Special Issue: 2K: Child Influencers in the Asia Pacific

SM+S
social media + society

Korean Toddlers at Play or at Work? Commodifiable Authenticity of Sponsored Child-Rearing Vlogs

Social Media + Society
July-September 2025: 1–5

DOI: 10.1177/20563051251356151
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms
Sage

Hanwool Choe[1]

Abstract

As child-rearing everyday vlogs grow in popularity in South Korea, children featured in these vlogs are increasingly becoming influencers. Through a case study of sponsored everyday vlogs of a 3-year-old Korean toddler, I identify two strategies that transform the toddler's everyday life into a marketplace: The toddler's (1) pretend play as product demonstration and actual use and (2) image-making for branding. These strategies construct the toddler as a marketer promoting sponsored products and brands to adult consumers, while simultaneously offering virtual experiences of everyday family lives that viewers can vicariously engage with. This phenomenon, I argue, creates "commodifiable authenticity." Troubling the boundary between child play and influencer work, commodifiable authenticity shapes and reinforces the broader discourse of "child-as-commodity." Ultimately, my examination illuminates how by repackaging marriage and family life as media entertainment, Korean child-rearing vlogs hold new cultural significance considering that South Korea has the lowest fertility rate in the world.

Keywords

child influencer, Korean kidfluencing, sponsored everyday vlogging, commodifiable authenticity, discourse analysis

Commercializing childhood and everyday family life via Korean child-rearing vlogs

South Korea has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world (Jin, 2025), and many Korean young adults choose not to marry (Rashid, 2022). Ironically, however, *yuga* ("육아," trans. "child-rearing") content has gained significant prominence and attraction both in old and new media in recent years (Heo, 2025). Family-oriented reality TV shows like *syupeomaeni dolawassda* ("슈퍼맨이 돌아왔다," trans. "The Return of Superman")—where celebrity fathers spend days with their children without mothers—and social media content commonly known as *yugabeuilogeu* ("육아 브이로그," trans. "child-rearing vlog") prominently feature the everyday lives of children in a *Truman Show*-like portrayal of childhood. It is not an exaggeration to say that for many young adult Koreans, marriage and child-rearing have become virtual experiences to vicariously enjoy through the media rather than to pursue in real life, which is similar to the phenomenon of watching *mukbang* ("먹방," trans. "livestream of eating") for vicarious satisfaction (see Choe, 2019, 2021). This social "trend" suggests how marriage and family life are repackaged as a form of media entertainment in South Korea, thus acquiring new cultural significance.

Following this trend, children featured in child-rearing everyday vlogs are increasingly becoming child influencers. Among them is Jiho (pseudonym), a 3-year-old male toddler who is the focus of the study. As of March 2025, Jiho's YouTube channel has more than 900k subscribers. Each of the vlogs represents a week in his daily life. Jiho's everyday vlogs have been consistently uploaded since he was just 7 months old. His parents' dedicated and continuous documentation of his life has produced an extensive archival record of Jiho's life stories.

This phenomenon, often referred to as "kidfluencing," raises complex questions about the boundaries between kidfluencing (or "toddlerfluencing" in my research context) as a form of child labor (Hudders & Beuckels, 2024) and as a new form of child socialization in today's digital society. Moreover,

[1]The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Corresponding Author:
Hanwool Choe, School of English, The University of Hong Kong, Office: Room 849, 8/F, Run Run Shaw Tower, Centennial Campus, Hong Kong.
Email: hanwoolc@hku.hk

in the context of South Korea where marriage and childbirth are increasingly being foregone, (sponsored) everyday vlogs of young children may contribute to creating vicarious narratives of everyday family lives for viewer engagement, while subtly intertwining with commercial objectives.

By analyzing two of Jiho's recent sponsored vlogs, this study therefore explores how Jiho's childlike acts and behaviors are strategically constructed. Jiho's linguistic and social behavior, typically understood as "child play," is used as "labor" for his (unintentional) "influencer work," ultimately commercializing his daily life and idealizing everyday family life. I argue that this subtle duality achieves "commodifiable authenticity," a process that involves turning what counts as authentic and uncommodifiable—such as everyday life experiences—into a marketable commodity, while simultaneously blurring the line between living and selling everyday life (c.f., Heller, 2014). I also argue that the family-oriented imagery emerging from Jiho's vlogs offers a virtual experience of everyday family life that audiences can vicariously engage with.

Methodology

To analyze data, I use discourse analysis, a qualitative approach to language use and identity construction (Tannen et al., 2015) and netnography or online participant observation for an ethnographic understanding of data (Kozinets, 2015). This study is part of my larger project, *Discourse of Everyday Vlogging* (see Choe, 2024a; 2024b), which has received research ethics approval from my affiliated institution. Jiho's vlogs are publicly accessible and searchable on YouTube. While he is a public figure, I use a pseudonym in this study to protect Jiho's identity as a minor. At the time of research, I did not engage in any interactions on his vlog channel, such as liking and commenting.

Case study 1: the toddler's pretend play as product demonstration and actual use

In the interaction presented in Transcript 1 (below), Jiho's mother advertises a facial sheet mask product while standing in front of a mirror in a room, wearing pajamas, and sporting the mask on her face. Jiho's father films her from a side angle as she verbally explains to the camera the product's benefits and how-to-use instructions while visually demonstrating how to wear the facial mask. Jiho speaks to his mother throughout this process.

Pretend play is one of the common everyday family activities in parent–child interaction for socialization and sociability (see Gordon, 2002, 2009). In Transcript 1, pretend play not only fosters playful family interaction and bonding but also becomes a vehicle for commercial storytelling. Jiho's cheerful and playful use of the leftover face

1	Toddler	((to mom)) "I want to do a bit" 난 쪼금만 할래
2	Mother	((to the camera)) "Though I sometimes apply leftover patches to areas like the neck" 자투리 팩은 목같은데 붙이기도 하는데
3		"Since Jiho asked me to put them on him" 지호가 붙여달라고 그래가지고
4		((applying the small patches on the toddler's both cheeks))
5		((to the camera)) "If I put them on like this, it feels like I'm doing a facial mask together with Jiho" 이렇게 붙여주면 지호랑 같이 팩하는 거죠
6	Toddler	((making a ghostly hand gesture and giggling with the leftover facial mask patches on his cheeks)) "Hahaha" 으하하하
7	Mother	((making the same ghostly hand gesture while wearing the mask, approaching Jiho, and speaking in a lower tone)) "Hehe, I'm going to eat you up" 으히히 널 잡아먹겠다

Transcript 1. Facial sheet mask commercial.

mask patches takes the form of a ghost-themed pretend play with his mother (Lines 6 and 7): they make ghostly hand gestures and sounds, while his mother also pretends to gobble Jiho up. At the same time, this playful pretend play serves as a demonstration of the sponsored product's qualities. Specifically, the patches on Jiho's face, though manufactured for adults, cause no skin irritation (while being used as a play resource). This highlights the facial mask's suitability even for children's sensitive skin and implicitly alludes to the high quality of its ingredients, while also indirectly suggesting family sociability.

To elaborate further, by accepting his request ("I want to do a bit" in Line 1) and verbally reiterating that she gives him the extra patches because "Jiho asked [her] to" (Line 3), the mother emphasizes Jiho's agency in participating in wearing the small patches. While she mentions that the leftover patches can be used for "areas like the neck" (Line 2), the toddler's direct engagement in wearing them on his cheeks makes implicit declarations about the product's safety and reliability. In this context, Jiho's pretend play (Line 6) can be interpreted as a product demonstration, effectively serving as a safety test and offering reassurance to potential consumers.

Moreover, this mother-toddler pretend-play interaction creates vivid imagery that symbolizes a happy mother–son relationship, as if the sponsored facial mask itself plays a role in fostering such familial intimacy and bonding through

"doing a facial mask together" (Line 5). Creating an idealized portrayal of familial closeness, their playful interaction draws viewers into a vicarious experience of what commentators describe as "화목하고 편안한 가정" (*hwamoghago pyeonanhan gajeong*), or a "harmonious and comfortable family." They also express that watching Jiho and his family is "나의 행복" (*naui haengbog*), or "my happiness," and offers "힐링" (*hilling*), or "healing." These comments highlight how Jiho's vlogs, though sponsored, make an authentic appeal to the audiences and provide a virtual form of comfort and entertainment through a family-driven setting.

To summarize, Jiho's acting as a ghost with the patches on his cheeks (Line 6) not only represents his innocent and playful behavior (child play) but also subtly positions Jiho as an active participant in endorsing the product (influencer work), thereby creating the commodifiable authenticity of the sponsored product and further reinforcing the product's positive appeal.

Case study 2: the toddler's image-making for branding

As Jiho gains online visibility, not only are products sponsored but media celebrities also appear in his everyday vlogs to promote themselves and their work. Among them is Doyoung, a member of the K-pop idol group NCT 127. In a vlog set up as a play date, Doyoung visits Jiho at the time of his group's new album release. In Transcript 2 below, Jiho puts the letter-shaped cookies "N," "C," and "T" in Doyoung's hands while eating the cookies they had baked together earlier.

Korean child-centered reality TV shows like *The Return of Superman* commonly feature celebrities visiting the homes of young children and interacting with them, and Jiho's everyday vlogs are no exception. In the context of everyday vlogging, the narrative-like structure of the vlog—chronicling a vlogger's engagement in daily life as it unfolds—enhances a sense of ordinariness (see Choe, 2024b). In Jiho's sponsored vlog with Doyoung, the chronologically organized narrative account of their day together—doing what Jiho usually does, such as eating and playing—presents their interaction in a documentary form, making it appear as if it were just another ordinary play date in Jiho's life.

Transcript 2 illustrates how the toddler plays a pivotal role in creating, promoting, and strengthening a positive public persona for the K-pop idol group member in an organic and relatable manner under this narratively curated "natural" setup. Specifically, Jiho's grabbing and handing each letter-shaped cookie to Doyoung, while reciting the letters "N," "C," and "T" (Lines 1, 3, 4, and 6), can be seen as the toddler's "child play," which, I note, maintains his vlog's everyday tone. However, it also subtly serves its commercial purpose ("influencer work") by drawing attention to the group's name in a dramatic way, as Jiho's actions reveal the letters of the group's name one by one.

1	Toddler	((handing the lettering cookies, N and C, to Doyoung))
2	Doyoung	"N"
3	Toddler	((pointing at the N in his hand)) "N"
4		((pointing at the C in his hand)) "C"
5	Doyoung	"Oh" 오
6	Toddler	((giving the alphabet cookie, T, to Doyoung))
7	Camera	((zooming in on the letter cookies—N, C, and T—from left to right in Doyoung's hand))
8	Doyoung	"Jiho, do you understand NCT now?" 지호 NCT 를 이제 알겠어?
9		"What is NCT?" NCT 가 뭐야?
10	Toddler	((pointing at Doyoung))
11		"Uncle" 삼촌

Transcript 2. K-pop idol commercial.

Jiho is not the target audience for the idol group given his young age. However, his playful interaction with Doyoung creates virtual imagery of family-oriented bonding that many of his adult fans or intended adult audience can relate to. The discursive construction of family bonding imagery is observed in two ways. First, in the comments section, viewers describe Doyoung as a "good person" who is "caring," "considerate," "lovely," and "sweet," with "such a big heart," and as someone who will be "a great dad." Some commentators even see Jiho-Doyoung interaction as "결혼장려 영상" (gyeolhonjanglyeo yeongsang), or "marriage encouragement video," and "최고의 출산장려영상👍" (choegoui chulsanjanglyeo yeongsang), or "the best childbirth encouragement video." These comments indicate how their playdate associates Doyoung with family-oriented qualities, reinforcing his relatable image.

Second, Jiho calls Doyoung "uncle" (Line 11). By asking Jiho, "what is NCT" (Line 9), Doyoung encourages him to engage more with the current interaction. Subtly introducing (or reminding viewers of) the name of the group, his question discursively incorporates the playful interaction with the toddler and its promotional undertone, aligning with the sponsored vlog's commercial context. In response, Jiho says that it (NCT) is Doyoung by pointing at him (Line 10) and referring to him as an "uncle" (Line 11). The use of familial terms, such as "uncle" and "aunt," to address non-family members is a common discursive strategy to express closeness and connection in Korea—many of Jiho's viewers self-address his *laenseonimo* ("랜선이모," trans. "online aunt"; lit. trans.

"LAN [local area network] cable aunt") or *laenseonsamchon* ("랜선삼촌," trans. "online uncle") in the comments section. This reflects how the viewers vicariously engage with, and enjoy, their "virtual family" interaction and relationship. Doyoung being recognized and referred to as an uncle further reinforces his approachable persona, building a stronger sense of connection with fans, within a family-friendly setting.

To sum up, commodifiable authenticity is constructed when Jiho's childlike behavior through the playdate setup—where Jiho gets along well with the adult he has just met—seamlessly serves to make relatable images of Doyoung and his group (ultimately for advertising their new album release). Through this, two prominent representations of Jiho emerge: One as a sociable child (child play) and the other as an active participant in branding Doyoung and his band (influencer work). Jiho's dual representations highlight that his everyday activities are a commercially viable resource, and his everyday vlogs serve as a highly marketable platform to increase the group's social media engagement.

Child play versus influencer work

Jiho has hundreds of thousands of "online aunties and uncles" who engage virtually with his life—a phenomenon commonly known as "sharenting" (sharing photos, videos, and updates of one's children on social media) (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Jiho's online aunties and uncles are likely his potential consumers eager to participate in online (window) shopping by watching his everyday life vlogs. The viewers' family-like, vicarious engagement in watching Jiho's vlogs may function as their imaginary family role-play as if they were part of his family, and for their virtual sociability with Jiho. I argue that this imagined closeness not only reinforces a sense of connection but also potentially leads to purchasing sponsored items in order to relate to this sense of connection even in reality.

Jiho's sponsored everyday vlogs create and perpetuate the discourse of "child-as-commodity" in which he and his childhood are capitalized on as marketable commodities for social consumption and entertainment, primarily for adults. As Abidin (2020) observes, the public visibility of "social-media-famous children" (p. 226) is strategically monetized through their "commercially viable biographies" (p. 227) centering around everyday lives and developmental milestones. Sponsored everyday vlogging extends beyond vlogging as public diaries. In it, living a life itself becomes not only "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986) of online presentation of self and life but also an economic resource generating fame, influence, and revenue.

Child influencers are not yet securely protected by legal, ethical, and regulatory measures (see Abidin, 2023), which creates a gray area in the phenomenon of kidfluencing. This lack of accountability instead constructs the child influencers as the influenced, who "are used, framed, and appropriated" (Abidin, 2015, Micro-microcelebrity section, para. 3) by adults—their parents, followers, and sponsorship partners. The blurred distinction between child play and influencer work alerts us to how kidfluencing troubles the boundary between child exploitation and child socialization in today's social media era. Finally, my study also uncovers how ideals of everyday family life are discursively and commercially constructed within the context of Korean kidfluencing, shaping its role in providing vicarious experience of family life for entertainment and packaging family-oriented imagery in marketable ways.

ORCID iD

Hanwool Choe https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0022-6547

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Abidin, C. (2015). Micromicrocelebrity: Branding babies on the Internet. *M/C Journal*, *18*(5). https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.1022

Abidin, C. (2020). Pre-school star on YouTube. In L. Green, D. Holloway, K. Stevenson, T. Leaver, & L. Haddon (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to digital media and children* (pp. 226–234). Routledge.

Abidin, C. (2023). Child influencers: How children have become entangled with social media commerce. *Australian Quarterly*, *94*(3), 3–13. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27221042

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In R. Nice Tran & J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 46–58). Greenwood.

Choe, H. (2019). Eating together multimodally: Collaborative eating in mukbang, a Korean livestream of eating. *Language in Society*, *48*(2), 171–208. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404518001355

Choe, H. (2021). Mukbang as your digital tablemate: Creating commensality online. In A. Tovares & C. Gordon (Eds.), *Identity and ideology in digital food discourse* (pp. 137–168). Bloomsbury.

Choe, H. (2024a). Doing being ordinary, doing being expatriate: A frame analysis of food activities in everyday vlogs of Korean expatriates. *Language & Communication*, *99*, 244–258. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2024.10.006

Choe, H. (2024b). The presentation of self via everyday vlogging: Analyzing everyday vlogs of Korean expatriates. *Discourse, Context & Media*, *59*, 100784. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2024.100784

Gordon, C. (2002). "I'm Mommy and you're Natalie": Role-reversal and embedded frames in mother-child discourse. *Language in Society*, *31*(5), 679–720. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4169221

Gordon, C. (2009). *Making meanings, creating family: Intertextuality and framing in family interaction*. Oxford University Press.

Heller, M. (2014). The commodification of authenticity. In V. Lacoste, J. Leimgruber, & T. Breyer (Eds.), *Indexing authenticity: Sociolinguistic perspectives* (pp. 136–139). De Gruyter.

Heo, Y.-J. (2025, March 13). *Imsin·chulsan·yuga yutyubeo wae ileohge ingiilkka?* [Pregnancy·babybirth·child-rearing Youtuber why so popular?]. yeoseonggyeongjesinmun [Woman Economy]. https://www.womaneconomy.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=232289

Hudders, L., & Beuckels, E. (2024). Children making big money: The implications of Kidfluencing as new form of child labor. *Journal of Children and Media*, *18*(4), 638–645. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2024.2404729

Jin, Y. Y. (2025, February 26). South Korea has a small baby bump after years of decline. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/26/world/asia/south-korea-babies-birthrate.html

Kozinets, R. V. (2015). *Netnography: Redefined*. Sage.

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). *Sharenting, n* [Oxford English dictionary]. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7727760589

Rashid, R. (2022, February 5). Happy alone: The young South Koreans embracing single life. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/05/happy-alone-the-young-south-koreans-embracing-single-life

Tannen, D., Hamilton, H. E., & Schiffrin, D. (2015). *The handbook of discourse analysis*. John Wiley & Sons.

Author biography

Hanwool Choe is an assistant professor in the School of English at the University of Hong Kong. Using interactional sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, she studies language use and identity construction across diverse contexts, such as social media, family, and food (both as individual domains and at their intersections).