold her puppy for, what she presumes is, the last time. The video ends with her parents telling her that they were joking; however, Everleigh's disposition remains unchanged ("LaBrant"). In a more extreme incident, the channel DaddyOFive's parents staged a broken family heirloom in nine-year-old son Cody's room before yelling at him on camera until he began to cry. After accusing their son of breaking the object, Cody begins to repeatedly insist, "I have no clue what happened! Please believe me!" ("DaddyOFive"). In both instances, the children's emotional distresses suggested that YouTube, like conventional platforms, fosters an environment of child abuse that needs Coogan Laws to ensure child consent to filming and to eliminate prank content (which limits a child's ability to consent).

*Anxiety from External Sources.* In the 1930s, stars most frequently experienced anxiety related to performance expectations established by media executives. Many of these expectations included maintaining one's childlike features (both facially and physically). However, for Judy Garland,

as her youthfulness faded and her womanly figure set in, her employment opportunities dwindled. In Buck's piece, she recounts that Garland, after losing a role in the movie *Summer Shock* and being regarded by MGM as "the ugly duckling of teens," who was no longer cute enough to be a child or beautiful enough to be an adult, she "[sliced] her neck with a piece of glass," causing the tabloid *The Los Angeles Mirror* to label her as "officially damaged goods" (Buck). Judy's self-harm and addictive behaviors were linked to "a high level of anxiety... and high level of stress as she tried to handle the pressure of being a worldwide celebrity," that adhered to her studios impossible and fleeting expectations (Buck). While it is not against Coogan Laws for studios to hire child stars less frequently as they age out of childish roles, evidence still suggests that much of Garland's anxiety and destructive behaviors were linked to her studios' demanding scheduling and encouragement of her use of amphetamine pills to remain lively. Given this evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that the institution of Coogan Laws protecting against substance abuse and working overtime are necessary in film to decrease minors' anxiety.

Similarly to child stars of the 1930s, today's child vloggers exhibit signs of anxiety related to performance expectations. However, these expectations are established by their parents and make it even more difficult for them to refuse to consent to filming. In a clip posted in August of 2019 on the Eight Passengers' channel, then ten-year-old daughter Julie was visibly uncomfortable (growing silent and pulling away from the camera) as her mother, Ruby Franke, filmed her preparing to shave both her legs and armpits. Franke began to tell the audience that Julie had been "practically begging to have her armpits shaved" and that she "needed her armpits shaved more than her legs" ("Eight"). Julie's closeness to her family and her mother's establishment of family vlogging as a typical, daily activity may have caused her to be inherently unaware of her right to refuse to consent to filming. In the ten most recent videos on the Eight

Passengers channel, there is no evidence that the children were asked for permission to be filmed (“Eight”). Without being made aware that they have this right, minors may not realize they can refuse to consent in anxiety-inducing situations. The anxieties associated with child vloggers result, much like traditional entertainment mediums, from an external source and evidence that, emotional distress, Coogan Laws protecting a child’s right to refuse to consent to filming specific content are applicable to YouTube.

#### CURRENT POLICIES AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While regulating family vlogging content to ensure child consent seems difficult, efforts have been made to do so by some European countries. For example, Dr. John Oates, founder of the British Psychological Society’s Media Ethics Advisory Group, emphasizes the United Kingdom’s enforcement of such regulations by “[carrying] out inspections of young people who are taking part in vlogging” to “[ensure] the child is consenting to what they’re doing and [to make] sure the child isn’t exposed to illegal or socially unacceptable behavior” (Tait). However, given that YouTube is a relatively new platform and that many child vloggers have not yet sustained long terms negative and positive effects from filming videos, further research within the next decade will aid in the evaluation of the Coogan Law’s application to YouTube’s (and YouTube’s general viability as an entertainment platform). The more that content produced in family vlogs is researched and compared to content of the Pre-Coogan Era, the more capable policymakers will become of tailoring Coogan Laws to YouTube to minimize the emotional distresses of child vloggers.

#### CONCLUSION

In terms of the emotional distresses, there are a great deal of similarities between child vloggers negative emotions resulting from attachment insecurity patterns and anxiety from external sources and those of 1930s child stars. However, the “kidfluencers” exhibit far less signs of

physical distresses (especially in comparison to the immense physical distresses experienced by child stars). This evidence suggests that while YouTube parallels traditional entertainment platforms regarding potential psychological damage if left unregulated, it is much more difficult to argue YouTube's viability as an entertainment platform in terms of physical intensity. In terms of the Coogan Laws, this implies that regulations connected to the number of hours a child works (which prevent physical distresses) are less important than sections of the law that brief children on the contents of videos before they are filmed and allow children space to consent to participate in vlogging (which prevents emotional distress).

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