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Introduction

Are unboxing videos what they sound like? Media scholars Craig and Cunningham (2017, p. 78) note that despite its relative size and popularity that “unboxing is poorly defined and understood”. To some, the popular internet genre is little more than one in which people mediate their opening up or otherwise unveiling of products followed shortly by their review, play, or other types of engagement with said product on-screen (for more general history, see Stoeber, 2018). Some toy unboxing content creators, however, have generated billions of video views and hundreds of millions of subscribers on the video-sharing platform YouTube and its child-centric subordinate YouTube Kids. These video views have generated substantial profit and notoriety for some, notably seven-year-old Ryan of Ryan ToysReview, who was YouTube’s highest earner in 2018 at over $22,000,000 for his amassed 26 billion views and 17.3 million subscribers (Berg, 2018). Many of these views are assumed to be coming from children and their families, given the substantial number of videos focussed on the unpacking or unwrapping of toys, candy, surprise eggs, and other commercial products of interest to children varying in price and cultural capital depending on individual channel practices. Nevertheless, the toy unboxing phenomenon’s commercial success is flavoured, if not tainted, by assertions that this segment of the children’s media industry is manipulative and untoward in their content and that, by unveiling a product in a positive or celebratory light, these videos are necessarily commercial and possess explicit intentions to sell the product on the screen. Still, when pleasure is derived, as indicated by toy unboxing videos’ popularity, one can challenge the basis for reductive assumptions and question the empirical grounding used to study this content, the creators who make this content, and the child viewers who engage with this content. This chapter draws from 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews with US-based toy unboxing content creators to position toy unboxing videos as having a rich and nuanced creator culture and as a disruptor to the children’s media industry. This chapter seeks to brings balance to the more theoretical tensions of structure and agency in contemporary children’s culture within which toy unboxing videos play an important role.

This research uses Jenkins’ definition of children’s culture and grounding “what it means to be a child, how adult institutions impact children’s lives, and how children construct their cultural and social identities” (1998, p. 3) against the meanings currently constructed, defined, and circulated as being representative of toy unboxing videos as media. Doing so not only focusses
the attention of this chapter on the diachronic cultural dynamics of children’s media in a networked era but also considers children’s culture theories within the broader circuit of culture that the researcher constructed and uses to examine toy unboxing. This chapter extends upon both Du Gay et al.’s (2013) updated circuit of culture framework and Buckingham’s (2008) three-pronged circuit of culture. This chapter’s circuit of culture, however, suggests that toy unboxing videos have their conventions, practices, and exchanges in which meanings are established, distributed, and negotiated within the networked interactions of content creators, content viewers, and YouTube as a platform, series of algorithms, and a corporation. This chapter, thus, frames the toy unboxing circuit of culture within a genre of content that is co-created, negotiated, and regulated by the actors above that also is indicative of and subject to contemporary children’s culture debates. This research argues that it is the networked trust and tastes of the various channels and related personae that produce these texts, the audiences which consume and give their attention to these texts, and YouTube as the global firm and platform that houses and shape these texts which facilitate the political-economic conditions which have generated inquiry into the phenomenon itself.

Buckingham (2008) suggests that cultural studies theories and frameworks, like the circuit of culture, have long been concerned with “how cultural meanings and pleasures are produced and circulated within society and how individuals or social groups use and interpret cultural texts” (p. 2) and practices to construct social identities. As such, this research considers social negotiation over toy unboxing and the dynamics between adults and children who engage with them. It situates child viewers of unboxing videos as active viewers – not passive – with agency, though not wholly ‘media-wise’. It does not take up the mantle that children’s culture is de facto commercialised or commodified and instead looks to balance the ‘power of the text’ with the ‘power of the audience’ as “the relationship between children and the media can only be fully understood in the context of a wider analysis of the ways in which both are constructed and defined” (Buckingham, 2008, pp. 227–8).

In this chapter, the practice of children’s content creators (including those that are considered inimical to a child’s well-being) are brought to light.

**Making Sense of Toy Unboxing Videos**

While academic research on unboxing videos, in general, has been scant in quantity, the interventions made thus far have been meaningful in laying the groundwork for this approach. Marsh, an academic researching young people’s digital literacy practices, acknowledges that “[o]n the surface, the viewing of unboxing videos may appear to be a straightforward consumerist practice, which is focused on the desire of goods – a form of vicarious consumption” (Marsh, 2015, p. 375). However, she situates the viewing of unboxing videos within children’s digital literacy practices in the home. Marsh acknowledges their value within the material culture of children and childhood as a “mode of cultural transmission [that] is a growing feature of online practices for this age group in the twenty-first century” (Marsh, 2015, p. 369). Other scholars, such as Nicoll and Nansen (2018), situate toy unboxing videos within children’s affinity wherein children participate and co-create a space for unboxing videos to fit within children’s culture by identifying and affiliating with them through informal literacies. Sharif Mowlabocus, a digital culture expert, has also published about unboxing videos, but has focussed on the unboxing of smartphones and discusses the pleasures of the broader unboxing genre. He writes that “communities of viewers are built up around [toy unboxing] channels and creators speak of how unboxing provides new ways to engage, share and interact with their children, as well as to generate an alternative revenue source” (Mowlabocus, 2018, p. 2).

These nuanced academic approaches, however, struggle for the spotlight as other concerns have been raised by popular press reporting on the same three toy unboxing channels – the
hand-channel FunToys Collector Disney Toys Review (formerly known as DisneyToyCollectorBR) and child personality channels EvanTubeHD and Ryan ToysReview. It is not surprising nor undeserved that these channels receive such media attention when one considers their record-breaking view counts, subscriber bases, assumed monetary gains from AdSense revenues, and debated commercial ties (especially regarding sponsorship or branded content disclosures) despite their everyday relatability. It does, however, largely frame the broader toy unboxing phenomenon around these three individuals and pushes the thousands of other creators with less notoriety further out of the limelight.

Other concerns ranging from how YouTube videos are algorithmically suggested and made visible to audiences (Gillespie, 2014), to advertising disclosures (Campbell, 2017), to exposure to inappropriate or dangerous content (Bridle, 2017) have further compounded longstanding children’s culture concerns and, through YouTube and YouTube Kids, created a perfect storm to frame toy unboxing videos as the new nadir of consumer capitalism and children’s consumption in the digital age (Buckingham, 2011). However, moral panics around toy unboxing videos and their impact on children’s culture are often bereft of the meaningful academic interventions listed above. Thus, the following sub-sections examine different facets of toy unboxing’s circuit of culture intending to make sense of toy unboxing videos and open dialogues to discuss the impact they have on children’s culture and the children’s media industry.

Genre, Content, Texts, and Taste

As stated above, Mowlabocus (2018) focussed on smartphone unboxing to discuss the genre’s propensity to touch and handle the objects, its cinematic perspective, and its audience orientation regardless of the products being unpackaged. He discusses the “affective intensities and tactile pleasures that structure these texts and which locate the genre within a broader landscape of consumer culture” (p. 3) – a chief concern of many children’s culture critics. Mowlabocus writes that “it is possible to identify a set of common narrative tropes and visual conventions, some or all of which appear in the majority of unboxing videos” (p. 5). These techniques range from a narrative that documents a first engagement with the object being unboxed to a short discussion about how the product was acquired, whether for personal use or simple review, to the ‘money shot’ removal of the object before being temporarily set aside. The researcher deemed Mowlabocus’s framework as applicable to toys, artifacts, and other products being unboxed that personify material children’s culture, as Marsh suggests (2015; pp. 370–3). Many of these categories were also used in Nicoll and Nansen’s (2018) content analysis of 100 toy unboxing videos, wherein they analysed varying levels of calibrated amateurism and professionalism (Abidin, 2017) and compared techniques of mimesis between professional and amateur channels and adult and child channels. By examining the practices and media rituals in these videos, they signpost a convergence of children’s affinity spaces for different brands, products, and toys as well as newly developed affinity spaces around genre aesthetics, individual YouTube channels, and broader internet genre content conventions. Here too, their invoking of mimesis suggests that amateur channels borrow techniques from and imitate professional channels and vice versa in the same way that adult-hosted channels and child-hosted channels imitate one another (pp. 9–11).

As both studies break down some of the conventions of unboxing videos, both allude to the inherently social and even participatory process that viewers – here, child viewers – engage in when constructing judgement about new genres of content (Jenkins, 1998). As such, understanding children’s judgement of media and quality of children’s media as a genre (both how adults and children construct and conceive of such judgements) is a matter of significant consideration in the digital age. Lauricella, Robb, and Wartella (2013) contend that making such determinations, however, is far from an easy task given the varied definitions of quality children’s media.
This research contends that it is far more challenging to determine the quality of toy unboxing videos as opposed to other content of interest to children because of the particular political sensitivities and framing around under-aged children being on YouTube and platformised ambiguities of YouTube and YouTube Kids that shape the culture of toy unboxing videos (Hess, 2017; Rubin, 2018). Contemporary sentiments that position toy unboxing videos as far beyond the golden age of quality programming and as being too puerile or manipulative to be appropriate, let alone in good taste, are rampant in popular discourse. Drawing from Lauricella, Robb, and Wartella, however, one can look at “the age-appropriateness of material for the child, [the] characteristics of content, and the social experience of the context” to determine which toy unboxing videos and which toy unboxing channels are appropriate or quality by both children and adults and by both creators and viewers (2013, p. 5).

Channels and Personae

Where media and education scholar David Buckingham contends that “we need to pay careful attention to the ways in which those on all ‘sides’ of this debate construct and view children” (2011, p. 22), this research also suggests that careful attention is paid to how individual toy unboxing content creators are constructed and viewed given the networked co-construction of toy unboxing as a genre. Drawing from interviews with 24 different toy unboxing content creators in the United States, which represent 65 currently active channels on YouTube, this research acknowledges a wide variety of personalities, specialisations, and techniques that toy unboxing channels use to construct and calibrate their channels and online personae – many of which stand counter to channels like Evan’s, Ryan’s, and FunToyCollector’s. Further, as both research on identity in children’s culture and research on identity on social media platforms often discuss children’s overall lack of agency, this research suggests that many toy unboxers are less agentic than popular discourse might lead readers to believe. Many creators, like Nat from the Toys Unlimited family of channels, expressed that they are, “left negotiating how [they] make [their] content between what [they] think a child viewer and their family might want or need and what will make [them] algorithmically visible” (Nathalie, personal communication, 2 December 2018).

This matter is further complicated as both adults and children, separately and jointly, have successfully established themselves as experts in the toy unboxing genre. Agentic concerns over whether or not parents are producing, co-producing, or sharenting their children’s online identity have prompted concern over child labour laws for those younger YouTubers and questions about the blurred lines between playing in/on and working for social media (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Leaver & Abidin, 2018). This research takes the position that the representation of adults in children’s culture should not be restricted to the role of the adult but should also serve as an intersubjective ‘voice’ for children. To that end, many content creators described how their online identities and personae are modified or performed and sometimes turned into a series of digitally mediated and algorithmically determined tasks in order to pay their bills, let alone get close to their creative intentions.

The task of tailoring content to the algorithm, whether enacted by children or adults (with or without prompting or mimesis), has been identified as vital to toy unboxing channels’ ability to further intimate connections with viewers and establish their expertise in various affinity networks. This tailoring does not diminish the tensions that have been raised between the social construction of a toy unboxer’s presumed commerciality and their identity construction and personal practice on YouTube, however. With limited empirical scholarship on how much agency individual YouTube channels have to position their content within YouTube, let alone analysis for child-specific channels, one must consider how the global firm that YouTube has become will continue to impact children’s culture with the content it privileges and the big data it generates from child viewers and creators alike.
YouTube as a Global Firm

Where digital media scholars Burgess and Green (2018) contend that one cannot look at YouTube as a platform without investigating its creators and users, so too does this research acknowledge that each toy unboxing video’s success is shaped by the YouTube platform and the networked data it generates. Media scholar and COPPA architect Kathryn Montgomery explained that “the imperatives and practices of the Big Data era are also having a transformative impact on children’s media culture, fostering new data-driven business models, ushering in a new generation of digital platforms, and influencing social, personal, and cultural practices” (Montgomery, 2015, p. 267). Montgomery, in turn, prompting researchers to reconsider how they study children’s content on YouTube by citing the significance that big data could have in datafying and subsequently commercialising children’s culture. Montgomery contends that “data-driven media for children and teens may also encourage and reward certain tendencies and behavior patterns ... that could, in turn, become internalised and normalised” (Montgomery, 2015, p. 270).

A recent Pew Research Center study found that YouTube is a key content provider for children’s culture with 10% of all YouTube views in 2016 coming from kids entertainment, in some cases representing more than half of a given country’s entire view count (Smith, Toor, & van Kessel, 2018). The study goes on to note that 81% of parents with children under the age of 11 allow their children to watch content on YouTube, with 34% allowing this to become a regular activity, despite 61% having found at least some content that was deemed unfit for child consumption. Further still, the study found that “videos suggested by the site’s recommendation engine finds that users are directed to progressively longer and more popular content”. This research contends, therefore, that YouTube’s recommendation system uses the data generated by child and parent users of the platform to suggest content that the algorithm determines will keep users engaged longer, thus pulling users in for longer viewing sessions by pushing targeted and individualised content towards them. Further, in the interviews conducted for this research, many creators indicated that they were wholly dependent upon YouTube and that, despite having reservations about some of their practices, they would not survive without the platform (see Nieborg & Poell, 2018 for discussion on platform dependency).

Pairing YouTube’s use culture and media rituals together with these figures about YouTube’s platform and algorithmic design directives highlight how YouTube’s prominence as a media and data firm spans not only across the globe but across the networked era in which contemporary children’s culture resides. It is here that one can look at YouTube as a global firm and question what roles it may have in prompting consumer enculturation or what Cook describes as “the variety of ways in which children come to ‘know’ and participate in commercial life” and what the implications of this are (Cook in Buckingham & Tingstad, 2010, p. 70). Here too, one can look at how the political-economic dimensions of YouTube as a platform have incentivised individuals to join the platform while concurrently shaping the production culture of some genres, like toy unboxing, and allowing them to be framed as the root cause of consumerist concerns in contemporary children’s culture despite having little to no agency over platformised decisions.

The Production Culture and Political Economy

Using Mowlabocus’s notion that “[u]nboxing is integral to the broader YouTube economy”, (2018, p. 5), it is unsurprising that creating like Ryan and Evan won the war for eyeball attention among children. However, toy unboxing is also shaped by the YouTube recommendation system and the content creators making or optimising their content to be algorithmically privileged. Thus, participants in and critics of children’s culture should question how to untangle the
economic and corporate dimensions of YouTube, toy companies, and intermediaries from the more social, creative, conceptual, and interpersonal dynamics of these creators and their production culture. Drawing from Caldwell’s (2009) point that content creators “seldom systematically elaborate on [questions of production] in lengthy spoken or written forms” (p. 7), this chapter recognises how the existing framing of toy unboxers has not yet prompted the recording of personal reflections.

Toy unboxing videos’ place in children’s culture has primarily been one where objectors to the genre or critics of the culture have read into a varied ensemble of media texts but have been unsuccessful or have not attempted to look over the shoulder of those whom they belong to or who place value in them. While meaningful ground setting has been done by Craig and Cunningham (2017) in their initial conjecture that toy unboxing embodies a form of creator labour within their political-economic framework of social media entertainment as a media industry, this research seeks to extend their notion. This research sees the political-economic dimensions of toy unboxing intertwined with the production culture that is informed by those dimensions. This research, therefore, positions the rituals, production practices, and working methods of toy unboxing creators as being even more precarious than Craig and Cunningham proposed in 2017. This research also sees toy unboxing as wildly misunderstood and understudied – particularly regarding how it has been framed as positioning child audiences and their data as commodities to be exchanged for advertising revenue or toy company cash.

As this scholarship has developed, nuances have surfaced even amongst some toy unboxing sceptics and critics. Common Sense Media, a non-profit focussed on promoting safe media and technology for children and their families, wrote that

Companies don’t usually pay [a toy unboxer] directly for featuring their product in a video. When an unboxer becomes super popular (with tens of millions of views and subscribers), companies may send them products for free, but not always. Sometimes hosts disclose this, sometimes not.

(Common Sense Media, 2018)

This acknowledgement alone brings the political-economic question of whether children are commodified by the toy unboxing community or not to a head by challenging presumptions about toy companies holding puppet strings over creators in producing toy unboxing videos. While Common Sense Media does acknowledge that “extremely popular and influential You-Tubers [are monetarily compensated] in other areas [like making] a personal appearance at a toy store or a toy convention”, this has no measurable direct effect on how much algorithmic visibility is given to that channel’s video or even if a given toy company will send free product to that channel. Despite this clash between the political-economic frameworks and the production culture which shape the contextual dynamics of toy unboxing, it is the desire of both YouTube and the toy unboxer to obtain the audience’s attention and have them consume the videos being made.

**Audience Attention and Consumption**

In examining the relationships between the object being unboxed, the creator unboxing and mediating the unboxing of the object, the viewer of the video, and the YouTube platform itself, this portion of the circuit of culture induces a multidimensional sociality of emotion which can prompt or foster audience attention and channel video, platform, or product consumption. This demonstrates a noteworthy change in children’s culture by exploring how intimate communications can be mediated, structured, and utilised through the conditions of its existence by all
actors involved. At the apex of this attention and consumption is the contentious blurring of play and work, material and immaterial, and online and offline, which parents struggle to navigate alongside their children as viewers and content creators (Sefton-Green, 2018). Such context collapses are complicated when family entertainment channels on YouTube have had an average of roughly 200% year-over-year growth.

Such figures beg the question about whether it is the platform, the videos, the YouTuber, the affinity networks, or a confluence of them all, which creates a desire for children to give their attention to YouTube, YouTubers, and toy unboxing videos. Jackie Marsh explained that the attention children pay to toy unboxing videos is primarily based on pre-existing interests in the brands or toys being unboxed (Craig & Cunningham, 2017, p. 82). Marsh also noted that little research has been conducted around how the videos prompt buying or further consumption beyond the videos themselves. An additional consideration regarding consumption comes from a consensus between academics like Seiter (2005) and industry practitioners like Rosenberg (2004) that kids are interested in learning about or playing with other kids and that they trust other kids to a higher degree than adults. Where some might suggest that toy unboxing creators bilk off this and blend advertising and children’s content conventions to foster and nurture child viewer attention and prompt consumption (Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Diz, 2016; Campbell, 2017), this research suggests that more pertinent matters obfuscate the severity of any supposed commodification of children’s culture with other issues of trust and regulation that children’s culture faces through digital media.

**Trust and Regulation**

In 2017, author James Bridle wrote a viral article detailing what is now called the ‘ElsaGate’ scandal on YouTube and YouTube Kids. This scandal, in which dubious and satirical content featuring popular branded characters like Spiderman impregnating Disney princess Elsa or Peppa Pig drinking bleach made it onto YouTube and, to a lesser degree, onto YouTube Kids, rocked the children’s media industry and children’s culture experts and critics alike. While journalist Ben Popper explained that, “YouTube announced that it would no longer allow creators to monetise videos which ‘made inappropriate use of family-friendly characters’”, and that it was “in the process of implementing a new policy that age restricts this content in the YouTube main app when flagged”, stating that “age-restricted content is automatically not allowed in YouTube Kids”, fears were already rampant (Popper, 2017).

The difficulty for the toy unboxing community, whose largest concern or critique is the commercialisation of childhood argument rehearsed above, was that Bridle wrote about their content (as well as children’s nursery rhymes) in the same article – framing their content and the concerns held about their content alongside more egregious and devious content. In doing so, the toy unboxing genre suffered by Bridle’s association, ranging from losing algorithmic visibility, to loss of advertising revenue, to having a more staunchly negative connotation being associated with them than before. This article brought to light that YouTube and YouTube Kids have both algorithmic filters and employees and volunteers working across different time zones to review content. However, it also brought about additional questions ranging from how children may or may not be an algorithm’s or a creator’s unwitting target to why YouTube is not prepared to “ban the use of family-friendly characters by creators who are not the original copyright holders” (Popper, 2017). These have both positive and negative connotations for toy unboxing creators, viewers, and content as a whole. As screens continue to be used for a blend of “entertainment, learning, discovery, communication, play, creation, and more”, each of which is prompted by an algorithmic suggestion, it is not surprising that parents and lobbyist groups are concerned about digital media’s impact on children’s culture (Kleeman, 2017). However, as parents and children
tread the uncharted territories and increasingly porous boundaries between algorithms, platforms, tablets and mobile technologies, commercial brands, native YouTube channels, advertising, and content, this research argues that there is still room for, and indeed a need for, toy unboxing videos to be seen as pleasurable texts. One might even consider toy unboxing videos to be positive and important to children’s culture on the whole – notwithstanding those channels that subversively push the purchase of commodities or commercial goods of poor quality and value without disclosing as much.

Looking Forward

Today’s children are dually framed as being empowered through their having a digital childhood – or one that has never known content that was not mostly accessible anywhere and anytime, interactive, and customisable – and being in the direct line of fire for the risks of big data culture, niche algorithmic targeting, and covert advertising. Today’s adults, as shapers of children’s culture, examine these risks and will inevitably create appropriate parental controls, policies, and regulatory efforts to mitigate them and protect children’s rights (Livingstone & Third, 2017). It is this research’s conjecture, however, that they should also look at the content in question and ask if a toy unboxing video, an interaction with a given YouTuber, or even the toy being unboxed will provide a benefit to the child in question. Drawing from industry strategist David Kleeman, this research would like adults overseeing YouTube and content like toy unboxing videos, parents, and toy unboxing creators alike to ruminate on the idea that “child development doesn’t change, but the context in which children grow and learn does” (Kleeman, 2017).

As children’s culture changes with and through digital media, toy unboxing videos have brought to a head both longstanding cultural anxieties and new concerns as parenting transcends the physical into the digital and everyday children experience elevated access to and participation in social media attention economies. Children’s culture, therefore, should not view children’s digital practices as wholly separate from those in the ‘real world’ or even from the platforms and content that are deemed for adults. Furthermore, before regulatory efforts are made by state governments, YouTube, lobbyists, parents and guardians, and toy companies, this research entreats such parties to consider the entire circuit of culture surrounding toy unboxing videos and the agency that children’s culture theories may have in shaping active engagements on YouTube. By acknowledging that the production of toy unboxing videos stems primarily from individuals who are not necessarily beholden to the commercial toy companies but are dependent upon the algorithmic pressures of YouTube, the uses of these videos and the intentions behind them may be better understood and may find a place in children’s culture beyond being kindling for commodification and commercialisation discussions.

References


