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THE REPRESENTATION OF THE CHILD ON SOCIAL MEDIA: INTERPRETIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PARENTAL TROLLING TIKTOK VIDEOS

A b s t r a c t: This article examines the phenomenon of parental trolling videos on TikTok, where parents engage in pranks involving their children as part of platform challenges. The study investigates communication methods, user demographics, and algorithmic influences on content dissemination. Findings suggest potential psychosocial implications for children resembling cyberbullying, raising concerns about future parent-child relationships and the risk of social normalization of abuse of children's images on the Internet. Authors advocate for increased pedagogical education for parents, and recommend more social campaigns and research on predictors and effects of parental trolling, highlighting the need for holistic education and therapeutic support for children affected by the misuse of their image. The article shows some probable effects of publicizing images of children by parents, taking into account the impact of individual parents' decisions on entire societies. This topic opens a new, relevant area of pedagogical reflection.

K e y w o r d s: TikTok, child, parental trolling, sharenting, child welfare, child's subjectivity, childrens' rights

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Introduction

The spread of the use of the internet in modern societies provides both new opportunities and new risk factors.[4] Studies report abuse such as cyberbullying, online aggression, harmful content, data misuse, sexting and the viewing sexually explicit images. As Agnieszka Pluta and collegues argues, content published on social media influences audience attitudes.[5] For this reason, internet content and the manner in which it is processed are important areas of scientific reflection. The research described in this article focuses on a particular type of sharenting – parental trolling, i.e. the publication by parents of content depicting their child in an uncomfortable situation. We analysed seven videos recorded and published on the TikTok app by parents of children under the age of three taking part in 'challenges' involving the publication of videos depicting scenes that embarrass or ridicule the child. The aim of the project was to explore, how the child is represented by authors and receivers of analysed videos and what potential social effects this content may invoke.

The study was inspired by a discussion during a class at the Institute of Education at the Jagiellonian University. Encouraged by the teacher to look for topics "close to life," they suggested looking in detail at the videos that appear on their smartphone screens when they use the TikTok app. Therefore, the topic stemmed from a concern we experienced together while taking a joint course at university. We were motivated by the need to draw attention to a socially relevant problem and also had a desire to counteract the trend pointed out by Danuta Waloszek: "Apart from their periodic presence in the mass media, children's issues remain on the sidelines."[6]

In this article we briefly explain the legal and pedagogical meanings of the key terms, describe our methodological assumptions and present the results of our analysis. We realise that the categories we are exploring are very meaningful - each of the categories described here, such as 'subjectivity' or 'child', has been extensively described by representatives of various scientific disciplines, with pedagogy at the forefront. Other important categories relevant to our research project were: perspective and representation, linked to the belief that video is embedded in the social processes "it reflects, but also shapes."[7]

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[4] Tara Brabazon, *Digital Dialogues and Community 2.0: After Avatars, Trolls and Puppets* (Burlington: Elsevier Science, 2012); Jacek Pyżalski, Peter K Smith, "Nationality and ethnicity-based (cyber)bullying: how should we tackle this phenomenon in survey studies?". *Psychology, Society & Education* 3 (2022): 11–17.

[5] Agnieszka Pluta et al., "Exposure to Hate Speech Deteriorates Neurocognitive Mechanisms of the Ability to Understand Others' Pain". *Scientific Reports* 13 (1) (2023): 4127.

[6] Danuta Waloszek, "Ochrona i troska o dziecko i dzieciństwo. Niemoc czy niedostateczna kontrola?". *Labor et Educatio* 1 (2013): 112.

[7] Marcus Banks, *Materiały wizualne w badaniach jakościowych*, trans. Paweł Tomanek (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2009), 41. By necessity, we make some simplifications in this text in order to better explain how we understand them.

Child subjectivity

It is hard not to agree with Karen Wells' view that subjectivity is a complex concept.[8] This is proven by the well-developed tradition of pedagogical research, which has been conducted for many years by Polish academics such as Józefa Bałachowicz,[9] Barbara Smolińska-Theiss,[10] Ewa Jarosz,[11] Anna Golus,[12] Maria Szczepska-Pustkowska, Dorota Klus-Stańska,[13] Anna Witkowska-Tomaszewska,[14] Jan Żebrowski,[15] Maria Dudzikowa, Bogusław Śliwerski,[16] Józef Górniewicz,[17] Maria Szymańska.[18] It would require a separate study to describe the richness of the literature on this subject. Due to the limited format of the article, we only refer to a part of the scientific reflection, but we would like to point out that the issue of children's subjectivity is a much more widely discussed social problem. We encourage readers to familiarise themselves with at least some of numerous texts related to the child's subjectivity.

As Teresa Zubrzycka-Maciąg claims, "the child's subjectivity means his right to build his own identity and self-fulfilment, based on his personal needs and interests, rather than on the will of adults."[19] Lucjan Miś and Katarzyna Ornacka define the subjectivity of a child by how it is respected by adults. It is "a serious attitude towards the child, acceptance as a person, mutual understanding, respect, respect of boundaries and a clear definition of the child's position in the family

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[8] Simultaneously, it serves as the foundational basis for one's capacity to take action and be an active participant (referred to as being a subject). Karen Wells, "Children, youth, and subjectivity". *Children's Geographies* 3 (2014): 263.

[9] Józefa Bałachowicz, *Style działań edukacyjnych nauczycieli klas początkowych. Między uprzedmiotowieniem a podmiotowością* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej TWP, 2009).

[10] Barbara Smolińska-Theiss, *Dzieciństwo jako status społeczny. Edukacyjne przywileje dzieci klasy średniej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej, 2014); Barbara Smolińska-Theiss, "Godność dziecka – odkrywana, zdobywana, niszczona", *Horyzonty Wychowania* 5 (9) (2006): 151–168.

[11] Ewa Jarosz, *Ochrona dzieci przed krzywdzeniem. Perspektywa globalna i lokalna.* Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Śląskiego w Katowicach, nr 2739 (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2008).

[12] Anna Golus, *Dzieciństwo w cieniu rózgi. Historia i oblicza przemocy wobec dzieci.* Editiohistoria (Gliwice: Editio, 2019).

[13] *Pedagogika wczesnoszkolna. Dyskursy, problemy, rozwiązania*, red. Dorota Klus-Stańska i Maria Szczepska-Pustkowska. Pedagogika Wobec Współczesności (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2009).

[14] Józefa Bałachowicz, Anna Witkowska-Tomaszewska, *Edukacja wczesnoszkolna w dyskursie podmiotowości. Studium teoretyczno-empiryczne* (Wydawnictwo Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej, 2015).

[15] Jan Żebrowski, "O godności dziecka i jego prawach". *Studia Gdańskie. Wizje i Rzeczywistość* 6 (2009): 22–37.

[16] Bogusław Śliwerski, "Prawo dziecka do swoich praw". *Pedagogika Społeczna*, 4 (66) (2017): 37–58.

[17] Józef Górniewicz, *Kategorie pedagogiczne. Odpowiedzialność, podmiotowość, samorealizacja, tolerancja, twórczość, wyobraźnia*, Wyd. 2 (Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego, 2001).

[18] Maria Szymańska, "Uczeń jako podmiot i przedmiot działalności nauczyciela". *Edukacja Elementarna w Teorii i Praktyce* 11, 2 (40) (2016).

[19] Teresa Zubrzycka-Maciąg, "The Role of Parents in Developing the Sense of Subjectivity in Children". *Problemy Opiekuńczo-Wychowawcze* 586 (1) (2020): 70–80.

(or institutional – in the absence of parents) structure."[20] Respecting a child's subjectivity implies adults respecting their right to decide for themselves, respecting their boundaries, listening to their concerns, giving them space to act and live independently and involving them in family and community life.[21]

An expression of adult concern for respecting the child's subjectivity was the creation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. Among the basic categories included in this document are the best interests of the child' and "the welfare of the child."[22] This means "acting for the (children's) benefit, advantage, happiness and well-being"[23] and using various resources and values to foster the child's development. In Poland the protection of the child's welfare is regulated by articles 96 and 101 § 1 of the Family and Guardianship Code, according to which the child must be protected from everything that could negatively affect his or her development[24]. The Convention on the Rights of the Child uses the concepts of protection and assistance and includes a number of rights to which children are entitled because of their subjectivity. These include the right to equality, the right to protection of physical and mental health, the right to education, the right to dignity, the right to religion, the right to freedom of conscience, the right to freedom of expression, the right to enjoy cultural heritage, the right to leisure, the right to employment and the right to institutional protection and the right to a court of law.[25]

Protection of children's rights in social media

In countries that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children share identical rights to most of adults.[26] These include the right to protection of their image. Although children are legally represented by their statutory representatives, these representatives cannot misuse images and the privacy of children.[27] The misuse of children's images is regulated by the image protection law in many

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[20] Lucjan Miś, Katarzyna Ornacka, "Podmiotowość dziecka w rodzinie i w sferze publicznej". *Problemy Polityki Społecznej. Studia i Dyskusje* 1 (2015): 71.

[21] This observation also brings to mind the category of 'children's agency' – one of the subjects of international reflection. This has been reported for example by researchers from BERA: https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/childrens-agency-what-is-it-and-what-should-be-done [access: 11.12.2023].

[22] Convention on the Rights of the Child, https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text [access: 26.10.2023]; Paweł J. Jaros, ed. *Prawa dziecka. Dokumenty Rady Europy*. Biblioteka RPD. Warszawa: Biuro Rzecznika Praw Dziecka, 2013.

[23] Justyna Kusztal, *Dobro dziecka w procesie resocjalizacji. Aspekty pedagogiczne i prawne* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2018), 13.

[24] Ibid., 154.

[25] Ibid., 157.

[26] Małgorzata Turczyk, "Polish pedagogy in the early 20th century: The emergence of the concept of children's rights". *Polska Myśl Pedagogiczna* 7 (2021): 159–176.

[27] Adrianna Denys-Starzec, "Czy rozpowszechnianie wizerunku małego dziecka w internecie krzywdzi? O perspektywie prawnej rozpowszechniania wizerunku małego dziecka w internecie". *Dziecko Krzywdzone. Teoria, badania, praktyka* 3 (2022): 162.

countries. In Poland, for example, these issues are governed by the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and the Act on Copyright and Related Rights. An image is understood as: "a concretised arrangement of the physical representation of a human being, capable of being reproduced and disseminated."[28] The public release of a child's image requires the consent of both legal representatives[29] and should take into account the principle of the child's welfare.

　　Publishing of children's images on the internet by parents is an increasingly common subject of media.[30] They reach the web mainly through social media[31]. What distinguishes social media from other media is:

– reach: social media has the ability to reach a large audience,
– access: images are widely available to a large audience free of charge or for a small fee,
– usability: creating content via social media does not require special skills, the ability to use new technologies is enough,
– immediacy: social media provides a space for immediate response,
– impermanence: messages can be changed almost as soon as they are published, either through the editing function or by adding comments to the text.[32]

Child welfare versus sharenting and parental trolling

Publishing information about one's children and sharing photos and videos of them from different periods of their lives is a phenomenon called sharenting. This word is a combination of the words sharing and parenting. "It is used to describe parents sharing personal information about their child online."[33] This involves various types of content, such as text, images, and videos, which can be shared with or without the child's consent and agreement. The informed consent of a child, especially a child under the age of three, is obviously questionable in this case. Sharing content related to their children is often considered a typical aspect of parental conduct, particularly when parents take pride in their children's achievements, family life, or shared experiences like vacations. "However, there can be a tension between the

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[28]　Ibid., 163.

[29]　Ibid., 164.

[30]　Fiona Joy Green, Jaqueline McLeod Rogers, *Parenting/Internet/Kids: Domesticating Technologies* (Demeter Press, 2022).

[31]　We define social media as: "wszelkie działania, praktyki oraz zachowania pośród społeczności ludzi, którzy łączą się online, aby dzielić się informacjami jak również wiedzą czy opiniami" (Radosław Bielawski, Agata Ziółkowska, "Media społecznościowe, a kształtowanie bezpieczeństwa państwa". In: *Człowiek a technologia cyfrowa: przegląd aktualnych doniesień*, eds. Paulina Szymczyk, Kamil Maciąg (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Tygiel, 2018), 86.

[32]　Bielawski, Ziółkowska, 87.

[33]　David Smahel et al. *EU Kids Online 2020: Survey Results from 19 Countries* (London: The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2020), 121.

behaviour of parents and the children's perspective."[34] As authors of the EU Kids Online 2020 Report observe:

> For the past few years we have seen how there can be a strong conflict between the best interests of the child and the protection of their privacy and the wishes and actions of their parents or legal guardians. In some more extreme cases, courts have had to intervene.[35]

In Poland, a groundbreaking event was the verdict that sentenced a father to three months of community service after he shared a picture of his naked son on Facebook. Similar situations have occurred all over the world.[36]

Due to the widespread occurrence of harmful forms of sharenting, the term 'parental trolling', also known as 'troll parenting', is becoming increasingly common. It refers to parental sharing of content about their own children that disparage them purposefully or visually document a child having a difficult experience.[37] Content that can be classified as parental trolling usually depicts a child in an uncomfortable situation, for example when they are crying, upset, afraid or naked. While trolling is a form of cyberbullying,[38] parental trolling is a form of cyberbullying where the perpetrator is the person closest to the child. Parents who share such photos and videos probably see them as funny, disregarding the various consequences of sharing their child's image on the Internet. The negative consequences for the child's mental health are influenced not only by the mere fact that content involving the child is made public, but also by the processing of this content through comments and likes placed by viewers on published material.[39] As Wiktoria Grabalska and Rafał Wielki argue, parental trolling bears the hallmarks of a social pathology with long-term consequences.[40]

Sharing compromising content violates the principle of the child's well-being, as well as family law, which states that a parent should respect the rights and dignity of the child.[41] In Polish law, the terms parental trolling and troll parenting are not used, therefore images of children are protected by current legislation, which prohibits any ridicule or disparagement of a child. With regard to content published on the Internet, the legal regulations concern criminal liability under Article 190a

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[34] Ibid., 121.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Wiktoria Grabalska, Rafał Wielki, "Czy dzieci powinny trafiać do sieci? Prawne i kryminologiczne aspekty zjawiska sharentingu". *Prawo w działaniu* 49 (2022): 50–66.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Naomi Craker, Evita March, "The dark side of FacebookR: The dark tetrad, negative social potency, and trolling behaviours". *Personality and Individual Differences* 102 (2016): 79–84.

[39] Paweł Jędrysiak, "Odpowiedzialność za naruszenie dóbr osobistych osób nieletnich z wykorzystaniem portali społecznościowych w ramach parental trollingu". *Problemy Prawa Prywatnego Międzynarodowego* 23 (2018): 31–41.

[40] Grabalska, Wielki, "Czy dzieci", 63.

[41] Wiktoria Qader, "Parental trolling – wybrane zagadnienia prawne". *Zeszyty Naukowe Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Zawodowej im. Witelona w Legnicy* 3 (32) (2019): 139–144.

of the Criminal Code (persistent harassment and use of an image), Article 216 of the CC (insult) and Article 212 of the Penal Code (defamation). In order to determine whether the content published by the parent is punishable, a precise analysis of the legislation and the indications of a each potentially criminal act must be carried out.[42]

Examples of consequences of parental trolling for children's well-being

Children whose compromising photos and videos have appeared online are at risk of long-term consequences. When a video reaches a high level of popularity and becomes 'viral' it can be saved and forwarded. Some videos remain in the online space for years. As a result, during this time the child grows up, goes to school and becomes a member of a peer group that can access the compromising material. Taking into account that social media users are often children, the risk of these materials reaching them is high. Videos that ridicule a child can become the cause of peer violence and cyberbullying.[43] The child does not have the opportunity to create his or her own image online, as it is already created and in a compromising way. This, together with the child's development, can become a reason for a disturbed sense of security and acceptance and trust in the parent-child relationship in the future.[44] Jędrysiak thus concludes that it is justifiable to qualify the phenomenon of troll parenting as a social pathology, as it fulfils the prerequisites of psychological violence.[45] These include humiliation, denigration and ridicule, which lead to a lowering of self-esteem and the development of a negative self-image in those whose image has been made public.[46]

> Sharenting is also problematic because of other issues besides children's rights. There is a concern that seemingly innocent images in one context (such as a child playing on a beach) may be used and abused in other contexts. Moreover, some online services might acquire copyright over the posted images as part of their terms of service. This means that the information can be used for other purposes, such as commercial ones.[47]

In summary, posting a child's image online entails neither the child nor the parent having any control over who processes the child's image and for what purpose.

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[42] Aleksandra Drapała, "Parental trolling w świetle uregulowań polskiej ustawy karnej". *Problemy Prawa Prywatnego Międzynarodowego* 23 (2018): 77–90.

[43] Jakub Mróz, Małgorzata Wójcik, Jacek Pyżalski, "Bullying – prześladowanie rówieśnicze. Prawdy i mity na temat zjawiska". *Dziecko Krzywdzone. Teoria, badania, praktyka* 4 (21) (2022): 34–84.

[44] Jędrysiak, "Odpowiedzialność", 34.

[45] Ibid., 35.

[46] Joanna Helios, Wioletta Jedlecka, *Przemoc wobec dzieci w rodzinie* (Wrocław: Wydział Prawa, Administracji i Ekonomii Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2019), 71–83.

[47] Smahel et al., *EU Kids*, 121.

Research methods

The purpose of our study was to analyse the content of visual material published by users of the TikTok app bearing the hallmarks of parental trolling. The research method used was interpretive content analysis.[48] We have analysed the content of the seven TikTok movies taking into account their explicit and implicit content[49] being aware of the risk of subjectivity that analysing the implicit aspects of the content entails.[50] The choice of this medium of analysis was based on the international spread of the app. Another reason for choosing this medium was its popularity among children. According to the research of Joanna Dziekońska even children aged 8–10 are users of TikTok.

> [They] have [even] turned TikTok into a new informal e-playground. They participate in the TikTok community and create it. Children's activity in this place fulfills the need to be with others, to create something together, but also the need for quick interaction, fun and entertainment.[51]

This means that not only adults, but also children have access to troll parenting content that, to some extent, shapes their ideas about the role of child in modern Western societies and their future parenting attitudes.

Following the methodological guidelines of Marcus Banks, we made the assumption of a widespread ocularcentism[52] referring to the importance of people's visual way of knowing the world. As John Berger notes: "It is vision that establishes our place in the surrounding world."[53] We also assumed that the visual material is part of a wider narrative that is not only about the video, but also about the social relationships they represent. Among the criteria for content selection were:

- a video recorded as a response to a TikTok 'challenge' popular among parents of young children,
- relevance to parental trolling phenomenon – videos selected should clearly exhibit characteristics of parental trolling, where parents publish content depicting their child in uncomfortable situations,
- case diversity – a variety of materials demonstrating a broad spectrum of parental trolling content,

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[48] James W. Drisko, Tina Maschi. *Content Analysis: Pocket Guides to Social Work Research Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[49] Earl R. Babbie, *Podstawy badań społecznych*, trans. Witold Betkiewicz et al. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2008).

[50] Banks, *Materiały*, 41.

[51] Joanna Dziekońska, "Z trzepaka na TikToka – czyli na tropach nowych przestrzeni dzieciństwa. Doniesienie z badań fokusowych". *Edukacja Elementarna w Teorii i Praktyce* 18 2 (69) (2023): 9.

[52] Banks, *Materiały*, 39.

[53] Ibid.

– diversity of authorship and audience – selected videos should represent a diverse range of authors (parents) and audiences (viewers) to capture different perspectives and experiences within the parental trolling phenomenon,
– videos that are particularly popular, viewed by at least 1000 TikTok users.

We posed the following research questions:

1. How is the child represented in TikTok videos published by their parents?
1.1. What are the representations of acceptance or non-acceptance of the child as a person?
1.2. How is the mutual understanding between parent and child represented?
1.3. What is the attitude of the carers towards respecting children's boundaries?
1.4. What position in the social structure does the recorded child occupy?

We analysed the content of the videos using MAXQDA22 software, coding the content and the way the video was framed.[54] We began our analysis by preparing a database and creating a code tree based on Aristotle's triad of sender, message, receiver and Harold Laswell's model of the persuasive act.[55] We therefore considered the following questions:

– Who is the content creator?
– What is the message?
– What means of communication were used?
– Who are the videos recipients are?
– What are the effects of the published content?

The study was conducted in the beginning of year 2023. Data for the analysis was obtained in January 2023. This is when the content we analysed was published online. Selection of seven videos allowed for a manageable but comprehensive examination of the phenomenon, providing a balanced representation of the diverse range of parental trolling content on TikTok. Because of the purposive sampling we used, it is worth noting that the sample is not representative. The collection of TikTok videos bearing the hallmarks of parental trolling is so extensive that it would be impossible to create a systematic base. It is difficult to estimate the number of films on this subject, as thousands of them have already been published and new videos still keep appearing.

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[54] Ibid., 88.
[55] Harold D Lasswell, "The structure and function of communication in society". In: *The Communication of Ideas*, ed. Lyman Bryson (New York: Harper & Bros, 1948), 37–51.

Results

Content of analysed videos published on TikTok as a "challenge"

Who is the content creator?

TikTok users include citizens from almost every country in the world. They are mainly aged between 10 and 29.[56] The videos we analysed were created by the children's parents. In four of the seven films, the content submitters are women. The creator of two films were a woman and a man, and the creator of one movie is a man. It is difficult to characterise the video makers accurately. This is because they use pseudonyms. However, it is known that these are parents or carers of children up to the age of 3 years in early and middle-aged. The authors of the videos are caregivers or parents who take part in a TikTok game called 'challenge'.

What is the message?

Each video presents a situation in which a parent plays a prank to an unsuspecting child. Table 1 presents a summary of the content of each video:

Table 1. Summary of the content of TikTok videos

Working video title	Video content summary
1. "Plastic eyes"	The main theme of the video was scaring a child through the use of plastic eyes by his parent, who turns to the child after applying artificial scary eyes.
2. "Laughing ghost"	The footage shows a child who is in the bathtub with his mother, who, on leaving the bathroom, leaves the boy in front of a phone screen on which a ghost filter appears. The child, in a panic attack, tries to get out of the bath and escape.
3. "Face deformation"	Using a filter from TikTok mother makes a movement that gives the impression that the spacing of the eyes on the child's face has changed. As a result, the child is frightened by its image on the phone screen. She shows her fear with a loud scream.
4. "The frog attack"	The child is horrified seeing his image on the phone screen. An animation of a frog has been added to the child's image, which at the very beginning appears on the screen on the boy's hand and then jumps to his face. The boy is terrified, as evidenced by his screaming and the fright shown on his face. The woman filming the video can be heard laughing in the background.

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[56] Anna Tereszkiewicz, "TikTok – przegląd badań naukowych". *Media i społeczeństwo* 16 (2022), 215.

5. "Throwing cheese"	The author of the video is probably the child's father, who throws a slice of cheese in the crying boy's face. The shocked child stops crying. The child's parents can be heard laughing in the background. Moments later, the woman, who is currently holding the child in her arms, moves a piece of cheese from her face to the top of his head. The adults involved in the video do not hide their satisfaction with this performance.
6. "The Older Sister"	The theme of the video was the verbal aggression of an older sister towards her younger brother. The violent child reacts by crying. The chastising shout of one of the parents can be heard in the background of the video.
7. "The evil clown"	We can see a little boy in the foreground being fed, presumably by his mother. After a few seconds, a man emerges from behind the boy, wearing an evil clown mask. After a while, the little boy notices the man and watches him closely; he is confused and does not know how to react. His reaction changes when another boy enters the room and starts to cry at the sight of the clown. The little boy who is being fed by his mum also becomes panicked and cries. The mum does not react but continues trying to feed the baby.

Source: Authors' own work.

The videos analysed follow a similar pattern and share some common features. They are a response to 'challenges' among app users (throwing cheese, scaring, puzzling children). The main theme common to all the videos analysed is the child's reaction to the situation initiated by the recording person. The published recordings are accompanied by the laughter of the carers and cheerful background music from, for example, children's cartoons. There is therefore a disjunction between the reactions of the children and their caregivers. Children's reactions indicating fear and confusion are combined with adult laughs.

The videos are recorded from the perspective of the adults who are the play organisers and are in control of the situation because they are the operators of the recording devices, i.e. the smartphones. It is the adult who decides what will be shown in the video and what sounds or special effects will be added to the footage. The videos are a representation of a world in which a child can be recorded by adults and their image made public and processed independently of their will. Videos are also presenting a specific relationship between parent and child, in which the child's experience is treated as an object of entertainment.

What means of communication were used?

The latest statistical data reveals a global monthly active user population 689 million.[57] TikTok is a social media platform for creating and sharing short videos. Users can use a variety of special effects available on the app to change their videos by modifying the shape of the character's face, the tone of voice or choose the scenery or music that forms the background of the video. The app allows interaction with other users through messages, comments and likes, as well as live streaming. Videos published on TikTok can be downloaded to the app users' hard drives and processed and posted in many places, e.g. on other social media, without the video authors' control. The tools available in the application encourage users active use of the application, which leads to a larger audience as the number of likes for a particular video increases. These tools are being accused of fostering compulsive use of applications.[58]

Forms of user activity on shared recordings include: tutorials, stand-ups, lip-sync, duets, challenges.[59] Although videos published on TikTok can have a private status when shared only with 'friends' in the user's contact network, many of them have a public status, which means that they can be accessed not only by any TikTok user, but also by someone without an account on the app. An attempt by one of our research team members without a TikTok account to view videos with the hashtag was successful. After entering the hashtag 'babycheesechallenge', it was possible to view a number of videos tagged with this hashtag. It was also clear that all videos with this hashtag had been viewed 15 million times.

The videos analysed by us are characterised by a short duration (from 8 to 37 seconds), a high number of likes (from 808 to 2.9 million), comments (from 325 to 13.3 thousand) and shares (from 68 to 92 thousand). The comments published under the videos we analysed are in different languages, usually using emoticons and depicting different reactions of the audience ('you have traumatised that child', 'that baby is so cute', 'it is not funny', 'this is why i shouldn't have kids'). Two of the analysed recordings were modified by filters (phantom, face modification), which may encourage other app users to replicate and imitate this content. Underneath the analysed recordings there are short comments added by the videos creators (e.g. 'I felt so bad', 'I am going to hell', 'I waited a whole 9 months of pregnancy, plus another 6 months for her to grow […] to do this'). In addition, hashtags have been added to each video analysed, which make the videos more visible and can gain more likes and views.[60] Examples of hashtags used to mark the videos analysed include: #scaringlittlekids, #kidscomedy, #babycheesechallenge.

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[57] Noel Griffith, "99 TikTok Statistics for 2023". Supplygem (blog), 2023. https://supplygem.com/tiktok-statistics/ [access: 11.12.2023].

[58] Tereszkiewicz, "TikTok – przegląd", 214.

[59] Ibid.

[60] A hashtag is a phrase preceded by a # sign, which is used to tag posted videos and photos. These tags make it easier for other users to find the desired content.

Who are the videos recipients?

A feature of the TikTok videos is their ability to reach any of the users of the TikTok app. What is more, content shared on TikTok may be shared across different digital environments which means that the video author has virtually no control over who is the viewer of the content. Indeed, it can be anyone with access to the internet.[61] Web 2.0, i.e. websites created after 2001, is founded on user-generated content. Once published, the output of a user can be processed in a number of ways by other users.[62] It is also worth mentioning the multilateralism of the messages associated with the publication. That is, the wider context which the video is a part of: the author of the video speaks, but the viewer can also join in the discourse. Moreover, viewers can engage in conversation with each other by responding to someone else's comments or adding their own, or even by sharing the content with subsequent users. They can add their own comments or modify the material before making it available again.

A feature that differentiates TikTok from similar social media platforms is strong algorithmisation of automatically targeted content for users. "TikTok unprecedentedly centers algorithmically driven feeds and algorithmically driven experiences. On TikTok, unlike on other platforms, the user experience is obviously, unambiguously, and explicitly driven by what is commonly called the 'For You' algorithm."[63] This type of algorithmisation means that the likelihood of receiving a notification when this type of video has appeared increases with the frequency with which the user views content with similar themes. As the user browses content on TikTok over time, the thematic area of content viewed narrows.

Research and media messages identify a number of negative consequences that TikTok users are exposed to. These include: mechanisms that encourage compulsive use of the app, insufficient protection of personal data, the spread of hate, extremist content and cyberbullying.[64] Another problem was the lack of protection for users' personal data. It resulted in the banning of the app in the state of Montana, USA. The ban was justified by the potential national security risk. The data protection problem also led the developers of TikTok to be punished by the Irish Data Protection Commission (DPC). The fine amounts to €345 million. The reason for its imposition was a breach of children's data protection legislation.[65]

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[61] Esteban Morales, "Ecologies of violence on social media: An exploration of practices, contexts, and grammars of online harm". *Social Media + Society* 3 (9) (2023).

[62] Bielawski, Ziółkowska, "Media społecznościowe".

[63] Aparajita Bhandari, Sara Bimo, "Why's everyone on TikTok Now? The algorithmized self and the future of self-making on social media". *Social Media + Society* 1 (8) (2022).

[64] Tereszkiewicz, "TikTok – przegląd", 215; Tom De Leyn et al., "In-between child's play and teenage pop culture: Tweens, TikTok & privacy", *Journal of Youth Studies* 8 (25) (2022): 1108–1125.

[65] Irish Data Protection Commission announces €345 million fine of TikTok, https://www.dataprotection.ie/en/news-media/press-releases/DPC-announces-345-million-euro-fine-of-TikTok [access: 26.09.2023].

Another problem is the widespread use of TikTok by children under the age of 13. Information from the app's official website indicates that "TikTok is only for users who are 13 years old or older, and 14 years old in South Korea and Indonesia."[66] However, the app is used by many younger children who not only browse the content, but are also active users.

Direct and anticipated effects of the published content

The aim of our study was to investigate how the child is represented by the authors of the analysed parental trolling videos and what potential social effects this content may provoke. A separate study with a representative sample would definitely be needed to empirically explore the social implications of parental trolling. The scope of our study did not include this type of analysis, but it is already possible to anticipate the occurrence of some effects on the basis of scientific literature.[67]

The analysis of possible effects of publishing the videos we explored is an extremely broad topic, so for obvious reasons we limit the presentation of the results in this area to those we believe are most important. We have categorised them into three groups: effects on child wellbeing, effects on the parent and effects on the community.

The direct impact of sharing videos is the number of views by users of TikTok and other social media platforms. The videos trigger public expressions of opinion in comments and 'likes'. There seem to be also many more serious consequences associated with the actions of TikTok users engaged passively or actively in parental trolling.

At this stage, it has not been possible to directly prove these effects, but on the basis of existing research, their occurrence is highly likely. There are admittedly not only positive comments under the videos, but also negative commentaries expressing disapproval of their creators. In some videos, even the filmmakers sometimes themselves expressed shame at their own behaviour towards their child. However, based on existing research, it can be assumed that despite the objections of some viewers, phenomena similar to those caused by cyberbullying are likely to increase. It seems important to mention: "psychosocial problems, declining academic performance, and low self-esteem."[68] These effects can occur with differing degrees of intensity depending on the child's individual characteristics and social environment. Undoubtedly, however, "parental trolling constitutes one of the types

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[66] Caregiver's guide, https://www.tiktok.com/safety/pl-pl/guardians-guide/ [access: 26.09.2023].

[67] Empirical investigation of the effects of parental trolling is complicated by the fact that it is a fairly new social problem. We can only assume what consequences parental trolling may cause in the future. Furthermore, it seems that the effects may be far-reaching and may manifest themselves in children's lives during their teenage years or in adulthood.

[68] Elimy L. Helfrich, Jennifer L. Doty, Yi-Wen Su, Jacqlyn L. Yourell, Joy Gabrielli, "Parental views on preventing and minimizing negative effects of cyberbullying". *Children and Youth Services Review* 118 (2020): 1.

of cyberbullying, a particularly cruel one, since the perpetrator (troll) is a parent taking advantage of the helplessness of his or her own child."[69]

Another result of parental trolling is the legal consequences caused by sharing a child's image. The person who suffers the consequences of parental trolling is the parent who publishes the images. Indeed, abuse of the child's subjectivity may result in a deterioration of the child's relationship with the parent in the future, as exemplified by the many lawsuits brought by children against parents who publish images of their children on social media. There is a risk that an adult son or daughter will claim their rights in the future if they feel that their welfare has been violated by their parents.

However, the consequences of the videos analysed are likely to be more far-reaching. In fact, they may affect entire societies where the normalisation process of pathological behaviour is taking place. The mechanisms encouraging likes, shares and comments on the videos show violence against the child as typical behaviour. It would appear, therefore, that the effects of disseminating a child's image on the internet are broader than the child-parent relationship. The prevalence and positive reactions of users towards this type of content make it the 'norm'. As Anna Tereszkiewicz claims:

> TikTok encourages copying and imitation by promoting activities that include remixing existing videos in an appealing way, in particular remixing popular content that is algorithmically related to the new video, or by encouraging users to create videos that have mimetic potential, i.e. videos that will become the basis for further imitation[70].

The more of this type of content on the internet, the more favourable users' attitudes towards cyberbullying and tolerance of violations of child welfare.

Violation of the child's subjectivity represented in the analysed videos

The description of the above presented aspects of the TikTok videos allows us to answer the question: How is the subjectivity of children represented in the analysed videos? The most important results are discussed below.

Respect for a child's subjectivity is expressed in the acceptance of the child as a participant of community, above all of the family. What all the TikTok movies analysed have in common is that the child is involved in a game designed by an adult. The child, however, is neither consulted during the course of the game nor in the way it is recorded and shared. Emotions such as fear or bewilderment become

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[69] Jędrysiak, "Odpowiedzialność", 32.
[70] Tereszkiewicz, "TikTok – przegląd", 215; Diana Zulli, David James Zulli, „Extending the Internet meme: Conceptualizing technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform". *New Media & Society* 8 (24) (2020).

the subject of entertainment not only for their caregivers, but also for all those to whom the video reaches.

Similar findings apply to mutual understanding between parent and child. The child performs not as a co-producer but as an actor. The combination of reactions indicative of the stress experienced by the child with the cheerful music and smiles of the parents may indicate a lack of understanding of the child's perspective. Psychological violence is used against a child who is ridiculed, at a time when he or she needs support and feels fear. In addition, the parent who should create an atmosphere of safety for the child is the one using violence. A parent posting a video online also provokes a conversation among commentators who rarely consider how the child participating in a challenge may feel. The child's task seems to be to entertain the users of TikTok and other social media rather than to contribute to the community.

The attitude of adults recording a child unwittingly participating in such play would seem to be one of disregard for the child's boundaries. The parent records and share the video without the child's informed consent. Afterwards, parent allows the child's image to be commented on by strangers, often taking part in the discussion themselves. The videos present the situation from the parent's perspective omitting the child's perspective. There is a risk of the video being used by strangers or, in the future, by peers who find a video of a schoolmate and perhaps use it for bullying purposes.

Another outcome of the study is our finding that parental trolling 'challenges' videos are watched by many people, including children and teenagers who will be parents themselves in the future. Through modelling and mimicry, they learn how to form a relationship with their own children. If children watch the videos, they may learn that children's boundaries can be violated without legal consequences for adults. The child's image becomes 'data' that can be posted online without consequence. In the light of these findings, an important question about respect towards the children's subjectivity in the online world arises.

Discussion and limitation of the study

The conclusions of the video content analysis seem to confirm that the development of social media can foster pathological behaviour.[71] Despite increased awareness of children's rights in Western societies, "behaviours indicating illusory child empowerment" are still present.[72] Our research supports the statement of Miś and Ornacka who notice a violation of childrens' subjectivity manifested, for instance, in: "ignoring the child in the adult relationship, disregarding the child's problems,

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[71] Brabazon, "Digital Dialogues and Community 2.0".
[72] Golus, "Od przedmiotu", 326.

ridiculing and devaluing the child's position, opinion or behaviour because of his/her age and inexperience, imposing an adult conception of life and behaviour on the child without giving him/her the opportunity to express their own opinion [and] driving the child into jobs and tasks beyond their strength."[73] Meanwhile, the need for the subjective treatment of children follows indirectly from the principle of the protection of the welfare of the child, which underpins all children's rights legislation.[74]

The videos we analysed convey important information not only about "Who the child is for the adult"[75] but also about who the parent is. The findings bring to mind research on trolling as a source of entertainment[76] which demonstrates the need for entertainment in parents' lives. This issue requires further research. Theoretical categories that may be useful in explaining the causes of parental trolling are, in our opinion, insufficiently explored so far. The concept of 'kidults culture' – when adults display childish behaviour and never want to grow up, because old age (or even adulthood) is undesired by them-could be a valuable line of enquiry[77]. Perhaps the tendency to play on the internet using images of one's own children is one of the manifestations of 'kidult culture'? Research results indicating the correlation of Internet trolling with psychopathy, sadism, and Machiavellianism may provide some food for thought in this context too[78]. The results of our research confirm also that the 'adultist' model of parenting[79], in which the parent plays a decisive role in the relationship and overlooks the child's subjectivity, is also still prevalent.

Future research should take into account the limitations of the study described in this article. Among the most important are the interpretative, and therefore inherently subjective, nature of the analyses and the subjective selection of the TikTok videos. Another weakness of our research strategy are difficulties in analyzing the videos, especially their hidden messages[64]. Moreover, our research suggests that the popularity of the parental trolling content are a popular problem, however, it is difficult to state unequivocally how many videos have been published and how many people they have reached, taking into account the cross-circulation of content on social media.

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[73] Ibid., 318, za: Miś, Ornacka, "Podmiotowość", 63–82.

[74] Karolina Mendecka, "Klauzula dobra dziecka w konwencji o prawach dziecka i w prawie polskim (wybrane problemy)". *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Iuridica* 77 (2016): 31.

[75] Danuta Waloszek, *Pedagogika przedszkolna. Metamorfoza statusu i przedmiotu badań* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Pedagogicznej, 2006), 47.

[76] Erin E. Buckels, Paul D. Trapnell, Delroy L. Paulhus, "Trolls just want to have fun". *Personality and Individual Differences* 67 (2014): 97–102.

[77] Keith Hayward, "*Life Stage Dissolution* in Anglo-American advertising and popular culture: Kidults, Lil' Britneys and middle youths". *The Sociological Review* 61 (3) (2013): 525–548.

[78] Ginés Navarro-Carrillo, Jorge Torres-Marín, Hugo Carretero-Dios, "Do trolls just want to have fun? Assessing the role of humor-related traits in online trolling behavior". *Computers in Human Behavior* 114 (2021): 106551.

[79] Golus, "Od przedmiotu", 319.

Conclusion

Following these observations, we recognise the need to strengthen efforts to promote digital competencies of children, teenagers and adults. We see an urgent need for pedagogical and legal education among parents and educators. It seems to be an important task for schools, kindergartens, nurseries and maybe even hospitals, where children not only start their lives in the real world, but also their social media image is often created. Therefore, we see the need for a refreshed pedagogy not only for teachers and parents, but also for potential future parents – preschool and school students at all levels. In our opinion, this education should be conducted holistically, with the emphasise on the child-parent relationship.

We recognise the potential of social campaigns for the conscious sharing of children's images on the internet, run by various entities. In Poland, these include the "Dbam o Mój Zasięg" and the "Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę" Foundation. We recommend supporting such campaigns.

We also believe that there is a need to develop research into the predictors of sharenting and parental trolling and the prevalence of their severe effects. With knowledge of the causes of this phenomenon, more preventive interventions could be introduced. In addition, we reflect on the need to design therapeutic actions for children whose images have been disseminated causing their emotional distress. There is a risk that the problem of parental trolling and disturbed relationships between children and parents in families may develop to the point where we will see effects in the behaviour and mental state of children and adolescents in the future. Perhaps this is a new area for therapy with children and adolescents just like the experience of other types of trauma. It is not difficult to imagine that it might be a traumatic experience for a teenager to find ridiculing recordings that his or her parents made public on the Internet several years ago.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that among the content published on the TikTok app, there are not only trolling videos, but also a lot of educational and parenting content, spreading positive parenting role models, encouraging reflection and improving parental and pedagogical skills. Social campaigns are also present on TikTok, e.g. on counteracting online hate speech. Unfortunately, the algorithm selects content tailored to a person's interests based on their viewing history, therefore social campaigns cannot be expected to reach every user on TikTok. They will therefore not be a sufficient tool for the prevention of parental trolling among parents. It seems, therefore, that pedagogy in 'off-algorithm' (whatever that may mean) contact is still needed.

Przedstawienie dziecka w mediach społecznościowych. Interpretatywna analiza treści filmów o charakterze parental trollingu opublikowanych w aplikacji TikTok

S t r e s z c z e n i e: Artykuł prezentuje wyniki jakościowej analizy treści siedmiu filmów o charakterze parental trollingowym, opublikowanych w aplikacji TikTok. Filmy zostały stworzone przez rodziców biorących udział w „wyzwaniach", którzy nagrywali własne dzieci w sytuacjach ośmieszających lub stresujących je. Badanie dotyczy metod komunikacji, demografii użytkowników i znaczenia algorytmów w rozprzestrzenianiu się patotreści. Wyniki wskazują na możliwe psychospołeczne konsekwencje dla dzieci zbliżone do skutków doświadczania cyberprzemocy. Autorki opisują możliwe skutki nadużywania wizerunku dziecka dla przyszłych relacji rodzic–dziecko i na ryzyko normalizacji społecznej parental trollingu. Wskazują na potrzebę projektowania działań edukacyjnych dla rodziców oraz rekomendują kampanie społeczne i dalsze badania nad czynnikami determinującymi parental trolling, proponując dyskusję nad kompleksową edukacją w niemal wszystkich grupach wiekowych i nad terapeutycznym wsparciem dla dzieci dotkniętych nadużyciem publikacji ich wizerunków.

S ł o w a   k l u c z o w e: TikTok, dziecko, parental trolling, sharenting, dobro dziecka, podmiotowość dziecka, prawa dziecka

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