

Child Star or Child Exploitation?

The 21st century is known as a technological turning point for the world in many different categories. We've invented things such as nanomedicine, 3-D printed body parts, MRIs, self-driving cars, drones, and so much more. But the most important out of all these? Social media. Arguably, the creation of smartphones and social media were the most influential invention of the 21st century. The evolution of YouTube, Tiktok, Snapchat, and Instagram has benefited the world in more ways than one, such as giving job opportunities to people who wouldn't have them otherwise and creating communities where people with common interests and problems can come together. From these opportunities emerged a new type of greed. The greed for fame. People from all over the world developed a fever for likes and follows, no matter the expense, and this expense surely did not stop at children. The rise of Internet fame created the rise of something much darker that was hidden from behind the camera — child-based channels. They are unethical in the ways in which they exploit children; therefore, we should not watch them.

Piper Rockelle is a prime example of how child-based channels are built off of child exploitation and labor. Piper Rockelle started her journey with fame in 2016, when she was only eight years old. She started out making YouTube videos showcasing various challenges, pranks, and just her day-to-day life. Once she started to gain traction, her mother Tiffany Smith decided to expand her brand and invite other children her age to collaborate. They later created a content house in which all of them lived. The group later coined the name *The Squad*, which consisted of 10 members; Sophie Fergi, Gavin Magnus, Sawyer Sharbino, Hayden Haas, Corinne Joy, Symmone Harrison, Piper's two cousins Clair and Reese Rocksmith, Lev Cameron, and, of

course, Piper Rockelle. At first, nothing was wrong with their content, and they all described it as being a fun and enjoyable hobby, but then viewers started to notice something strange. Their videos became increasingly more scandalous and inappropriate for their age. The girls' clothes became more revealing, and their makeup more suitable for a 50-year-old woman. The boys were starting to say more flagrant things and initiating intimate movements such as kisses or hand placement. When some of the parents tried to voice their concerns, they would get shut down and told it had to be done in order to be successful. Heather Fergi, in a documentary, later said that Smith had allegedly told her, "Piper is not Sophie. She needs to show more" (*Bad Influence*). They would film videos concerning pranks/dares with their *ships* or other male friends to the point where people would start to catch on and question them. It started to become clearer that their target audience was no longer geared towards young kids. The content was becoming more risqué and sexual despite concerns. They noticed that as long as their videos fell under this genre, they would get two times the views than normal. Sharbino stated, "Tiffany absolutely wanted to do more questionable content to get more views and likes" (*Bad Influence*). The more sex appeal there was, the more views and attention the video got and therefore more money was pulled in. Now the squad members started to describe their hobby as work and unenjoyable. Fergi said, "We were filming ten to fifteen videos a day. We would start at 11 AM and film until 1-2AM and this was every day of the week" (*Bad Influence*). Clair Rocksmith's mother also came out to say that a lot of the time, the kids didn't have time to eat and would skip meals in order to meet their film quota. They felt that this is what they had to do in order to keep their fanbase, and if they stopped, so would their revenue. Even though child channels are marketed to be relatable, fun content, they often have a dark side the audience can't see, or the children can be manipulated into catering to a type of content in which they aren't comfortable.

The squad is an example of how exploitation and labor is the foundation of child-based YouTube channels.

Unfortunately, the Rockelles are not the only controversial family with the problem of exploiting their children because the LaBrandt family would eventually come into frame, and they would prompt concern for family channels and child exploitation for the rest of their career. This family's channel is built on the exploitation and neglect of their first daughter Everleigh. The channel started out focusing on the mom Savannah LaBrandt and her daughter Everleigh LaBrandt, and they would make cute mother-daughter videos which was what first gave them traction. Later on, Savannah met her future husband Cole LaBrandt who would later help build their Internet fame to what it is now. Their videos started off innocent and cute but slowly started to turn the opposite direction once the parents realized what was giving them views: Everleigh. From then on, their content became strictly around Everleigh. Pranks, routines, performances, you name it — it was filmed. The issue with this was there was no sense of privacy from what the viewers could see. Videos were uploaded everyday from staged pranks to mundane tasks that Everleigh was performing. They would post very personal information about Everleigh as well. They uploaded a video of Savannah reading a love letter that was given to her by Everleigh's deceased dad. And while they laughed about how sappy and childish it was, you could hear Everleigh crying and begging them to stop in the background. The response? The camera panned over to her five-year-old face, soaked with tears and snot without any remorse or comfort. As the years went on, the family grew bigger. The newest members being Posie Rayne, Sunday Savannah, Zealand Cole, and Beckham Blue. And with the births of these children, more content about them was pushed out. Fans would go crazy after each pregnancy was revealed and live births were given to them. The size of their family isn't the issue. It's the lack of responsibility

and care they have for each of the children. Rumors spread across social media about how the family only has as many kids as they do for views and clickbait, and they make their oldest (Everleigh) take care of them instead of staying in school. While the family never outwardly addressed whether or not Everleigh had been attending school during that time, they did suspiciously reveal that their children *decided* to become homeschooled. Their family channel has explicitly shown how they violate their children's privacy from filming the moment they are born to their vulnerable moments. And we as viewers support this type of abuse through watching these videos. However, it's not always as plain to see, and most of the time, we don't even notice until it's too late and the perpetrator has gotten away with it.

Child channels not only pose a problem for the child in the present but can have long-term effects for the rest of their life. For example, child exploitation significantly increases the chances of mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression and eating disorders. This is because the constant stress and emotional instability they experience during their formative years ultimately catches up with them in their adult years, impacting their ability to sustain relationships, jobs, and other important social relationships. Statistics show that 77% of substance abusers have had some sort of trauma before the age of 16 (Farrugia). Which is well before the age of when child stars get exposed to social media and essentially the cause of their later trauma. A lot of child stars grow up to have more complex trauma than single-incident trauma because it stems from prolonged and repeated problems. This could lead to distorted self identity and dissociation as they age and could be especially worse if they are not suggested to receive therapy or any form of professional help.

With the rise of social media, there are pros and cons, as there is for everything. However, child exploitation cannot be ignored. It isn't always easy to see as it is to hide, often

masked under the guise of a child's dream life. You can't always see the signs until it's too late.

For this reason, it's important to pay attention to how old the child on your screen is, and

remember, that not everything online is as it seems.

Work cited

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