

Toy unboxing: It's a thing; it's lucrative but sensitive: research

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QUT Distinguished Professor Stuart Cunningham. Credit: QUT Marketing & Communication

New research examining the global social media phenomenon of toy unboxing, which is causing concern for parents and other child welfare advocates, concludes it engages children beyond passive consumption but also recommends regulation to address it.

Toy unboxing: Living in a(n unregulated) material world, the work of QUT Distinguished Professor Stuart Cunningham and Professor David Craig from the University of Southern California (with research by PhD student Jarrod Walczer at QUT's Digital Media Research Centre), has just been published in *Media International Australia*.

"The rapid growth and popularity of toy unboxing - videos of the opening, assembling and demonstration of children's toys, often by children, across [social media platforms](#) - is definitely generating some moral panic but new technologies for children's media tend to do that," Professor Cunningham said.

"Some people call it 'toddler crack' and regulation is obviously needed but there is also empowerment for children involved and business opportunities that bring families together in a common enterprise."

Professor Cunningham said unboxers were a subset of social media entertainment content creators. They can be adults but many are children unboxing and reviewing toys and they are extraordinarily popular.

"Unboxing emerged as a genre as early as 15 years ago but once YouTube was launched in 2005 it has gone through the roof and is one of the most popular online genres of all, growing at a rate of 871 per cent since 2010," he said.

"In that time the genre has diversified from adult electronics to children's toys, which is the most popular segment in that field of [social media](#) entertainment.

"The YouTube channel Fun Toyz Collector has nine million subscribers and features a pair of hands opening boxes and assembling toys with a childlike female voiceover.

"There are many more such channels including one of Australia's most viewed YouTube channels - FluffyJet Productions - which has more than three million subscribers and has attracted more than three billion views since its creation in 2010.

"Child creators are playing an increasingly central role. The channel Ryan ToysReviews stars a six-year-old and was launched in 2015. Within one year it was the second largest channel on YouTube (behind Justin Bieber) with 645 million views.

"Another, EvanTubeHD, hosted by a 10-year-old, has more than four million subscribers and billions of views. Like other young stars he is a multi-platform entrepreneur with two other YouTube channels, a line of merchandise and followers on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, all of which is making him and his family millions of dollars."

Professor Cunningham said government regulators have been slow to catch on and the near-global nature of digital platforms make it difficult for there to be consistency from one country to the next.

"Issues of product placement and endorsements are also arising. In the UK, the Code of Non-Broadcast Advertising, Sales, Promotion and Direct Marketing requires vloggers to disclose when they are being paid to promote products, brands or services," he said.

"These rules apply in the UK but are also likely to affect how unboxers in the United States operate or at least require they geo-restrict their content to outside the UK.

"YouTube, meanwhile, has self-regulated regarding children's access, privacy and advertising, and although they allow product placements and endorsements they require creators be transparent about these.

"Many child advocates want to see greater regulation and unfortunately discount the possibility that these videos may also be instructional, education, or simply communicative and fostering peer-to-peer interactions between child creators and viewers.

"There is a strong belief children are being exploited but that is ignoring the business model and creative practices involved in the professionalization of amateur content creators, be they kids or adults.

"Unboxing represents a whole new brand of marketing that can have far greater reach than traditional marketing. Companies are beating down the door of the kids who are doing it best.

"Unboxing videos can work for young children as a form of peer-to-peer communication and for some families as small businesses."

More information: David Craig et al, Toy unboxing: living in a(n unregulated) material world, *Media International Australia* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/1329878X17693700](https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X17693700)

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