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"I know where you live, let's be friends": Digital Violence in the Context of Kidfluencing

Kidfluencing is an activity of minors involved in creating and sharing social media content with embedded commercial collaborations. Variants of kidfluencing range from content creation mainly carried out by parents to the children's largely independent activity. The purpose of this article is to investigate forms of digital violence that may occur in the context of kidfluencing. The analysis draws on theoretical approaches by Galtung and Bourdieu to examine how direct and structural violence operate through the symbolism of words and images, shaping digitality as an ordering process. Data derived through netnography and critical discourse analysis reconstructs parents' perspectives on kidfluencing, often revealing cultural violence stemming from a lack of awareness about digital harms. This is contrasted with the perspectives of kidfluencers, who do not perceive online and offline as separate spheres but instead view digitality as a fundamental reference structure in their lifeworld. As a result, digital violence does not remain purely symbolic but materializes in physical experiences that diminish children's well-being and strongly call for the stricter regulation of kidfluencing practices.

Keywords: Cybermobbing, Cyberstalking, Digital Hate Speech, Digital Violence, Kidfluencing

„Ich weiß, wo du wohnst, lass uns Freunde sein": Erfahrungen von Kidfluencer: innen mit digitaler Gewalt

Kidfluencing bezeichnet eine Tätigkeit von Minderjährigen, bei der sie Content für soziale Medien erstellen und teilen. Die Produktion dieses Bild- und Videomaterials, in das kommerzielle Werbekooperationen eingebettet sind, kann maßgeblich durch Eltern angeleitet werden oder selbstständig durch Kinder erfolgen. Im Zusammenhang mit Kidfluencing können unterschiedliche Formen digitaler Gewalt vorkommen, die in diesem Aufsatz auf der Grundlage eines theoretischen Konzepts, das Ansätze von Galtung und Bourdieu synthetisiert, untersucht werden. Die Analyse stellt digitale Varianten direkter und struktureller Gewalt dar, welche durch Wort- und Bildsymboliken generiert werden. Mittels Netnografie und kritischer Diskursanalyse erhobene Daten erlauben dabei die Rekonstruktion elterlicher Perspektiven auf das Kidfluencing als Variante kultureller Gewalt, die von fehlendem Bewusstsein über Gefahren im digitalen Raum geprägt ist. Dem gegenüber werden die Perspektiven von Kidfluencer:innen dargestellt, die Online- und Offline-Dimensionen nicht als getrennte Sphären wahrnehmen, sondern Digitalität als fundamentale Referenzstruktur ihrer Lebenswelt begreifen. Die Analyse zeigt, dass digitale Gewalt nicht nur auf der symbolischen Ebene verbleibt, sondern sich auch in physischen Erfahrungen manifestiert, die das Kindeswohl nachhaltig beeinträchtigen können und eine strikte Regulierung des Kidfluencings erfordern.

Keywords: Cybermobbing, Cyberstalking, digitale Gewalt, digitale Hassrede, Kidfluencing

1. Introduction

The internet is a social context that demonstrates significantly higher engagement from young people compared to other spheres of public life (Burton, 2019, p. 3). Worldwide, approximately one in three internet users is a minor[1] (Wright & Rotino, 2020, p. 6). A specific way some young people use the internet is through so-called kidfluencing. This refers to digital work that exists in a legal gray area, where minors are, to varying degrees, involved in their parents' creation and sharing of digital content that embeds paid or unpaid advertising collaborations, or they undertake these activities independently. Kidfluencers typically belong to Generation Alpha (born from 2010 onwards) and reach at least 1,000 followers with their social media profiles, often even hundreds of thousands to millions (Hudders & Beuckels, 2024, p. 638).

Using digital platforms for kidfluencing is accompanied by an increased risk of violence performed through these channels (Morales et al., 2023, p. 2162)[2]. Digital platforms "serve as catalysts for violent behaviors, reinforcing and legitimizing forms of oppression and symbolic violence, particularly the violence of language" (Recuero, 2024, p. 1). At the same time, policing does not align with this development. Rather, the internet must be regarded as a "largely law enforcement-free space" (Kattenberg, 2024, p. 131). Digital violence, which refers to diverse forms of harmful actions or practices carried out through digital technologies (such as digital hate speech, cybermobbing and cyberstalking), may infringe upon human rights and children's rights, especially the right to privacy, the freedom of expression and the freedom from violence (Coombs, 2021, p. 480) and it may have significant consequences for the physical and emotional well-being of victims.

A growing body of international literature is exploring the requirements for regulating kidfluencing as an official form of employment (child work) under national labor laws and child protection frameworks (Guzman, 2020; Huang, 2021; Masterson, 2021; Rohde-Abuba & Kreuzer, 2025), since kidfluencing is assumed to be associated with a wide range of negative effects for children, affecting "work-life balance, their education, how safe they felt online and physically, how they maintained friendships, pressure to increase their profile, and their mental health well-being" (Shomai et al., 2024, p. 1109).

Building on research that suggests a broad range of risks in kidfluencing, this article aims to provide a deeper analysis of specific risks of digital violence. While cases of especially younger kidfluencers exist, who are the central figures in digital content that is otherwise solely produced by parents (overlapping with so-called family influencing), this article specifically focuses on kidfluencers who at least have access to their digital accounts and, through this, experience digital violence, or are even the main actors in the entire kidfluencing process; namely the planning, producing and sharing of digital content.

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[1] In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, all minors will be referred to as children in this article, and no distinction will be made between children and adolescents.

[2] Since middle generations – such as parents, professionals, and researchers – interact with the internet differently from young people, they often fail to fully grasp the extent and nature of digital violence affecting children. It is crucial that younger parents, who are digital natives themselves and aware of their children's risks in the digital sphere, nevertheless struggle to develop effective protection strategies in the face of the dilemma that digitality is, at the same time, important for their children's learning and social participation (İnan-Kaya et al 2018, p. 156).

It has to be noted that, for reasons of analytical depth, this article excludes other risks – specifically those of commercial exploitation (Rohde-Abuba & Kreuzer, 2025) and sexualized violence (Rohde-Abuba, forthcoming) – that are also highly relevant for the overall assessment of risks related to kidfluencing. To investigate the potential harms of kidfluencing through digital violence, a national research perspective is necessary, even though kidfluencing is a global phenomenon: International companies integrate their advertising into local production contexts, and children perform digital labor for a global audience under local working conditions. As a result, regulating kidfluencing requires not only international oversight but also national legislation and child protection practices. This article illustrates that need through the case of Germany.

In order to investigate the risks of digital violence a comprehensive theoretical understanding of structures and dynamics of digital violence must be developed. For this endeavour, I will synthesize and adapt theoretical concepts from Galtung (1969, 1990; see also Wodajo, 2022) and Bourdieu (1991; see also Recuero, 2024) to the digital context. Hence, this approach will show how digital violence presents itself as a specific intersection of structural violence through algorithms and direct violence executed by individuals and groups on the internet. Both are primarily generated through symbolic violence, which may deeply compromise the emotional and physical well-being of "lived bodies" in a digital resonance space (Lindemann & Schünemann, 2020, p. 628).

Due to the reluctance of kidfluencer parents to consent to research interviews with their children, this study relies on German-language TV and online documentaries about kidfluencers. The data is supplemented with findings from a netnography focusing on the same kidfluencers. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, children's and parents' narratives of digital violence are reconstructed concerning its direct and structural components, as well as the cultural norms that enable violence. These results are related to netnographic research on negative comments and reactions to kidfluencers' digital activities, which reveal the enactment of digital violence.

2. Conceptualizing digital violence with the help of Galtung and Bourdieu

When it comes to the digital practices of young people, the distinction between 'online' and 'the real world', often intuited by middle and older generations, is "no longer an appropriate way to describe how [these] subjects experience using communication technology" (Lindemann & Schünemann, 2020, pp. 632-633, with reference to Licoppe, 2004, and van Doorn, 2011). Rather, digitality presents itself as a specific set of "structural conditions of action" (Stalder, 2018, p. 8) in young people's socialization, which not only result from technical developments but also involve social, economic, and political power dimensions (Stalder, 2018, p. 8). These power dimensions manifest in the interplay between online and offline structures through "mediatized communication as an interaction of lived bodies in a 'social resonance space'" (Lindemann & Schünemann, 2020, p. 628). Digital violence represents a specific aspect of this social resonance that may affect emotional and bodily well-being.

In this article, the work of Johan Galtung serves as a foundation for investigating digital violence. Galtung's original concept, developed for offline contexts, consists of the components of direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence, which can be adapted and applied to digital contexts. According to Galtung (1969, p. 168), violence refers to "avoidable insults to

basic human needs" (Galtung, 1990, p. 292). Violence "work[s] on the body" or "on the soul" (Galtung, 1969, p. 169). In the context of digital violence, insults primarily affect psychological well-being, but may also lead indirectly to physical harm. This may manifest in symptoms of stress, self-harm, or suicidality (for a comprehensive overview, see the meta-study by John et al., 2018).

At the core of Galtung's concept is a distinction between direct violence, which is carried out by a specific actor, and structural violence, which occurs without an identifiable individual perpetrator (Galtung, 1969, p. 170). In the digital context, direct violence is committed by individuals who attack their victims using digital tools and practices, such as via email, private messages, comments, pictures or videos, in 'posts', 'stories' or 'reactions'. These digital practices can be understood through Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence." Symbolism refers to the use of words or images that define a person's social position. As Bourdieu (1991, p. 120) states, every act of assigning a (derogatory) name signifies "to someone what [they are] and how [they] should conduct [themselves] as a consequence." Bourdieu argues that power stems from authority and legitimacy, enabling one to "impose a certain vision of the social world" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 106). This typically degrades the person being named while elevating the speaker. Recuero (2024, pp. 3, 7) describes symbolic violence in digital contexts as being characterized by toxicity, since violence "spread[s]" through algorithms and infrastructures, thereby "potentializ[ing]" its effect. When symbolic violence spreads digitally, it is therefore legitimized (Recuero, 2024, p. 7) and acts as a form of structural violence.

Structural violence is "built into the structure" (Galtung, 1969, p. 171), which in the digital context is most importantly represented through algorithms. "Algorithms do not represent the world" (Stalder, 2018, p. 13), even if we assume they do. Creating "unequal power and consequently [...] unequal life chances" (Galtung, 1969, p. 171), algorithms "influence what we see, how we navigate the world, and which options for action are available to us – or not" (Stalder, 2018, p. 13). Wodajo (2022, p. 4), building on Galtung's work on structural injustice, states that in the digital space, there is a "hybrid category" in which "a direct harm is identifiable but produced by underlying structural inequalities", such as the algorithmic spread of hate videos created by an individual actor.

Cultural violence, as the third component of Galtung's concept, refers to "any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form" (Galtung, 1990, p. 291). Hence, cultural violence includes norms, narratives, and beliefs that make "direct and structural violence look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong" (Galtung, 1990, p. 291), represented for example by the missing digital child protection mechanisms (see Livingstone et al., 2018), the chronic underestimation of online risks for children (Zumbrängel, 2020, p. 37; Imran et al, 2023) or inadequate safe-by-design mechanism that delete violent data before it circulates. Apart from that, symbolic violence "operates through culture and language" (Recuero, 2024, p. 2), as it arises from systems of knowledge and beliefs about social hierarchies that are instrumentalized to harm individuals or groups.

3. Methodology

As the methodological basis for this article, various documentaries on kidfluencing in German-speaking countries were examined, with the findings cross-referenced through a netnographic

analysis of these cases. Thus, this methodological strategy provides a dual perspective by linking discourse with the performativity of digital violence.

Although male kidfluencers exist, data material from multiple TV and online documentaries only featured females. Documentaries were selected because they provide information on kidfluencing practices and experiences involving children under the age of 15 respective children who report about digital experiences when they were younger than 15, which is the legal threshold for child labor in Germany. The sample consists of all documentaries that met these criteria and were accessible at the time of analysis.

Table: Data Material

ID	Title of Documentary (translated to English)	Country and Publisher	Year of Publication	Name and Age of Kidfluencer
Documentary A (DA)	Girl Gang	Swiss cinema production about German kidfluencer	2022	Leonie (approx. 14 to 18)
Documentary B (DB)	Underage TikTok Stars – The Tough Reality of the Business	German TV production by the public station WDR	2021	Laila (15), Annalena (11), Alisha (16)
Documentary C (DC)	Child Influencers: Is This Already Work?	German online production published on the YouTube channel "reporter" produced by the public station WDR	2020	Luisa (9)
Documentary D (DD)	YouTube, Instagram & Co.: Child Labor in Social Media	German TV production by the public station BR	2019	Illia (12), possibly external material of Miley (approx. 8)
Documentary E (DE)	The New Child Star Phenomenon: Kidfluencers	German production by the private television station Vox	2021	Coco (14)
Documentary F (DF)	Insta-Fame at 14: Has This Gone Too Far?	German production by the online channel "follow me.reports", part of the public broadcasters ARD and ZDF	2021	Emilia (14, the same individual as in DG)
Documentary G (DG)	Do You See Me – Growing Up as a Social Media Star	German production by the public TV station ARD	2023	Emilia (16)
Documentary H (DH)	The Business with Child Influencers on YouTube	German production by journalist Mirko Drotschmann, also known as "MrWissen2Go.", which is a network of the public stations ARD and ZDF	2019	Emily (12)

The methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis is used to examine how the documentaries represent power structures as intertextually shared discourse elements that enact "dominance and inequality" (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). This analysis of the documentaries is further supplemented by selected findings from a netnography (Kozinets, 2021), which facilitates the examination of digital images and video material (Wegner et al., 2024). While all of the cases were screened through netnography, the materials presented in the documentaries were no longer accessible in some instances and partly irrelevant to the analysis, so only specific findings are reported in this article.

Critical Discourse Analysis in this article focuses on adultism as the primary power structure shaping relationships between minors and their parents. This is reiterated in the concept of the "childhood gaze" (Rohde-Abuba, 2026), which reflects an adult's "act of seeing" (Foucault

1976, p. 9) from a position of power over children's digital practices and experiences, including violence and legitimizing the (non)regulation of them. This perspective is evident in the documentaries' interviews with parents.

In interviews with children, the data also reveal the "children's gaze" on digital violence and their own agency in coping with it (Rohde-Abuba, forthcoming). While children's voices cannot be entirely freed from adultism, the epistemic interest lies in exploring children's perspectives on their life worlds – their gaze, their understanding of power and regulation, and their agency. Thus, Critical Discourse Analysis aims to reconstruct both versions of 'the gaze', revealing the knowledge patterns and beliefs of parents and children, which are shaped by the power structures of their life-worlds (see also Recuero, 2024, p. 2), and relate them to the netnographic findings of kidfluencing practices.

4. Empirical findings on digital hate speech

Digital hate speech refers to "attributions of inequality in digital speech acts" (Struck & Wagner 2022, p. 180), e.g. discriminatory, offensive, or threatening content aimed at individuals or groups that is spread through digital platforms such as social media, websites, forums, messaging apps, or other online communication channels.

Through netnography, a typical example of public hate speech was found on Emilia's account. On July 7, 2020, Emilia posted a dancing video on Instagram. At the time of analysis, it had around 100 likes, though it is unclear whether Instagram displays the total number of likes to other accounts. Very few of these accounts use clear names and identifiable profile pictures. However, names and pictures often suggest that they belonged to young people of all genders. As Koutamanis et al. (2015, p. 486) argue, young people on social media primarily receive positive comments in quantitative terms, which presumably reflects online peer communication styles and the dynamics of structuring digital contexts through 'likes' (Stalder 2018, p. 13). Thus, many users positively commented Emilia's video, such as calling her "cute" or "pretty." Others reacted to Emilia's caption, asking where they were on holiday. Beyond many positive comments on Emilia's video, one comment identifiable as hate speech in the context of ableism was found. A person with the username "alex_0711love", with the profile information "Alex Rsngr 0711❤️Only good vibes and feelings❤️Very open-minded❤️Life is damn fucking beautiful❤️Enjoy all❤️Investments❤️Börsenhandel❤️Kryptotrading❤️Immobilien" and a profile photo of a middle-aged white man posted a hateful, ableist comment. Below Emilia's dancing video, "Alex Rsngr 0711" commented: "What kind of spasms are these, you spaz? (Was sind das für Spackungen du Spast?)" without receiving any reactions. Here, 'Alex Rsngr 0711' uses symbolic violence by "naming" (Bourdieu 1991, p. 237) Emilia with a derogatory term.

So, referring to Galtung this a typical form of direct violence working "on the soul" (Galtung, 1969, p. 169) with the help of semantic or visual symbolism that denounces "to someone what [they are] and how [they] should conduct [themselves] as a consequence" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 106). Similar to other cases in the sample, direct digital violence appears to be perpetrated by young adult to middle-aged men, although it is questionable how reliable the given profile information are. The state of research remains unclear on the question of gender. As elaborated in a meta-study by Lee and Sonah (2023, p. 2), some studies suggest a male bias in hate speech, while others find no significant gender differences in its perpetration.

It is suggested in research that digital hate speech presents as a "social practice" aimed at gaining "feelings of power and self-efficacy" (Struck & Wagner, 2022, p. 191). As the profile information, with an emphasis on stock and real estate trading, does not suggest any shared interests with Emilia, it can be assumed that the perpetrator mainly interacted with her to harm her. This illustrates a specific form of cultural violence in digital spaces, where hate speech is made to seem "at least not wrong" (Galtung, 1990, p. 291), because on a direct level, there are no reliable reactions from other users, and on a structural level, no safeguarding measures exist to prevent or counter it.

Similar cases of digital hate speech were reported in the documentaries. In the documentary E, Coco's mother explains that she monitors the comments and messages on her daughter's channel, trying to delete harmful content before Coco sees it. This appears to be a rather common practice, as the parents of Emilia and Annalena also report that they delete negative comments and block or report users who appear dangerous. Another parental strategy is to disable all comments on their children's accounts, which was the case for Luisa and Illia at the time of the analysis. This highlights the absence of built-in protective measures in the digital apps (for example by automatically deleting certain words) as a specific cultural component of enabling digital violence. The mother reports that comments directed at Coco include "You look like you're 9 years old," "Go back to your country. You don't belong in Germany," "You have no breasts," or "You are a stick" (DE 03:36 ff.)[3]. Thus, as suggested by Silva et al. (2016, p. 689), insults typically center around the categories of race and gender, whereas classism did not appear in the kidfluencing data. It is crucial to note that racist and sexist comments, as exemplified in Coco's account, often directly refer to features of the kidfluencer's body. Therefore, symbolism is closely related to the physicality of the child.

The agency of Coco's mother is for her daughter to be exposed only to positive feedback on her videos (DE 03:25). Thus, the mother individually provides protective measures against emotional harm for her child, which are not enacted by social media providers or clients of kidfluencers even though they are required by law for children in other types of entertainment work. This reiterates, on the one hand, that kidfluencing takes place in a legal gray zone, and on the other hand, that it depends on the individual efforts of parents to protect their children.

Reflecting on the hateful comments, that she tries to delete, Coco's mother notes that those who write such messages "are often still juveniles" (DE 04:06). This reveals the mother's perspective on childhood and youth in digital contexts, as she interprets these forms of symbolic violence as being carried out by young people (even though she cannot know the identities of the subscribers) and dismisses them as rather harmless. Similarly, the father of Emily says that he deletes comments "when harsh insults up to death threats like 'Go die' (geh sterben) appear" (DH 06:35 ff.). However, he states that he believes "it's not that important to her to engage with negative people. I think Emily focuses on the positive aspects" (DH 06:47) Hence, in the parental gaze on childhood depicted here, digital violence among young people is considered a regular aspect of digital peer interactions. Likewise, it is assumed that it does not significantly affect young people.

In the documentaries, also kidfluencers report cases of hate speech by minors or adults with whom they have no offline connection. Based on this data, it seems that kidfluencers are not as concerned with deleting hate speech, but rather cope with it in a different way, which illustrates the children's gaze on digitality. Elaborating on her experiences with digital violence,

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[3] DE 03:36ff. refers to Documentary E at three minutes and 36 seconds and the following

Alisha says that when receiving the first negative comments on her posts she was very astonished and did not understand why people would write such negative messages. She felt like "I didn't do anything to them" (DB, 17:34). However, in the meantime she learned "how to cope with it" (17:41), which means that she does not engage with it. Similarly, talking about the 'dos and don'ts' of influencing, Emilia suggests, "not to engage with hate and not to let yourself be too influenced by others." (DG 25:35). This mirrors Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence, in which "naming" can only be carried out from a position of power (1991, p. 237), "to impose a certain vision of the social world." Hence, not to engage in digital hate can function for kidfluencers as denying the perpetrator any authority to impose a relevant vision of the world. When considering the specific context of digital spaces, it becomes clear that these spaces result from "response presence" (Knorr-Cetina, 2009, p. 74, with reference to Goodwin, 1981), which means that digital presence—and with it relevance—is established through reacting to each other's data. Not reacting can therefore be understood as a protective strategy by kidfluencers to withhold digital relevance from perpetrators. However, to mitigate the risks of kidfluencing and make it a safe form of digital work, it is necessary not to rely on children's own competencies, but to establish structural safeguarding measures that remove violent content before it gains relevance.

5. Empirical findings on cybermobbing

Cybermobbing (also known as cyberbullying) refers to the harassment, defamation, or systematic attack on a person through digital communication channels. I differentiate cybermobbing from hate speech in that the latter typically manifests as a single attack, whereas the former consists of systematic, repeated attacks by the same offender or, as shown below, interconnected attacks by multiple offenders.

Cybermobbing may involve minors or adults who have offline relationships with the victim, or it may occur purely in online interactions. The first type is shown in Emilia's documentary. She remembers that when she started influencing at the age of ten, her classmates closely observed her online activities (which can be categorized as cyberstalking, see below). She recalls: "At that time, I didn't want to go to school anymore. For example, they created [online] groups about me where they gossiped about me" (DF 04:00). This highlights that young people do not live in separate online and offline worlds; rather, these dimensions merge into a unified reality where violence can amplify itself. Digitality presents as a specific structural component of this form of cybermobbing that allows perpetrators to execute violence online, which is only visible to people who have access to these online spaces. Hence, cybermobbing often is hidden from parents and professionals, who typically do not participate in these spaces. Moreover, cybermobbing does not remain merely at a symbolic level but also impacts everyday behaviors, such as causing individuals to avoid certain social situations, as shown in Emilia's example.

According to Ballaschk et al. (2021, pp. 473, 475), cybermobbing and digital hate in school and classroom contexts arises from the perpetrators' need to achieve or maintain their status by demeaning other children or compensating for feelings of inferiority. As kidfluencing typically leads to an increase in attention and appreciation (also shown in the DA for the case of Leonie), it may expose the child in school contexts and challenge peer relationships, which might require support from parents and professionals to prevent violence.

A drastic example of cybermobbing is shown in documentary A, in a so-called YouTube 'reaction video' by the young male adult influencer Mustihaft (DA 1:06:13), which was also traced through netnography. In this type of influencing hate towards other content creators is commodified to gain digital traffic as a structural component of digital violence. The video is titled "Leoobalys Must Be Stopped! CRINGE WARNING (Leoobalys muss gestoppt werden! CRINGE WARNING)" and was published on February 22, 2019. It had 1,203,953 views at the time of analysis. The video is 10 minutes and 40 seconds long, showing small snippets of Leonie's Instagram and TikTok videos (often of her dancing), imitating and insulting her.

At the beginning of the video, Mustihaft states that followers can send him Instagram videos that he will "make fun of", with "dark humor" (03:17). He also calls on his audience to send him names of influencers or musicians that he should "make fun of", illustrating the dynamics of interactive cyberbullying (03:07). As Struck and Wagner argue (2022, p. 191), against the backdrop of social and economic digital inequalities – with successful (kid)fluencers as a privileged group – digital hate becomes a performative act to consolidate a collective group of disadvantaged users for whom digital attention and recognition seem unattainable.

At the same time, the devaluation of kidfluencers through specific online dynamics is a tool for gaining the attention as illustrated by the case of Mustihaft. While watching Leonie's videos, he continuously insults her, saying things like "fuck your mother" (05:52) or "shut your fucking mouth, you son of a bitch" (06:18), partly claiming that he hates the song more than Leonie's dancing (06:23). The symbolic climax of the video is when he, imitating Leonie (who was blowing glitter into the camera), spits on his lens and says "son of a bitch, dude" (08:11) as well as "fucked-up monstrosity, because of you" (08:15), while cleaning the lens and insinuating that he spat on the lens because of Leonie. He later claims that she made "the most stupid McDonald's commercial he has ever seen" and spits into the camera again (09:01). At the time of analysis, the video had 5,671 comments, some expressing explicit hatred toward Leonie, but most of them positively commenting on Mustihaft and referring to the spitting as something very funny and hilarious. For example, the user "@lanajaa-en7yk" commented, "I almost had a heart attack when he spat on the camera 😂😂😂❤️❤️ #MUSTIFIZIERTE😍😘❤️❤️", which received 346 likes. This example mirrors the argument of ElSherief et al (2018, p. 1), that online visibility can be generated through targeting a popular account with hate. Audiences that specifically consume these accounts for the sensation of hateful content function as an "echo chamber" (Recuero 2024, p. 4), where symbolic violence is legitimized both indirectly through clicks and shares and directly through positive comments, which all serve as "authorization signals" (Recuero 2024, p. 6 with reference to Bourdieu, 1991).

Many social media apps do not depend only on "likes" for structuring a community as Stalder suggests (2018, p. 13), but also clicks may be treated as indicators of relevance. Algorithms show highly clicked contents more often so that a shared horizon is not only constructed through appreciation but also hate. This shows that digital violence as a "hybrid" form of direct and structural violence according to Wodajo (2022, p. 4) does not only arise from direct violence, but also from structural violence, both of which are legitimized through a specific digital culture.

Hateful content generates online traffic and can therefore benefit content creators, such as Mustihaft, as high-arousal emotions of anger and outrage tend to attract more user attention (Berger & Milkman, 2012, p. 192; see also Struck & Wagner, 2022, p. 184). Because platforms rely on monetization, they use algorithms to showcase popular content that either aligns with

users' networks or drives higher engagement (Recuero, 2024, p. 4). Additionally, the algorithms of some platforms tend to favor extreme content, as it serves as a gateway to even more extreme material (Ribeiro et al., 2020). This reiterates the specificity of digital violence, which lies in two interlinked dimensions: direct digital violence enacted by a specific offender, such as Mustihaft, and the subsequent structural violence driven by algorithms that amplify the video's virality—an effect that, in turn, appears to legitimize the violence.

While, according to Koutamanis et al. (2015, p. 487), negative comments occur only in small numbers, they may have a strong impact on the mental well-being due to their visibility to others and their potentially undeletable nature. In Leonie's documentary, while scenes of Mustihaft's reaction video are shown, her voice is heard saying "I feel the hate every day. You are so full of shit. Just die. I will find you. I will kill you" (DA 1:07:39) Here, the intersection of online and offline risks and the intersection of emotional and (potential) physical harms become obvious when cybermobber threaten to search for Leonie and kill her. Hence, as suggested by Lindemann and Schünemann (2020, pp. 632-633) Leonie does not interact in a separated cyberspace and a 'real world' but both dimensions are interwoven with each other into one lifeworld of children, that is not shared by parents in the same way as they are not targeted by these forms of violence. While parents can reduce the effects of cyberbullying by deleting harmful content from their child's own channels, they cannot control abuse directed at their children on other channels. Therefore, effective safeguarding requires the cooperation of platforms to remove digital violence against minors across all channels and in all forms of content that reproduce it.

6. Empirical findings on cyberstalking

Stalking refers to a pattern of repeated and unwanted attention, harassment, or surveillance directed at an individual, causing fear, distress, or anxiety. When digital media or technology are used for stalking, it is typically referred to as cyberstalking. This behavior can include actions such as sending the victim unwanted messages, showing up at their home or workplace, or monitoring their online activities.

The essence of kidfluencing as the commodification of online peer and friendship practices (Rohde-Abuba & Kreuzer, 2025) and its risks to children's privacy and well-being are reflected in a small comment found through netnography on Laila's account: Below a TikTok dancing video of Laila published on February 13, 2022, a user with the name "jj<3" commented, "I know where you live, let's be friends." The account is anonymous, using a photo that appears to be of a female but is not clearly identifiable and could be unrelated to the user. The account only has two anonymous videos and a low number of followers. As the account follows other accounts with very similar names and unidentifiable photos, it is likely that these are fake accounts. Laila does not follow any of the accounts, making these one-sided relationships.

The comment is interesting in many ways: It is based on the claim of having private information about Laila. The pressures connected to this may, firstly, result in the possibility that this person will show up at Laila's house and, secondly, that her address is leaked online – a phenomenon called doxing. In doxing, the specific intermingling of direct violence and structural violence that characterizes digitality becomes obvious. While it normally requires individual efforts to search for and identify the address of a kidfluencer and possibly visit her house or share this information with others (direct violence), the kidfluencer's private information, once

it enters public space, becomes accessible to anyone who looks for it, regardless of the kidfluencer's intention or control. Moreover, information remains indelible on the internet, as downloaded data cannot be deleted.

Interestingly, in the documentation it is reported that actually followers had shown up a Laila's house before. Laila's father says that at their former house, three teenage boys (around 15 to 16 years old) came by because they wanted to see where Laila lived. They stood in front of the house, rang the doorbell, and tried to take pictures of the interior (DB 23:20). However, the father says that the boys "were actually quite nice" and just wanted to see Laila's house (DB 23:27). This narrative resembles the 'childhood gaze' presented by Coco's mother and Emily's father, who accept mobbing and stalking in kidfluencing as regular forms of peer interaction. When the reporter asks how the family would feel if "someone else" were to find their house – implying that the young boys were harmless, but others (older men?) might not be – the father responds that they are "not afraid" of such situations. The mother agrees, saying (DB 23:46) "it's still within reasonable limits." It is unclear what she exactly means by this, but it is evident that the parents do not perceive high risks of cyberstalking for their daughter. In Laila's case, the documentary includes footage of the exterior of the house and several rooms inside, making it easy to locate, if it is their actual home and not a set staged for the documentary.

Alisha recalls a terrifying incident of fan stalking, when she received a message from a young man who sent her a video of himself standing in front of her house at 1 a.m. (DB 20:37). Thus, in her case, the parents at that time did not implement protective measures against harmful messages, which she received directly and unsupervised. She was very scared and went to her mother, who was at home with her. Since then, Alisha says that she has stopped filming outside her house (DB 20:48). This is an astonishing statement because parts of Documentary B appear to be filmed outside her (supposed) home and in her neighbourhood making the place, too, easily identifiable.

Laila's and Alisha's cases, in which stalking is connected rather to fandom, can be contrasted with Leonie's case of stalking linked to obvious hatred. As shown in the previous chapter, Leonie receives messages saying, "I will find you" and "I will kill you." This threat unquestionably refers to the offline dimension and violence that "work[s] on the body" (Galtung, 1969, p. 169), while it certainly also impacts "the soul" (Galtung, 1969, p. 169). In Leonie's documentary, it is reported that the family has been "mobbed" by an "internet stalker" for over a year (DA 1:18:16). This individual spreads harmful rumors about them and contacts their clients with negative information, making the family fear losing commissions. In response, Leonie's father has decided to file a criminal complaint with the police (DA 1:18:33). However, in the documentary, it appears that Leonie, in her 'children's gaze' on digitality, is much more aware of the risks of sharing private information online than her father. In one scene, she reprimands her father for filming their house in the background, pointing out that it could be easily identifiable: "If I upload it now, everyone will see it forever." (DA 1:30:58). She is visibly frustrated and complains that he only listened to her after she had repeatedly warned him. Nonetheless, he ultimately complies with her request. Interestingly, while Leonie does not allow her father to post content revealing their place of residence, the documentary extensively shows their (supposed) house from the outside, the sports field where Leonie trains, and several car rides between locations the family regularly visits. The family's supposed home address can also be found online through the father's name.

Differing the above shown cases, Coco's mother explains that she does not want her daughter "to be stalked." For that reason, she believes parents must always "observe their children and

check what they do" (DE 10:22). Thus, leaking private information and interacting with unknown individuals is perceived by her as a risk related to children's lack of responsibility, not parents' risky online practices (see Leonie's father). However, in this documentary, the family's apartment is only shown from the inside, car rides are filmed only in the inner city, and their private address cannot easily be identified through family members' names. This suggests a better practice of parental or documentary editors' responsibility in child safeguarding. To reduce risks for all kidfluencers and create a safe working environment, independent of their parents' awareness and engagement, platforms must disable the publication and spread of minors' private information.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined how kidfluencing may expose minors to distinct forms of digital violence – hate speech, cybermobbing, and cyberstalking – that operate not only as isolated acts of aggression but as structurally mediated processes. Drawing on Galtung's triad of direct, structural, and cultural violence, refracted through Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence, the analysis has shown how the violence directed at kidfluencers emerges from a dual dynamic: it is enacted by individuals but gains its potency and persistence through algorithmic infrastructures that amplify and normalize it. Thus, digital violence may occur as "an event" caused by an individual perpetrator, but through algorithms, it can develop into "a process" of structural violence that continuously confronts the victim with hateful content (cf. Galtung, 1990, p. 294). The analysis shows that in the 'children's gaze', e.g. the perspective of children on power structures in their lifeworlds, digitality serves as a reference structure for their lives, in which digital symbolism – such as hate speech, cyberbullying, or cyberstalking – not only works "on the soul" (Galtung, 1969, p. 169) but also materializes in physical experiences of stress, fear, and avoidance resulting from degradation, threats and violations of privacy.

The parents' perspective (the 'childhood gaze') on digital childhoods reveals the "invariant" of cultural violence (Galtung, 1969, p. 169), which largely negates its relevance to their children's digital experiences. However, digital violence must not be regarded as an accidental byproduct of digital culture but constitutive of its very functioning: the affective economy of virality depends not only on admiration but also on outrage, contempt, and degradation. Platforms convert such emotions into visibility, and visibility into economic value. Kidfluencers become nodal points in this economy, positioned at the intersection of two forms of precarity – childhood's structural dependency and platform capitalism's extractive logics. The analysis thus suggests that kidfluencers are not simply vulnerable users who need protection within existing frameworks, but rather subjects whose digital activities reveal the underlying structural violence of digital capitalism itself.

This has profound implications for regulation. The absence of safe-by-design measures and protocols established by platform providers and public institutions as invariants of cultural violence leave untouched the platform architectures that currently externalize the costs of digital violence onto children's emotional and bodily well-being, which may or may not be protected by their parents.

While some parents engage in deleting harmful messages and comments as an auxiliary strategy to mitigate harm that has already occurred, children display a different coping mechanism

that reflects their socialization as digital natives: by not reacting to hate, kidfluencers and bystanders deny symbolic violence any relevance or authority – an essential condition for its effectiveness in the sense of Bourdieu. Consequently, hate that goes unacknowledged in the logic of digitality disappears behind more 'clicked' and 'liked' content. Nevertheless, this form of digital violence significantly harms kidfluencers' well-being.

Any regulatory regime against digital violence must begin from children's own experiential epistemology of digitality as a unified lifeworld. Taking the children's gaze seriously implies designing not only legal safeguards but alternative socio-technical infrastructures that refuse to convert children's visibility and information into commodified data flows in the first place. In this sense, regulating kidfluencing requires more than child protection; it requires a paradigm shift. If digital platforms are to remain part of children's social worlds, they must be reconfigured to operate on the premise that the production of attention cannot come at the expense of children's rights. This entails embedding protective mechanisms at the infrastructural level (such as pre-emptive filtering of violent content, the erasure of identifying data, and algorithmic de-optimization of hate-driven virality) while also transforming cultural understandings of childhood that normalize exposure to harm as a byproduct of participation. Only when children are recognized not as miniature adults navigating risk, but as epistemic subjects whose ways of being digital differ from adults', can regulation address the foundational asymmetry that currently renders kidfluencing a site of normalized violence.

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