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YouTube as Media in Constructing Behavioral Change in Children

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Abstract

YouTube has emerged as a dominant global platform for digital storytelling, offering unprecedented opportunities for creators to project their identities to a massive visual audience. This study investigates the psychological and behavioral evolution of child influencers, specifically focusing on the longitudinal changes observed in Ryan Kaji of the YouTube channel "Ryan's World." Using a behaviorist theoretical framework, the study applies the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model to analyze how the digital environment acts as a catalyst for behavioral modification in young influencers. This investigation explores the various factors that contributed to the channel's exponential growth and subsequent developmental shifts in its subjects. The findings indicate that as a child YouTuber, Ryan Kaji experienced a significant character transformation shaped by intense environmental stimuli, including brand expectations, audience feedback, and the repetitive nature of content production. Furthermore, the study concludes that while YouTube serves as a broad educational and entertainment medium, the platform also facilitates complex dynamics between parental involvement and child labor. This research highlights concerns about parental exploitation, where the constant push for content production serves as a primary driver of behavioral change. This study also indicates that the intersection of commercial interests and digital exposure creates a unique behavioral paradigm that requires further ethical scrutiny.

Keywords: behavioral change, children, content creator, Ryan's World, YouTube Kids.

1. Introduction

A media literacy intervention is an educational strategy aimed at augmenting critical thinking through the enhancement of media knowledge, the elevation of awareness regarding media influence, and the refinement of skills to evaluate media representations (Byrne, 2009). These interventions seek to enhance people's abilities to comprehend media. Analyze messages, identify biases, evaluate credible sources, and comprehend media impacts on individuals and society. Digital skills treatments aim to equip individuals with the capability to utilize digital technology effectively and securely (Alon et al., 2024).

Effective media literacy education seeks to safeguard audiences from adverse effects while simultaneously empowering them to be ethical media creators and engaged, responsible digital citizens (Potter, 2010). One of the most popular media providing video hosting services today is YouTube (Bärthel, 2018), which offers a free upload option. Free video clips can be loaded, viewed, and shared by users. YouTube is also a great option for those seeking knowledge without reading papers. There are many videos on YouTube, such as vlogs, music video clips, do-it-yourself or DIY

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videos, skits, live performances, and others. Media literacy education is essential for assisting children in navigating YouTube content and promoting positive behavioral change (Zanatta, 2017).

Platforms such as YouTube, equipped with sophisticated recommendation algorithms and an extensive array of information, can significantly influence children's social norms, values, and behavioral expectations. An essential component of media literacy is the emphasis on critical analysis and comprehension of the commercial motives underlying the content consumed. Children must be instructed not to passively consume content, but to recognize that each video is a deliberate creation, frequently designed for financial profit through advertising or endorsements (Hobbs, 2017). The capacity to discern and interrogate commercial motivations and concealed goals enables youngsters to withstand consumerist influences and deter the emulation of unrealistic lives depicted by influencers. Consequently, media literacy functions as a cognitive safeguard, empowering children to assess the reliability and emotional resonance of content, thereby fostering more informed decision-making and the cultivation of a more genuine self-identity independent of media influence (Buckingham, 2003).

The more famous YouTube is, the more people look for business opportunities there. It is not surprising if this happens because YouTube provides various rewards for content creators (Holmbom, 2015). For example, someone who becomes a content creator gets a lot of money from every video they upload. They upload the video to their YouTube account. Their loyal viewers who have followed or are interested in the topic brought by the account owner will watch it, and the money will flow to the creator's account depending on the number of people who watch the video (Zanatta, 2017). Besides being useful as a business opportunity that makes money, we can also find various videos that people of all ages need. Videos that many need include video tips and tricks, talk shows and variety shows, web dramas, music videos, and many more.

Overall, not only adults but also many kids are using YouTube. They either use YouTube Kids or use an account from their family. There are many types of videos that kids will access, such as educational videos for children, children's nurseries, fairytale animation, videos with children as actors, toy reviews, animation or cartoon characters, and others. A video uploaded with children as its target usually will gain a million views quickly. YouTube has made YouTube Kids an application that could be used mainly by children. They claim to provide a better-organized domain for children to wander on YouTube and make it more controllable for parents and guardians to steer their exploration. The main difference is that there is no comment section in the kids' version of the YouTube app. With over 100 million downloads, the app tries to answer parents' complaints about how YouTube content is unsuitable for their children. Some popular genres in the YouTube Kids app, namely video blogs (Vlogs), comedy sketch videos or skits, and "hanging out" videos in which kids record their day interactions with friends and siblings. Videos in which kids recorded events such as sporting activities, games, school functions, and car shows are also popular (Lange, 2016). However, it still reassures parents that letting their children be on YouTube without supervision is okay.

One of the kids' YouTubers who has a great subscribers is Ryan's World. The video was published on April 28, 2020, with the title Ryan Pretend Play Funny Police Story Helps Find Missing Items!!! (Ryan's World, 2020). Ryan shows up in the video with the theme of playing pretend. He used many properties such as clothes that fit the roles, toy equipment of toys, and play friends. Ryan's family acts as a helper or guide for the play. In the video, Ryan and her parents create roles in the police story play. As the video was uploaded on the YouTube Kids channel, it is interesting to discuss how the play portrays the life of Ryan in Ryan's World as a kid. YouTube has become a source of entertainment for many kids worldwide, and the apps have a particular effect on them. This kind of channel targets kids as its audience, provides entertainment and education in its content. The importance of examining the benefits and drawbacks that directly or indirectly promote babies' and kids' mental and physical growth is feasible because of YouTube's children's media platforms (Imaniah et al., 2020). Therefore, the content might trigger an organism's response according to the topic of the content. Thus, as the video highlights the play and its properties used, the construction behavioral change in the child is the focus of this research. Ryan's World has regularly uploaded its videos on YouTube daily, whether a new video or a re-upload video. Considering his content on YouTube, having 35 million views and 33,8 million subscribers, this video on Ryan's World YouTube Channel is chosen for analysis.

Understanding how other experts' similar studies show when investigating the topic on YouTube is essential. Three contemporary pieces of research relating to this subject are mentioned here. First, the 2020 article journal publication by Boerman and van Reijmersdal examines the

impact of the consumption of sponsored influencer YouTube videos on children's advertising literacy and para-social relationships (PSR). PSR is a potential country limit for the effects of disclosure on persuasion based on the connection between children and influencers. According to this research, when kids accurately recall influencer-sponsored YouTube video disclosures, it raises their attention to advertisements and helps them comprehend how to persuade and sell (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, 2020).

Second, a 2020 journal publication of research by Zhou et al. The article examines how behavioral, contextual, and psychological variables affect how users utilize the YouTube app as a learning tool. The results demonstrate that individual characteristics, including expectations for learning outcomes and attitudes, directly impact whether YouTube is used as a learning material. On the other hand, contextual variables, like socializing on YouTube, affect attitudes, while personality characteristics, such as pre-kindergarten experiences, impact the expectation of learning results (Zhou et al., 2020).

The third study investigates the causes of YouTube addictive behaviors by examining the connections between social anxiety, para-social relationships with YouTubers, and YouTube addiction using a conceptual model rooted in cognitive behavioral theorists. This study was conducted by de Bérail et al. and was publicly released in 2019. This study contributes to the body of knowledge regarding para-social compensation theory (de Bérail et al., 2019).

Based on the previous research, the studies did not examine the construction of behavioral change that happens to children because of YouTube videos and their content. This study then attempts to reach the behavioral aspect of a child on YouTube as they are associated with it. Here, by emphasizing the content creator's language and behavior when sharing his play as a child on YouTube. Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) enables a researcher to see how individuals react to media content, particularly in children. Stimulus organism response theory provides a way to understand the meaning of behavioral change as a child connected with YouTube. According to Mehrabian and Russell, the SOR hypothesis highlights that people often respond to their environment in one of two ways. Positive habits, such as the desire to explore, remain, attach, or perform, are all included in one collection from participants. Trying to prevent habits, however, involves wanting to do the opposite of the last activity, such as acting negatively (Mehrabian, Russell, 1974). By applying a behaviorist study approach that works within the Stimulus Organism Response framework, this research aims to investigate the factors that influence changes in children's behavior that are closely related to watching the related video. This study addresses the researcher's questions: how much influence do children's YouTube videos have on their behavior change?

2. Materials and methods

The researcher uses qualitative descriptive methods as the research method for reviewing the YouTube video channel *Ryan's World*. The data is gathered by watching some videos from the YouTube channel with a critical awareness of children's behavioral change and concentrating on all of the activities the content creator has done in the video. We used a practical framework to analyze children's behavior change more deeply by examining the elements connected to children's behavior using the Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) theory. The Theory of Stimulus Organism Response is a response or reaction to external stimuli. It also classified human behavior into open and closed behavior (Skinner, 1938). The SOR hypothesis has been used in research on servicescapes (Bitner, 1992), arousal and enjoyment (Mehrabian, Russell, 1974), and aesthetics across a variety of disciplines (Wohlwill, 1976). In investigating the video's content, the relationships between inputs (stimulus), processes (organism), and outputs (response) have been studied in depth by using the SOR theory (Kim et al., 2020).

3. Discussion

The discussion began with examining one of Ryan's World videos (Ryan's World, 2020) entitled *Ryan Pretend Play funny Police story helps find missing items!!!* Later, followed by a comparison of the behavioral changes Ryan Kaji underwent using the Mehrabian-Russell SOR theory approach, which was broken down into the stimuli from the environment (S) through the acquisition of organisms (O) that affect changes in a person's behavior (R). The organism is the end product of a process carried out by the stimulus, which typically plays a role between stimulus and reaction. In contrast, the stimulus may be viewed as a factor that impacts a person's situation. As a

consequence of Stimulus and Organisms, including numerous aspects like intentions or conduct, Response is the leading outcome (Mehrabian, Russell, 1974).

The proliferation of social media makes it easier for people to find work, including becoming a content creator. Working as a content creator is a job anyone can do anytime. Armed with good cameras for taking videos and content that engages the audience, many people push their luck as content creators. However, developing channels for content creators to become more famous and in demand by many people does require persistence, diligence, and much time. For example, on YouTube, people attempt to make their fortune as content creators by creating their own YouTube channel and begin uploading their videos. The YouTube app has developed substantially over the years and has become the world's most popular online video platform. Be notable for the engagement created between content creators and consumers through comments, likes, and sharing as the website transitions from being a static site to one that serves as a social network (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020). Uploaded videos have various types and genres, from children to adults, all available on the platform.

Children like content made explicitly for YouTube by content creators such as YouTube personalities. Children watch YouTube Kids' content, including pranks, video games, online streaming, unboxing things, product reviews, and individuals showing their musical skills. Some also watch videos of people living their daily lives, sometimes called video blogs or vlogs (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, 2020). Especially now, a particular YouTube platform for children is called YouTube Kids. To present a safer online experience for their underage audience, YouTube established the YouTube Kids application. Parents can determine what their children can watch on YouTube Kids (Papadamou et al., 2020). Design elements like repetitive content, highlights of learning segments, and support of social-emotional development should be considered in children's planning and creation of video content. Adults or more knowledgeable others should make a mindful and careful selection of videos to ensure that children spend their time on YouTube as beneficially as possible (Neumann, Herodotou, 2020).

Ryan's World is a toy reviewer YouTube channel founded by Ryan Kaji in 2015. In each of his YouTube videos, Ryan continuously reviews various kinds of children's toys, especially toys that contain surprises inside them, with his family. Apart from reviewing children's toys, Ryan also has his own brand of toys (Hains, Jennings, 2021). With the support of his parents, content that initially only contained little Ryan playing with his new toys has now turned into content that can induce much money. Ryan began to diligently upload videos containing his activities in unboxing and reviewing toys that would interest children his age. Unboxing videos that show a product being opened are one of the most popular genres of video on YouTube. Unboxing videos may thrill children since they suppose that watching them is joyful, almost as if they are opening their presents. The "unboxing" videos have evolved into reviews of products for children (Neumann, Herodotou, 2020). *Ryan's World*, which used to be named *Ryan ToyReview*, is a channel that regularly makes toy review videos.

Several major toy manufacturers also constantly ask Ryan for his endorsement. For instance, Ryan, a kids' YouTuber with 33 million followers, unpacks and showcases toys from the advertiser in his channel's videos and bakes cookies with the support of a well-known butter product (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, 2020). With so many subscribers, it has become one of the most famous YouTube content creators, and he has a high income at a young age. As a result, advertisers, typically young individuals, are drawn to social media influencers and unconventional endorsers because of their capacity to interact with people on social media (Martinez, Olsson, 2019). As the *Ryan's World* YouTube channel proliferates, which has more and more subscribers and viewers, it has made many changes to the content provided by the channel. It also made Ryan Kaji, who used to be a child who liked to make vlogs or be called a vlogger, evolve into an 'influencer'. An Influencer is a specialist who becomes a trustworthy recommender of a product or service for the general public. It is because of their expertise and skill in the field (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020). Mainly, YouTube personalities, usually referred to as YouTubers, have emerged as a new fame category, attracting millions of subscribers and making millions of dollars annually (Tolbert, Drogos, 2019).

Everyone's dream is success at a young age, like Ryan Kaji, who made \$ 26 million in 2019 (Hains, Jennings, 2021). At the age of eight, he made that much money, which was a boast of his parents. However, there are changes in behavior shown by Ryan Kaji in one of his videos. One of the videos with a high number of viewers is *Ryan Police Pretend Play and Late Going to School!!!*

Furthermore, his first video, entitled *Kid Playing with Toys Lego Duplo Number Train* (Ryan's World, 2015), shows how the contrast is the difference in behavior shown by Ryan during the video. The first video they uploaded shows how Ryan -who was four years old at that time- created toy review content that his mother recorded. In the video, Ryan looked very happy, like children of the same age who had just gotten the new toy they wanted. Meanwhile, the introductory video that will be discussed shows Ryan's attitude, around nine years old at that time, which looked different from that in the first-ever video. Somehow, Ryan's attitude and behavior in the video seem unnatural.

A stimulus can be interpreted as a stimulus that can cause a change in a person's attitude or behavior. The causes vary, but environmental factors influence most. Ryan Kaji, who was four years old the first time they recorded a video for YouTube, told his parents that he wanted to make YouTube content, and because they wanted their children to be happy, they agreed to Ryan's wishes. Ryan then began his content by reviewing various exciting toys; he also looked delighted, and his attitude looked like any other 4-year-old. In his first video, *Kid Playing with Toys Lego Duplo Number Train* (Ryan's World, 2015), Ryan looks genuine in reviewing the toys Ryan and his mother bought at the toy store. In the video, it is shown how Ryan is having fun and looks joyful. In front of the camera, Ryan is happy but confused at certain moments, like other four-year-old children who do not know what to do, especially during the video. The warm interaction between the mother and child in the video frames their happy moments – this video models positive parent – child interactions. Even though what appears to us is Ryan Kaji, who wants to create a YouTube channel, without the influence and contribution of his parents, the Ryan's World YouTube channel would not have expanded well. It concludes that Ryan's parents took a crucial role in changing their son's behavior. The social learning theory claims that children learn their social agents' actions and ideas. Modeling, reinforcing, and social connection also play a part in the process (Folkvord et al., 2019). Changes in children's behavior are caused by the many videos made to make their son's YouTube channel something that both parents can earn from. Under the pretext of complying with their children's wishes, they indirectly exploit minors who should still be playing with their friends and being directed to as content creators instead.

Organisms here can be interpreted as the main actors in the discussion and the center of this research topic: Ryan Kaji. Ryan already has his own YouTube channel at the age of four and has become one of the most well-known kids YouTubers in the toy review field after several years of pursuing his activities. Ironically, even though YouTube provides a particular app for children, it has allowed minor children to become content creators, producers, and even more disseminators using simple devices such as mobile phones (Tur-Viñes et al., 2018). Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that a kid at that age could work his own YouTube channel to become one of the highest-earning channels for the toy review genre. The categories of video game play, toys, and DIY are where children's YouTubers have the most significant influence (Castelló-Martínez, Tur-Viñes, 2020). Not to mention that almost every day, Ryan uploads new videos on his channel, making this even more challenging to visualize. At least it takes hours to make a video with a span of 6-10 minutes. It may include the editing process, and it may just be the process of making the video. Furthermore, counting the more than 2,000 videos Ryan has uploaded on his YouTube channel, including his compilation videos with his family.

The response is the outcome of the consequences between the stimulus and the organism. It serves as the phase at which an individual's behavior toward the stimulus can be observed. In the case of Ryan Kaji, he went from making vlogs with his mother videotaping him to becoming a kid influencer who created various content. The accumulation of kids' user-created content has formed its entertainment genres. It includes gaming tutorials and plays videos, comedy acts, pranks, DIY videos, and children's play. The video content usually involves materials like slime or Play-Doh that children are familiar with. In addition, content creators frequently upload videos of themselves examining and evaluating different retail toy products, known as "unboxing toy videos" (Nicoll, Nansen, 2018). Ryan eventually developed content that appeared more professional and exciting, and his parents also participated in the video. As a result of the encouragement of the parents who accompanied him, a child who was simply interested in toys gradually seemed to learn how to become a content creator or influencer. Unlike kid actors, the influencer does not appear to play and enjoy themselves with toys, increasing their relatability to the viewers and covertly carrying out any clear or commercial purpose (De Veirman et al., 2019).

The involvement of parents, who frequently remind and educate children to describe toys or help children learn through toys, leads to behavioral changes in children. As YouTube content improves, it is

noticeable that Ryan Kaji understands more about creating content, as seen by his acting in specific content. Here, the role of parents is not to regulate or moderate children but rather to help shape or modulate how children participate in the YouTube content space (Nansen, Jayemanne, 2016). Ryan Kaji's behavior has evolved from that of an ordinary child who enjoys playing to the behavior of an intelligent child who can act to ensure the continuity of his YouTube content.

The focus on psychological well-being and educational outcomes underscores the connection between media use, mental health, and academic success. Rising apprehensions regarding the effects of digital media on mental health, including heightened stress, anxiety, and depression, have compelled researchers to examine these domains more rigorously (Primack et al., 2009). Nevertheless, the findings indicate that no substantial effects were observed for the majority of these outcomes. A systematic review and meta-analysis of interventions employing digital tools for mental health promotion in children aged 11–18 revealed modest yet encouraging effects on well-being, anxiety reduction, and enhancement of protective factors (Wright et al., 2023). Global awareness of mental health issues is rising, leading to more research on factors affecting psychological well-being. Research indicates that media use and digital interactions substantially affect mental health (Zsila, Reyes, 2023); hence, interventions aimed at enhancing media literacy and digital competencies are essential to mitigate their adverse effects.

4. Results

Using the Stimulus-Organism-Response theory of Mehrabian and Russell, the researcher analyzes changes in children's behavior caused by YouTube on the Ryan's World YouTube channel. The researchers explored how children can change their behavior by focusing on Stimuli, Organisms, and the Response Ryan Kaji gave for more than eight years, creating content on his YouTube channel. The results of this study indicate that Ryan Kaji experienced significant changes in character and behavior, which were influenced by various environmental factors. The result was that Ryan, who was only four years old, wanted his own YouTube channel, and then his parents realized this desire as a stimulus. Ryan Kaji, the object of this research, must act in front of the camera while reviewing the toys he just bought. It ends with Ryan Kaji's changing behavior as a result of the response he gave to his daily life, which he had to act in front of the camera since childhood. Furthermore, Ryan Kaji's parents act not only as his guardians but also as his work partners. Children's play shown in the first-ever video of Ryan Kaji later changes into a routine that needs to be recorded every time.

5. Conclusion

YouTube exposed children to a wide range of YouTube video content. In this case, children who act as YouTube content creators or those who work as an audience may feel a shift. Not only because of the children's growth as average children but also because of the environment surrounding them, making them seem more grown-up than their peers. Changes in a child's behavior are always related to their parents. The relationship between parents who exploit their children into YouTubers who constantly make video content is one of the reasons for the change in children's behavior. Kids YouTubers have parents who are both guardians and colleagues simultaneously. This study found that children who are typically recorded will become more camera-conscious. They will provide a more camera-friendly attitude and act with a focus on showing everything to the camera as a content creator. It will later lead the children to act like children rather than naturally act like children.

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