



KIDS, KIDTECH, AND DIGITAL CAPITALISM

THE FIGHT FOR OUR
DIGITAL FUTURES



NATALIE COULTER



KIDS, KIDTECH, AND DIGITAL CAPITALISM

Uncovering the workings of the KidTech industry, this book explores how capitalism operates in digital spaces that are geared toward children and how this impacts children's everyday lives.

This book foregrounds the social, cultural, and economic logics of capitalism and the historical trajectories of how children, childhood, and what it means to be a child have been shaped by these logics throughout the 20th century. This is followed by three core sections of the book, which examine present concerns. The first explores how young people are now entangled in digital capitalism as data, the second traces how children are recruited into producing digital content and—by extension—value for digital corporations, and the third explores how KidTech platforms are increasingly constructing digital spaces that isolate children from parental involvement. The book concludes by questioning the wider implications of KidTech on children's rights and its long-term consequences.

This book will be of interest to students and scholars in a wide range of fields including digital media studies, children's media studies, internet studies, media policy, children and youth studies, digital governance studies, and beyond. It will also be of interest to educators and policymakers seeking to understand the complex workings of children's digital lives.

Natalie Coulter is a Professor in Communication and Media Studies at York University. Her research focuses on young people's digital cultures, children's media, girls' culture, and digital capitalism. She is the Past Director of the Institute for Digital Literacies (IRDL) and a founding member of Girls' Studies Research Network (GSRN). She is co-author of *Media and Communication in Canada* (2025) and author of *Tweening the Girl* (2014). She has published widely on such topics as digital media, social media, consumer culture, gender and youth culture, Canadian media, masculinity and *Playboy*, research harassment, and the social impacts of digital technologies.



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To my people: Troy, Maeve, and Cambie.

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Portions of this book draw on my earlier publications, though all have been substantially revised and reworked for this volume. Throughout, I indicate where I am extending or building upon my previous scholarship. In several chapters, I engage more directly with earlier projects. Chapter 2 revisits my 2012 article “From Toddlers to Teens: Colonizing Childhood the Disney Way,” published in *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, and Cultures*, as well as material from my first book, *Tweening the Girl: The Crystallization of the Tween Market* (2014, Peter Lang). Chapter 4 incorporates sections from a co-authored chapter with Grace Lao, “Superfans and Evangelizers: Young People’s Creative Entanglements with Promotional Culture,” published in *New Frontiers in The Cultural and Creative Industries of Childhood and Youth*, edited by V. I. de la Ville (Peter Lang). It also draws on my article with Tamar Faber, “Let’s Go Make Some Videos!’: Post-Feminist Digital Media on Tween-Coms,” published in *Television and New Media* (2021). I thank all of my co-authors for allowing me to include these components.

1

INTRODUCTION

Digital Kids, Digital Worlds

At the end of the day, as my kids get their snacks and settle down on the couch with their phones in hand, I ask them how their day was. “I dunno, fine,” they shrug, barely looking up. “So, what did you do?” I ask. “What happened in school?” “The usual,” they say. It takes a while, a bit of joking, a bit of prodding to figure out what “the usual” is, but eventually I get little snippets of their day. They did a test on Google Classroom in geography class, practiced French on Duolingo, charted a graph on Desmos in math class, created a presentation in Canva for art class, hung out with their friends at lunch while scrolling “Insta,” passed 10,000 steps on their Fitbit, played Roblox at their friend’s house before coming home. When I envision their days, I am surprised at how much “the usual” involves gliding through digital spaces. “What’s up for tonight?” I say slyly trying to continue the conversation. One kid has to meet her tutor online and will probably FaceTime her friend afterwards. The other will watch Netflix and finish up her science homework on Brightspace. She will also probably “snap” her friends on Snapchat, but she’s not sharing that with me because I will “bug her too much” about her social media use. My children, like many other children, seamlessly slide through digital spaces all day long. As they move through these spaces, they have sponsored content delivered specifically to them, their data is harvested and tracked, and their creative outputs become content on multiple platforms.

As a parent, I barely see these spaces they weave in and out of all day long, leaving little wisps of themselves scattered across this digital media ecosystem. But when I take a deeper look what I really see is a virtual full-scale takeover of children’s lives by these tech companies that are geared to kids. While this is happening “on the daily” in our own home, outside of my home global tech companies are racing to dominate these digital spaces and to consolidate them

into larger platforms as “omni-experiential” places to learn, work, watch media, socialize, shop, game, and communicate—all within one connected immersive environment (Yamada-Rice, 2021). At the moment, there is little understanding of how these spaces will emerge and what their impact on our children’s lives will be.

Children create, socialize, and play in digital spaces, which can be a place of pleasures and fun, but also spaces of regulation and control. Children’s lives are entangled in these corporate digital spaces and their activities are captured, tracked, and stored by corporations in commercial databases that are beyond parental control and can potentially last forever. At the same time, as digital technologies, platforms, and apps become more intensely embedded into the rhythms of a child’s everyday life, which families have access to these technologies and digital spaces and which don’t becomes a greater source of inequality.

This book has been percolating away in my brain for close to three years, before I even put pen to paper or, let’s be honest, fingers to keyboard. I don’t know when I started to think about this specifically, but slowly I came to the realization that what it means to be a child is sculpted by the social, political, and economic demands of digital capitalism, and since this moment of late-stage capitalism is dramatically shifting, what it means to be a child is also changing. This book is less about the experiences of being a child, and more about what it means to be a child in these spaces. The focus of the book is on the industry itself, as opposed to young people’s actual experiences. I know as a reader you might be disappointed to not have the perspectives of young people themselves in this book. Trust me, I struggled with this myself but I had to make this editorial choice to keep the scope of this project manageable. Including young people’s perspectives on their experiences of digital platforms took the argument in a different direction, away from the focus on how digital capitalism shapes what it means to be a child. How kids engage with these framings is a different project, and one that is worthy of study, but beyond the scope of this book.

The impact of the digital on children’s lives became even more evident with the global pandemic as many young people retreated to their bedrooms and basements, to be on their digital devices to meet up with their friends in the virtual spaces of Roblox, to practice the latest TikTok dance moves, or to attend virtual school via Classroom or Brightspace. It felt like virtually overnight children’s entire social, educational, and play lives moved fully online, allowing for the massive proliferation and expansion of digital technology and digital platforms and further entrenching big tech giants even deeper into children’s lives. For example, at the time of writing this in 2025 every day approximately 151 million users worldwide play Roblox¹ and there have been 40 billion visits to its most popular game Adopt Me!,² TikTok had close to 1.59 billion users worldwide³ with many of the users being children under 13

despite the platform's age restrictions, and Google Classroom has an estimated 150 million users.⁴ Hidden in these statistics were those kids who were left out as they didn't effortlessly make this shift to online because they lacked access to computers, reliable WiFi or even private bedrooms to engage in the digital. There is an embedded privilege in which kids were even able to move their lives online, and which were not. It's easy to forget as we are a few years out of the pandemic, but there were deep inequities in how this shift was experienced. This moment reminds us that digital capitalism impacts all, both those that are included and those who are left out.

At the core of this massive change, where much of children's daily lives moved into online spaces, there is shifting reality of what it means to be a child in these spaces. Throughout this book, I argue that with this virtual full-scale takeover of children's lives by tech companies, we need to slow down and ask critical questions about children and childhood in the context of this moment of digital capitalism. It is imperative that we begin to understand the workings of tech companies, specifically the ones geared to kids as they are shaping what it means to be a child. This has to be done in order to protect children's digital rights and support children, families, educators, and policy makers as we all navigate the rapid changes in all of our digital lives.

Before doing this, we also need to really understand this kids' digital media ecosystem. I focus specifically on the spaces where kids play—or what is colloquially called the KidTech industry, which can be defined as the professional ecosystems, digital infrastructures, and regulatory frameworks that create digital play spaces geared to kids with the purpose of engaging directly with kids as consumers.

Understanding the KidTech industry means to understand its two parts, the kid in KidTech, and the tech in KidTech. And, as a third component, how does the kid and the tech interact as two working parts of a whole. Young people have always been central to the way the capitalism unfolds, and this moment of digital capitalism is no different. As I will show in Chapter 2, the workings and logics of capitalism has always reconfigured the lived experiences of being a child, and by extension has shaped the contours of what it means to be a child. At the same time, the ways kids engage in capitalist spaces has broader impact on how capitalism functions. The two are mutually constitutive, but the balance of power is never equal. By building on a historical trajectory of the symbiosis of kids and capitalism, I am arguing that the logics of digital capitalism and the affordances of digital platforms shape what it means to be a child in this current moment, while at the same time children shape the functioning of these platforms. Underpinning this argument is my belief that understanding how children and young people are embedded in digital capitalism is critical if we really want to understand the workings, logics, and futures of digital capitalism for us all.

How I Got Here

Many of the ideas in this book have been taken from other publications and projects I have worked on over the years. When I was working on these projects, they seemed disparate. I thought of them as small individual projects that had little to do with each other, a project here on girls and fun, a project there on Canadian media for example. While I was interested in all of them, I would work on each of them for different reasons. Some of them grew out of my dissertation and subsequent book on the development of the tween girls' market in the 1990s. Others were small projects that I applied for funding for on childhood, as I was positioning myself as a scholar of young people's consumer culture, following the example set for me by my PhD supervisor Dr. Stephen Kline 25 years ago when I started my studies. I would think of a current project that could be an abstract for a conference that I wanted to attend. Some of these abstracts would grow into bigger papers to become a larger separate project or published as articles or book chapters. Some of these projects were collaborative in that I worked on research teams or with research partners, and some projects were solo acts. And some projects I started would eventually die through a slow death of neglect as I lost interest when I couldn't seem to find a core argument that would work, but they still sit there on my desktop, half written, half formed, a few with the potential to be reborn as new ideas. This is the pile of work that I draw from as I write this book. Together these projects are the trees of my intellectual forest. At first, I couldn't see the forest because of the trees, but when I step back and look at the full forest,⁵ a much bigger argument about children and digital capitalism begins to form.

As I skim through this reservoir of research materials on my hard drive, I can see the glimmers of a larger argument start to solidify around how the children are central to the workings of capitalism. The commercial epistemologies of capitalism have reconfigured childhood subjectivities according to marketplace logics and in doing so have naturalized the child as a consumer. The scraps of my research reveal a trajectory that starts with some of my historical research looking at the late 1800s with the rise of Victorian girls' magazines that began to position young people as having distinct and separate interests and desires from adults. This trajectory continues through the mid-20th century with expansion of the teen market and the rise of Disney, as a moment when youth tastes began to influence culture. The 1980s are critical moment in the explosion of children's consumer culture, as media deregulation allowed for media properties such as *Strawberry Shortcake* or the *Smurfs* to be both a TV show and licensed merchandise, firmly solidifying children's role as consumers in a model of business practice that has grown exponentially ever since. Across the decades of the 20th century, young people have been naturalized as consumers and segmented into narrower niches such as the

toddler, the teen, and the tween, offering more intense marketing opportunities, all defined, understood, and organized according to the commercial logics of the mediated marketplace. The digital child is a continuation of making capitalism hum over the long haul (to paraphrase my absolute favorite quote by Daniel Cook, 2004). This book is me tracing how the child fuels the workings of capitalism throughout the 20th century to the contemporary moment. As I make these traces, I am beginning to see deeper core questions in my research and how they fit together in new ways, like a Frankenstein-ed quilt, built of scraps of material but stitched together in a new formation.

The main thesis of this book is that the child is being redefined according to the logics of digital capitalism, to become a datafied subject, a promotional laborer, and a naturalized citizen of digital enclosures. I argue that the stakes for understanding KidTech is high, as we need to understand both the tech and the kid. For the first time we as humans are entrenched in corporate structures of digital capital even before we are born; we are captured as digital data in databases that can potentially last our entire lifetimes, the distinction between play and labor is collapsing as our play lives are recruited into modes of promotion for corporate brands. Our futures are being reimagined as unfolding in digital enclosures where we learn, work, play, watch, socialize, and shop all in corporately owned digital spaces. We need to understand these logics and demands in the context of the current moment of digital capitalism (what is the tech?) in order to understand how the child is formed as an epistemological entity (what is the kid?). As the KidTech industry is expanding beyond childhood and beginning to colonize all of our digital worlds such understandings are critical to our futures. Defining what it means to be a child ultimately shapes our ideological construct of what it is to be human. Thus figuring out definitions of the child under the neoliberal logics of digital capital has broader implications on how we ultimately come to define all of our rights and our human subjectivity.

Overview of Chapters

To understand the implications of KidTech and digital capitalism, we need to understand its historical underpinnings of the child and the marketplace. I do this in Chapter 2 where I begin to sew together my scraps of the historical research to provide an overview of how young people's culture has been central to the capitalist enterprise of an expansion of consumer culture throughout the 20th century. In this chapter I show how the cultural definitions of what it means to be a child have been shaped by the commercial epistemologies in which the consumer culture industries (i.e., market research, advertising, media, retail) construct cultural categories of childhood according to the logics of the marketplace. Throughout the chapter I trace how as the 20th century progressed children were naturalized as consumers and segmented into narrower niches such as the

toddler, the tween, and the teen that offered more intense marketing opportunities, and who were all defined, understood, and organized according to the commercial logics of the mediated marketplace.

In Chapter 3, what I think of as the theory chapter, I question what is the tech in KidTech by illustrating that KidTech is a form of digital capitalism that includes the digital media, platforms, and technologies geared to young people as well as the underlying corporate infrastructures and profession ecosystems that support these. This chapter provides a deeper explanation of the workings of digital capitalism and the KidTech industry.

The fourth chapter of the book traces how children have become entangled in digital capitalism as datafied subjects as their lives are embedded within the digital even before they are born, and continues as they age. This, I argue, makes this young generation the first fully datafied generation, fully known through the lens of the commercial, but unequally experienced, as young people's lives now unfold in the spaces of private capital and surveillance capitalism. Chapter 5 questions the moral logics of the KidTech industry in naturalizing children as workers whose creative labor is extracted for value to digital corporations. Kids are also laborers, conscripted into capitalism to create content and to do promotional work through the activities of play.

In Chapter 6 the book returns to the definition of KidTech and does a deeper dive into the workings of KidTech, its corporate infrastructures and professional ecosystems—by focusing mainly on Roblox. I return to the original question of what is the kid in KidTech to show how KidTech companies build narratives around children's autonomy in order to justify creating digital enclosures that isolate children's digital lives from their parents' involvement. The chapter has two components. First, I explore the professional ecosystems of KidTech as a commercial epistemology that “knows” the digital child, according to the logics of digital capitalism. I show how such commercial epistemologies are central to shaping how KidTech extracts value from children by defining kids as being tech-savvy and deserving of their own spaces. These logics are used to justify children's digital spaces as digital enclosures. Second, I then define Roblox's vision of its platform as a “omni-experiential” converged digital space where a child can learn, work, watch media, socialize, shop, game, and communicate—all within one connected immersive environment, as a “moated walled garden.” I argue that this moated walled garden is a form of digital enclosure that isolates children from parental involvement and is potentially a virtual full-scale corporate takeover of children's lives. I end by arguing that this will have a dramatic impact on children's lives, the experiences of childhoods, and by extension on the lives of all of us.

The book concludes by stating that the stakes of this technology are high for young people whose entire lives unfold within the enclosures of the neo-liberal corporate frames of digital capitalism. KidTech is changing what it means to be a child, and by extension what it means to be a parent, a family,

and a citizen. I contend that there is great urgency in understanding these digital spaces and how they are structured within the logics of digital capitalism. As KidTech becomes more prevalent and begins to colonize almost all aspects of our children's lives, we must be attentive to the ways that the structures of the digital world can potentially replicate and exacerbate the oppressions and inequalities that are already centered in society. Protecting young people's digital rights and right to privacy is increasing complex as children become datafied subjects on corporate servers that buy and sell information to third parties and content producers whose creations, images, and stories become content for KidTech platforms. As the world becomes more digital, which children get access to digital technologies and services becomes an even greater possibility of exacerbating inequalities and privileges already experienced by children. I conclude this chapter by exploring the new General Comment 25 (GC25), adopted by the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which clarifies the UNCRC as it applies to a digital context, in relation to the key findings of the book.

Terms of the Book

Before continuing, I want to explain the terms of the book. Who exactly am I studying, and why am I using the term "kids"? Originally, I was going to use the word child but it is such a tricky term. In legal definitions such as how the United Nations uses it, the term child sometimes means anyone under the age of 18 years old which lumps teenagers, tweens, and young children all into category, and flattens out differences. In other contexts, child may mean those under 13 years old, which then excludes those older children. In the past I have used the term young people—as a way to get around this trickiness. The term young people is not as confining as child, but it is so elusive. It's hard to pinpoint what it means, especially as youth under the pressures of late stage capitalism is bloating outwards to those in their twenties but that's not what this book is about. Youth doesn't work as a term, because it is something that people chase, to hold on to their youth, or to be youthful. It also doesn't work because so often in work on media and digital culture, the older end of youth (the teenager and early adult) end up being the main focus of research and the younger child is completely ignored. Their culture is never as exciting to researchers as that of teenagers, and teens are a much easier category to study—getting a project past research ethics is easier and you don't need parental permission.

Here in this book, taking a cue from the media and tech industries, I have decided to call them kids. I like the term kids because it is open, it's colloquial, and it pushes beyond the parameters of legal definitions of the child. As a concept, kid can include tweens, sometimes even teens, without centering these ages. The term kid means not an adult. As a colloquial term, it also means being someone's child—as in "I have two kids." Used in this context it