


Staging affection: the performance of child influencers in digital cosmetics advertising

Afeto em cena: a performance das influenciadoras mirins na publicidade digital de cosméticos

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ABSTRACT: In this article, we investigate how child influencers create affective bonds with young audiences on Instagram to legitimize cosmetic consumption practices. We conducted a qualitative and exploratory study based on content analysis of 38 sponsored posts published in 2024 by three Brazilian child influencers. We identified strategies of staged affectivity, such as catchphrases, affectionate gestures, and everyday narratives, that embed products in an apparently organic manner within formats such as “get ready with me” and “unboxings.” We found a lack of advertising disclosures and evidence of the exploitation of children’s vulnerability, which underscores the urgency of regulatory updates and the need to deepen academic debate on digital advertising targeted at children.

Keywords: child influencers; children’s advertising; affectivity; consumption; social media.

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RESUMO: Neste artigo investigamos como influenciadoras mirins constroem vínculos afetivos com o público infantil no Instagram para legitimar práticas de consumo de cosméticos. Realizamos uma pesquisa qualitativa e exploratória, baseada na análise de conteúdo de 38 postagens patrocinadas de 3 influenciadoras mirins brasileiras publicadas em 2024. Identificamos estratégias de afetividade encenada, como bordões, gestos carinhosos e narrativas cotidianas, que inserem produtos de forma aparentemente orgânica em formatos como *get ready with me* e *unboxings*. Constatamos a ausência de sinalização publicitária e a exploração da vulnerabilidade infantil, o que reforça a urgência de atualização regulatória e de aprofundamento do debate acadêmico sobre publicidade digital voltada à infância.

Palavras-chave: influenciadoras mirins; publicidade infantil; afetividade; consumo; redes sociais.

Introduction

In recent decades, marketing directed to young audiences has undergone significant transformations, especially driven by the reconfiguration of the contemporary media ecosystem. If traditional media — such as television and radio — once played a hegemonic role in the construction of imageries and in the symbolic mediation of child consumption, the advent of digital platforms profoundly redesigned these dynamics. Nowadays, social media are not only privileged spaces of sociability and entertainment for children, but also strategic channels of advertising dissemination. In this new scenario, child influencers occupy a prominent place, acting not only as content sources, but as symbolic mediators between brands and children's audiences.

The presence of children as producers of advertising content, often under the pretext of spontaneity, has intensified on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. These influencers build engaging, aesthetically cared-for narratives that combine elements of playfulness, affectivity, and everyday life to promote products. In the field of cosmetics, influencers are predominant. These types of content, although coated with informality and playfulness, act as persuasion strategies that potentiate early consumption and reinforce aesthetic and behavioral patterns still in childhood.

The most relevant — and, at the same time, the most worrisome — aspect of these practices lies in the veiled and affective form with which advertising is embedded in the media everyday life of children. By simulating an intimate relationship with the audience, child influencers build authenticity performances that dissolve the boundaries between entertainment and advertising. Through catchphrases, affectionate expressions, childlike language, and affectionate gestures, they create strategies of identification, engagement, and trust with young audiences.

The qualification of “veiled” attributed to such advertising insertions is worth problematizing. Although this adjective is justified by the absence of explicit identification as advertising content, the fake character

is only formal. At the discursive level, however, there is little to be veiled: When seeing these posts, the promotional intention that underlies them becomes evident. The supposed spontaneity is broken by the obvious marketing appeal — which, although not labeled as advertising, is revealed as such by the structure, the vocabulary used and, above all, the underlying commercial purpose. It is therefore a legal and rhetorical camouflage that does not stand up to the critical analysis of the content.

In the specific case of cosmetics advertising, we observe a symbolic construction of children's vanity as aspirational value. Skincare products, makeup, and perfumes are presented as an integral part of child influencers' everyday life, naturalizing habits traditionally associated with adulthood and shifting the boundaries of childhood to the universe of aesthetics and consumption. This simulation of normality, combined with the affective appeal, makes the advertising message even more effective and paradoxically more difficult to be identified as such, especially by an audience under cognitive development.

Within this context, in this article, we aim to analyze how child influencers create affective bonds with the children's audience to legitimize practices of cosmetics consumption on social media, especially on Instagram. We start from the premise that the affectivity staged on the posts works as an essential communication strategy for the naturalized ad placement in the daily life of digital childhood. To this end, we adopt content analysis as a method, based on a corpus composed of videos of three Brazilian child influencers, produced throughout the year 2024.

The discussion is based on authors such as Juliet Schor (2004), Henry Jenkins (2006), David Buckingham (2007), and Crystal Abidin (2018), whose theories allow us to understand the development of digital culture, persuasive communication, and child consumption. By the end of the article, we intend to contribute to the debate on the ethical limits of children's advertising on social media, as well as to the critical reflection on the aesthetics of affection as a persuasive tool in the contemporary digital environment.

Theoretical Basis

Digital influencers and the performance of authenticity

The phenomenon of digital influencers, especially in the social media context, has been redefining communication practices between brands and audiences. In the specific case of child influencers, a singular performance is observed, marked by the fusion between spontaneity, affectivity, and ad placement in disguise. This emotional construction can be interpreted in light of the concept of calibrated amateurism developed by Abidin (2017), who describes an aesthetic and performative practice in which authenticity is carefully staged to look spontaneous and unpretentious. Although Abidin (2017) deals with the concept in contexts that are not restricted to the children's universe, an approximation can be made between the author's theoretical formulation and the performative dynamics carried out by child influencers, especially regarding the simulation of intimacy and naturalness as a strategy of capitalization of attention.

This affective performance, based on emotional bonds with the followers, becomes even more powerful when the message source is a child talking directly with other children. In this dynamic, the advertising discourse is permeated by informal language, expressions of affection, and narrative constructions that seek engagement through empathy. As Henry Jenkins (2006) points out in his study on the culture of convergence, contemporary content operates under hybrid logics, dissolving the boundaries between advertising, entertainment, and the audience participation. The influencer ceases to be just a transmission channel to become an affective mediator of consumer practices.

The symbolic capital of these influencers is linked not only to visibility, but also to the ability to produce a discourse that simulates authenticity, intimacy, and identification. In the case of children, this staged authenticity creates the illusion of a shared consumption, reinforced by the idea that "children like me use the same products I do." Affectivity, therefore, is not only a communication style, but a key strategy in legitimizing influence.

Children's advertising and the construction of desire

Children's advertising is historically one of the most effective ways of mobilizing desire, making use of children's cognitive and emotional vulnerabilities. Juliet Schor (2004), economist and professor of Sociology at Boston College, analyzes this phenomenon as pester power, in which advertising creates messages that induce children to develop a strong desire for specific products, leading them to persistently push their parents for it until they give in. According to Schor (2004), this pressure is exerted by psychological mechanisms such as repetition, emotional appeal, affective blackmail, and social embarrassment. Thus, children's advertising shifts from a direct persuasion approach to a strategy that mobilizes children's ability to influence adults' decisions.

David Buckingham (2007) mentions how children's advertising shifted from direct approaches to more sophisticated forms of influence, exploring the imagery of children, their ability to mimic, and their affective bonds with media figures. From this perspective, the child is not merely the recipient of advertising, but rather becomes an active agent in the mediation of family consumption, often without realizing the commercial nature of the content to which they are exposed.

This vulnerability is broadened in the digital environment, where advertising takes on hybrid and less noticeable forms. The Instituto Alana [Alana Institute] (2014), in its report *Por que a publicidade faz mal para as crianças* ["Why advertising is bad for children"], denounces the difficulty of identifying the advertising message when it is immersed in playful, affective, and seemingly spontaneous narratives. This strategy blurs the limits between fun and sale, compromising the critical development of children and promoting early consumption.

In this regard, Jean Piaget (1973), in his studies on children's cognitive development, show that until the age of seven, individuals are in the preoperational stage, in which egocentrism and the difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality predominate. At this stage, the child does not yet have enough cognitive structure to identify the intentionality of advertising, becoming especially susceptible to persuasive content disguised with affection.

Affectivity as a communication strategy

The performance of affectivity in children's digital advertising is, therefore, a persuasive tactic that explores the cognitive and emotional weaknesses of the target audience. In the pieces of content produced by the child influencers, affectivity is manifested through accessible languages, affectionate vocatives, catchphrases, expressive smiles, welcoming gestures, and reports of personal experiences — all of these resources reinforce empathy and identification with young audiences.

These strategies aim to simulate an interpersonal relationship between influencers and their followers, diluting the asymmetry of advertising communication and shifting the focus from selling to affective sharing. The brand is presented as an extension of the child influencers' lifestyle, and the product as a natural part of their everyday life, as if there was no intentional business transaction.

By observing the dynamics of these types of content, we noticed that advertising often operates as a “invisible subject” of communication, concealed by affectivity. This deceit is not accidental, but intentionally designed to make the content more palatable, intimate and, above all, less questionable. Thus, affectivity works as a vector of persuasion, promoting an emotional and early consumption, which is legitimized in the relationship of trust established between influencers and their audience.

Method

This is a predominantly qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive study, with the objective of analyzing how child influencers create affective bonds with children's audience by promoting, in a veiled way, beauty products on social media. The main method used was content analysis, according to the traditional assumptions of Bardin (1977), articulated to the contributions of Krippendorff (2004), whose perspective allows us to understand implicit meanings, discursive patterns, and symbolic strategies present in the analyzed posts. In addition, tables were used as an instrument of systematization and synthetic representation of the

data, which enabled a specific and schematic quantitative approach, facilitating the visualization of regularities and recurrences in the analyzed pieces of content.

The first stage is skimming, which consists of a preliminary assessment of documents to obtain an overview of the content. For the present study, a survey of child influencers that address the beauty niche on social media was performed. To this end, keywords, such as “beauty” and “child influencer,” were searched in the search tools of TikTok and Instagram, so that the algorithm of these platforms could indicate other similar profiles. The search for “child influencer” is justified by considering that news portals and gossip profiles often use this term when reposting content related to this type of influencer, facilitating the identification of the original profiles from these reposts. This process was essential for selecting the research corpus.

After this stage, the corpus was chosen, i.e., the direct definition of the material to be analyzed. The selection of the scope of this study followed specific criteria after the preliminary definition of the content, identifying, at first, three child influencers deemed more relevant in the established requirements.

To define the child influencers of the beauty niche, five main criteria were established:

- age: under 12 years old;
- frequent presentation of sponsored beauty content on the profile: at least three pieces of content posted between January and September 2024;
- frequent presentation of cosmetics in general: at least 60% of all content posted between January and September 2024;
- number of posts between January and September 2024: at least 50 posts, including feed posts and stories;
- number of followers: at least 100 thousand followers.

By using these parameters, pieces of information were found and crossed to select the corpus that actually provides a representative study

of the phenomenon. The three child influencers selected after this process were:

1. Sophia Hsu (@lookdajapinha): 10 years old; 21 sponsored posts and 26 posts that, although not sponsored, seek to attract the attention of brands; 173 pieces of content on cosmetics; 375 posts; 380 thousand followers on Instagram. TikTok was not considered in this research because it did not meet the criteria;
2. Valentina Abraham (@valenoliabraham): 10 years old; 13 sponsored posts and 14 posts that, although not sponsored, seek to attract the attention of brands; 51 pieces of content on cosmetics; 83 posts; 572 thousand followers on Instagram. TikTok was not considered in this research because it did not meet the criteria;
3. Manuela Abegg (@manuabegg): 11 years old; four sponsored posts and 16 posts that, although not sponsored, seek to attract the attention of brands; 202 pieces of content on cosmetics; 324 posts; 199 thousand followers on Instagram. TikTok was considered in this research because it did not meet the criteria.

In total, 38 sponsored posts of the beauty niche were found on the profiles of the three influencers and 56 posts that, although not sponsored, seek to attract the attention of brands in the analyzed period. It is worth highlighting that, in the course of the article, fictitious identifications will be adopted in order to preserve the image of the children.

Considering the child influencers already selected, and given the absence of evidence and the impossibility of confirming whether the approximately 56 posts were sponsored in fact or not, methodologically, we excluded them from the scope of this research, as well as the other posts from other niches, such as stationery companies and restaurants. Hence, only the 38 posts with explicit beauty-related advertising were gathered and archived, among videos and stories posted by them in 2024, which represent the likely questionable practice of advertising aimed at children, considering the strictly academic context of this study. After this stage, the material to be investigated is analyzed.

In this second stage of content analysis as proposed by Bardin (1977), the coding and categorization of the content were carried out, in order to transform the raw material into data that could be qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed. Thus, posts were segmented into units of registration, including texts (subtitles and comments), images, and videos, which answered the following questions:

1. What types of beauty products and cosmetics are being advertised?
 - a. Separation between makeup, hair products, skincare, among others;
 - b. The brands promoted most often by these children will be observed.

2. How is the advertising message presented?
 - a. Post format, whether unboxing, reviews, weekly purchases, tutorials, among others;
 - b. Verification of whether or not there is explicit disclosure of paid content, either in writing or as a hashtag;
 - c. Interaction with the brand on the post, either directly — the brand is explicitly mentioned, with logo or tags —, indirectly — the product is shown without explicitly mentioning the brand —, or sponsored interactions — the brand interacts with the influencer (comments, content sharing).

3. Existence of patterns in the communication strategies of the child influencers:
 - a. Accessible and informal language, which is childlike, playful, simple, and close to the children's audience;
 - b. Words or expressions that create desire as well as excessive repetition of compliments and the brand;
 - c. Appeals to personal experience, and interaction with the audience and from the audience on the post.

Furthermore, it should be noted that not all content shared on the profiles of the child influencers are sponsored by brands. Nonetheless, considering that these are children and preadolescents whose

target audience is their peers, this type of post, although hypothetically speaking, may be involuntarily stimulating, in a premature way, consumption practices.

Subsequently, all the material collected during the research process is investigated. Thus, as recommended by Bardin (1977), in the third stage of results processing, inference, and interpretation, the qualitative analysis was carried out, which provided us with a deeper interpretation of the underlying meanings and the narratives constructed by the child influencers. Through critical readings of the posts, considering the social and cultural context in which they are inserted, we observed how the aforementioned influencers use language and visual elements to create an affective-emotional connection with the children's audience and, moreover, how this can contribute to the normalization and encouragement of early consumption of beauty products among children.

In addition, a complementary analysis of legal compliance was carried out, based on the Consumer Protection Code (Brasil, 1990b), the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (*Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente* – ECA) (Brasil, 1990a), Resolution No. 163/2014 of the National Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents (*Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente* – Conanda), and the guidelines of the Brazilian Advertising Self-Regulation Council (*Conselho Nacional de Autorregulamentação Publicitária* – Conar, 1980), in order to confront the observed practices with the legal limits of children's advertising in Brazil.

This multidimensional approach allowed us to understand how affective language, when articulated to the performance of spontaneity and the deceit of advertising, configures a powerful tool for convincing and naturalizing early consumption on digital platforms.

Analysis and Discussion of the Results

When analyzing the 38 seemingly-sponsored posts of the three child influencers on Instagram, we verified a communication pattern centered

on the performance of affectivity as a strategy of persuasion and naturalization of early consumption of cosmetics. These pieces of content recurrently present elements that build a symbolic environment of intimacy and identification, concealing commercial intentionality under an aesthetic of spontaneity and playfulness.

The three influencers analyzed demonstrated using verbal and non-verbal resources, in a carefully staged informality that appears in the catchphrase intros (such as “Hi, everyone!” and “Hi, guys! How you doing?”) and in the repetition of affectionate expressions, smiles, and gestures of intimacy (kisses to the camera, eyes wide open, enthusiastic tone). These resources, by simulating an interpersonal relationship, establish affective bonds that generate trust and increase the convincing power of the discourse.

In Chart 1 of the corpus, we highlight this construction: sentences, such as “Look how beautiful!”, “It smells so good and it’s very cute!”, “This serum is amazing!”, and “I have discount codes!”, create an emotional discourse that incites the desire for belonging and consumption. Furthermore, we observed a personalization of the advertising discourse, in which the product is presented as a personal discovery or a gift, which reinforces the intimacy character of the message.

Among the most widely used formats are the videos of the type “get ready with me” (67% of the posts of Influencer A, 22% of Influencer B, and 25% of Influencer C), unboxing of gifts, and vlogs (Table 1). Such formats structure everyday narratives that insert the products in an apparently organic way, linking them to moments of leisure, getting ready to go out, or domestic situations.

The insertion of the product in the affective context reinforces the idea that the child influencer is not “selling,” but “sharing” an experience. It is, therefore, a form of affective-commercial entertainment, which hinders the identification of the advertising message and compromises the critical capacity of the audience — especially when composed mostly of other children.

Chart 1 – Communication patterns used by the child influencers, Brazil, 2024.

Communication patterns	A	B	C
Catchphrases	“Hi, everyone! Get ready with me for...”	–	“Hi, guys, how you doing? Get ready with me for...”
Placement of the product in the video	<p>“I have news to share with you! Now I have discount code on X”</p> <p>“Gifts from the X store! The website and the Instagram are X, and use my code!”</p> <p>“Guys, oh my God! Look what I’ve just got!”</p> <p>“Before talking to you guys I have to tell you that the sale of the X brand has begun, which ends at 10 a.m.! You have 30% off + 10% using my promo code!”</p>	<p>“I’m going to use the X product now and don’t forget that you have a discount code, just click here!”</p> <p>“I couldn’t travel without my X jewelry! Here, guys, look how beautiful it is!”</p> <p>“Gifts from the X brand! Wow, what a beauty!”</p> <p>The influencer usually places information on promotions and discount codes in the caption of the post</p>	<p>“Unboxing X gifts, which is an amazing skincare brand!”</p> <p>“Now I’m going to use this moisturizer I received from X, and there’s a discount code for those who want to buy from them!”</p>
Comments on the product	<p>“Look how beautiful! It smells so good, I loved it!”</p> <p>“Guys! What a beauty! It smells so good and it’s so cute!”</p>	<p>“You guys, look how many lip balms, one cuter than the other! They’ve thought of everything, it smells like watermelon!”</p>	<p>“This serum is amazing, it smells really good and it’s helping my skin, like, a lot! And it’s lilac, which is my favorite color!”</p>

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Table 1 – Types of content produced by the Brazilian child influencers, 2024

Produced content	A (%)	B (%)	C (%)
Unboxing of gifts	21	22	25
Get ready with me	67	22	25
Vlog	12	22	–
Trying out products	–	35	25
ASMR	–	–	25

ASMR: Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Although it is clearly an advertising content — considering the presence of products, brands, discount codes, and sponsored interactions —, explicit advertising disclosure was practically nonexistent. Only one post (8% of the total of Influencer B) used the hashtag #ad, and still with low visibility and in a foreign language, which limits its informative reach to young audiences (Table 2).

Table 2 – Explicit disclosure of sponsored content, Brazil, 2024.

Sponsorship disclosure	A (%)	B (%)	C (%)
#ad	–	8	–

Source: Prepared by the authors.

In addition to the communicational dimension, we understand that these practices produce significant psychosocial and cultural implications. The promotion of cosmetics by child influencers contributes to the early development of children’s self-image, anticipating aesthetic concerns typical of adult life and generating potential feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. We also noticed that parents and guardians often act not only as mediators, but as promoters or managers of the children’s digital presence, which reinforces the legitimization of early consumption. Such factors evidence that naturalizing veiled advertising in childhood is not restricted to the present, but projects long-term effects on the formation of consumers more vulnerable to fake marketing strategies.

The debate about child adultification gained greater visibility in 2025, with the repercussion of the video *Adultização* [“Adultification”], posted by the Brazilian influencer Felca on his YouTube channel, which in a few days exceeded 40 million views (Estadão Conteúdo, 2025). In this video, Felca denounces the exploration of child influencers in pieces of content that anticipate aesthetic concerns and adult behaviors. By highlighting how digital platforms — through algorithms — amplify and disseminate this type of material, the video exposes not only the marketing dimension of the phenomenon, but also its social risks such as the normalization of hypersexualization and the exposure of children to contexts of symbolic

vulnerability. This episode illustrates how veiled advertising and the logic of digital visibility converge to accelerate childhood shortening, reinforcing the urgency of regulations that protect children from commercial exploitation in virtual environments.

This process can be clearly verified in the analyzed materials. The brands were mentioned in 100% of the analyzed videos, and in all cases the products were either directly or indirectly mentioned (Table 3). Comments from companies, praising emojis, and reposts of pieces of content in official profiles reinforce the promotional character of the posts. However, the absence of clear identification as advertising — in breach of Conar's rules and Conanda's Resolution No. 163/2014 — evidences a regulatory weakness and a permissiveness context in the digital environment.

Table 3 – Interaction of the contracting brands with the influencers' profiles, Brazil, 2024.

Brands' interaction	A (%)	B (%)	C (%)
Mention of the brand in the video itself, hashtag, or @	100	100	100
Brand comments in the post	5	24	50
Sharing on the brand profile	–	38	–

Source: Prepared by the authors.

This erasure of commercial intentionality is manifested, according to Schor (2004), as one of the most effective forms of child persuasion: The product is presented as an extension of the identity and everyday life of the child, and not as an object of desire imposed by third parties. Consumption, in this scenario, is deemed natural and is desired by similarity, mirroring, and empathy.

In addition to the influencers, brands play an active role in the construction of this symbolic universe. Products with colorful packaging, children's characters (such as the Hello Kitty collection by Cia. Beauty, as illustrated in Figure 1), and delicate names are often used to enhance

visual appeal. There are also affectionate interactions on the part of companies: comments with affectionate emojis, invitations to events, and content shares on official profiles.

Figure 1 – Cia. Beauty’s packaging.



Source: Cia. Beauty’s official Instagram profile.

These practices evidence a business model that bets on emotiveness as an engagement strategy and on the exploitation of children’s naivety as a market opportunity. As pointed out by Instituto Alana (2014), it is an “aesthetic of seduction,” in which the affective discourse acts as a symbolic curtain for commercial intentionality, hindering both the identification and the regulation of these types of content.

Final Considerations

In the article, we showed that the performance of child influencers on Instagram, especially in the cosmetics niche, makes use of communication strategies based on affectivity, staged spontaneity, and simulation of interpersonal bonds to promote products to the children’s audience. By analyzing 38 posts apparently sponsored by three Brazilian influencers

under the age of 12, we verified that advertising content is created in a veiled way, disguised under playful and emotional narratives, which makes it difficult to identify them as marketing pieces.

The affectivity staged in the videos — manifested through catchphrases, affectionate expressions, childlike language, personal accounts, and gestures of sympathy — acts as a resource for getting closer to the audience, which is also mostly composed of children, in line with what Abidin (2017) describes as calibrated amateurism. This emotional language, when combined with the naturalized presentation of products in the everyday life of influencers (such as in the formats “get ready with me” or unboxing of gifts), creates a field of symbolic identification that transforms consumption into a desirable and legitimized experience by their peers.

From an ethical and legal point of view, the results point to communication practices that transgress the principles of children’s advertising provided for in Brazilian legislation such as the Consumer Protection Code, the ECA, and Conanda’s Resolution No. 163/2014. The absence of explicit disclosure of pieces of content as advertising, the use of children’s image to promote brands, and the exploitation of the cognitive vulnerability of young audiences constitute potentially abusive forms of marketing communication.

Moreover, we demonstrated significant gaps in the regulation of advertising on social media, especially in the face of the new protagonism of child influencers. The difficulty in monitoring dynamic and ephemeral pieces of content, such as stories, added to the aesthetics of affectivity that disguises the commercial message, imposes concrete challenges to regulatory bodies and digital platforms.

Therefore, it is imperative to improve public policies and regulatory standards, in order to specifically contemplate the new formats of digital communication and the performance of children as producers of advertising content. Most importantly, it is essential to hold not only legal guardians responsible for child influencers, but also the brands and platforms that benefit from these practices.

Finally, we reinforce the importance of communicational criticism to the phenomenon of child influencers, understanding them not only

as marketing actors, but as symbolic instruments of legitimization of early consumption. The challenge imposed on society, academia, and regulators is to protect childhood without limiting freedom of speech, but ensuring that communication aimed at children respects their peculiar condition as a developing individual, as advocated by the Brazilian law.

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