

## **(ECREA Children, Youth and Media section)**

### **Memeable, persistent, uncontrollable: when children become memes**

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The current media landscape is shaped by an hypermemetic logic, in which major pop cultural and political moments inspire constellations of mediated remix, play, and commentary (Milner, 2016). Memes can be defined as ‘units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process’ (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). Personalities can ascend to or sustain a visibility status through memeability, a characteristic that invites an ‘affective relationship with them through repetition and imitation’ (Mercer & Sarson, 2020, p. 488). Affective publics (Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021) rework, republish, and recirculate visual content, ranging from fascination to derogation (Kassing, 2020).

Children, on the other hand, can hold cuteness: from small babies to children and animals, funny and messy moments, or awkward expressions. Cuteness is something that does not exist in them but that ‘we do to them’ (Harris, 2017, p. 37) in the way they elicit affective responses. They can also bear ‘memetic cuteness’ (Dale et al., 2017) in the way they lend themselves to having a layer of meaning or intention added that was not in the image (e.g., a mean attitude or a complex thought), often resulting in atemporal and universal creations. Cuteness has a strong potential for engagement and creativity (Authors, 2022).

This paper looks at memes generated around children who have gained visibility as a result of the effort of their famous or ordinary parents, through sharenting (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2017). It addresses three questions: How is children’s digital identity appropriated by these affective publics? What different meanings do the affective publics construct from the same media artifacts of the children? What challenges does this memetic visibility pose for children’s rights? It explores three cases of memeable children, purposively chosen to illustrate different contexts, initiatives, and outcomes: Cristiano Júnior, son of the global celebrity Cristiano Ronaldo, the most followed person on Instagram; Alice Secco, a Brazilian toddler who went viral on her mother’s social media accounts for speaking difficult words and then starred advertising campaigns; and the three children of a popular parodic female Instagrammer from Portugal, Madalena Abecasis, who creates and incentivizes the audience to create memes about them.

Using hashtags and text to search for the three cases across different digital spaces, the images were thematically grouped in Padlet to capture the association between formats, platforms, and content. Our case-study strategy focuses on commonalities and differences depending on platform, country, culture, children’s characteristics, and gender and status of the parents. The analysis suggests that the memeability of children can work as a tool for audiences’ engagement, creativity, and expression of affect (positive or negative) towards the parents, the children, or different causes. In whichever case, memes show how persistent, ductile, and replicable visual content is, and how it can quickly escape any sort of control by parents or other entities. We discuss the implications of this phenomenon with the rights of the child in mind, particularly as they play out in the digital realm (Livingstone & Bulger, 2014).