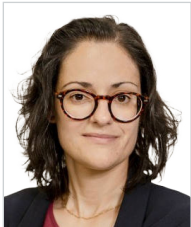


The role that influencers play in consumption decisions made by Spanish minors

El papel de los influencers en las decisiones de consumo de los menores españoles



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Abstract:

In a context of growing influencer marketing, it is important to question the role influencers play in the consumption decisions of minors. The special rapport that these content creators are able to create with

Resumen:

En un contexto donde el marketing de influencia crece, es relevante cuestionarse por el rol que juegan los influencers en las decisiones de consumo de los menores. La especial cercanía que estos creadores de

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their followers establishes a framework of credibility that also applies to their publications for commercial purposes. From a qualitative perspective using 12 focus groups, the aim has been to delve into the relationship between influencers and minors between the ages of 11 and 17 who live in Spain, in order to discover the perception and collective imagination of adolescents regarding their relationship with influencers and the commercial implications that this relation entails. The findings reveal that the link developed between the minor and the influencer has a direct impact on the level of credibility bestowed on commercial publications, which is directly dependent on the type of influencer; minors do not object to an influencers commercial collaborations as long as the resulting content is useful or entertaining and has a connection to the profession or lifestyle of the content creator who promotes it. On the other hand, unlike adolescents, the youngest participants demand interaction with their idols.

Keywords:

Adolescents and influencers; consumption and influencers; parasocial relationship; credibility; social networks.

contenido son capaces de generar con sus seguidores, puede establecer un marco de credibilidad que se extienda también a sus publicaciones con fines comerciales. Desde una perspectiva cualitativa y mediante la realización de 12 grupos focales se planteó ahondar en la relación entre influencers y menores entre los 11 y los 17 años viviendo en España con el fin de conocer la percepción y el imaginario de los adolescentes sobre su relación con los influencers y las implicaciones comerciales que dicha relación supone. Los hallazgos del estudio desvelan que el vínculo desarrollado entre el menor y el influencer incide directamente en el nivel de credibilidad otorgado a las publicaciones comerciales, algo que depende directamente del tipo de influencer; los menores no rechazan las colaboraciones comerciales del influencer siempre y cuando el contenido resultante sea útil o entretenido y guarde una conexión con la profesión o el estilo de vida del creador de contenido que lo promoció. Por otra parte, los más pequeños, a diferencia de los adolescentes, demandan una interacción con sus referentes.

Palabras clave:

Adolescentes e influencers; consumo e influencers; relación parasocial; credibilidad; redes sociales.

1. Introduction and theoretical framework

One of the differences between traditional celebrities and social media personalities is the ease of interaction offered to users by these platforms, which allows for the perception of a closer link with followers (Hartmann, 2008). This phenomenon is known as a parasocial relationship, an essential factor in the growing importance of influencer marketing as a strategy used by brands to target specific audiences. Although the characteristics of the perceived relationship with such celebrities (idealisation, intimacy, and passion) have been documented in the literature as somewhat limited compared to those of a true friendship, the opportunity to interact with celebrities increases the involvement with these personalities, as well as the engagement with his or her surroundings (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Due to the relevance of these celebrities in the daily digital consumption by minors, and therefore in their possible socialisation, this research aims to discover the impact that influencer marketing has on the consumption preferences of minors who browse social networks.

Marketing strategies that use the influence of individuals or opinion leaders to promote a brand through the virtual profiles of these figures, as well as to influence the decisions and purchasing habits of a community (Brown & Hayes, 2008), are becoming more frequent. Moreover, such strategies are seen as positive due to the perception of trust, experience, and attractiveness of consumers toward these influencers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Influencer marketing works as a link between brands and consumers, which is mediated by internet celebrities who gain the affection of their followers (Sheth, 2020). While advertising expenditures in Spain fell by 18% in 2020, influencer marketing, along with native advertising, recorded their strongest growth ever (Sanchez, 2021). Although the main motivation for minors to use social networks is for interaction with friends or acquaintances rather than

brands, the influence of and exposure to persuasive messages in games, tutorials, dances, and other viral content is clear, and this increases with age (Feijoo & Sádaba, 2022).

Influencers create high quality, aspiring content, thereby gaining a following similar to that of celebrities, which they monetise by promoting products (Lowe-Calverley & Grieve, 2021). For advertisers, they are attractive brand ambassadors, as they convey sincerity (Audrezet et al., 2020), credibility (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lim et al., 2017), and trust to consumers by creating a closer, more engaged relationship with their followers (Silva et al., 2021). Influencers create awareness about brands and products, serve as implicit or explicit endorsers of brands, and are ultimately able to influence consumers' purchase decisions (Jin & Ruy, 2020). These content creators are one of the most effective channels for sharing advertising messages with younger generations due to the bond created with their audiences, the dynamic format of the adverts, and their similarity to the editorial content of each profile (Feng et al., 2020; Ferchaud et al., 2018). It must also be noted that this effectiveness is enhanced by the ease with which the commercial content is blended with the influencer's own creations; this type of native advertising, which is also known as a hybrid adverts, is discreet in nature, as it tries not to interrupt the user's consumption experience (Quijandría, 2020). Beyond the fact that content shared by influencers is especially familiar to children and adolescents, due to their exposure to such content from an early age, another reason for this familiarity is the fact that a significant number of influencers are minors themselves (Hudders et al., 2021).

Influencers are able to shape the behaviour of their community by becoming role models. This process is further intensified due to the fact that influencers are seen as "close friends" (Meyers, 2017), which reinforces the idea that anyone can achieve the level of popularity that some influencers have attained (Silva et al., 2021), a feeling that is especially prevalent among children and adolescents. Such proximity is achieved by the influencer's ability to engage his or her audience in their day-to-day lives, and give access to more intimate aspects of their personal or professional lives on platforms that allow for user interaction (De Veirman et al., 2017). This contributes to a familial atmosphere of parasocial interaction, which is portrayed as the anticipated excitement of a face-to-face relationship between an individual and a media personality (Knoll et al., 2015). The stronger the parasocial interaction with influencers, the more reliable and engaging their message will be, and the more value will be placed on the opinion and experiences of the content creator. As such, the audience is more likely to follow their recommendations, including those related to products and brands, as their message is perceived as more trustworthy and appealing (Lim et al., 2017). Such trustworthiness also implies a match between the advertised products and the influencer's image, rather than the number of followers or scope (De Veirman et al., 2017). On the other hand, the acknowledged impact on the digital and advertising environments should be considered in order to stimulate and engage minors more effectively than traditional advertising (Hudders et al, 2021).

With regard to the role of traditional socialisation factors (family, school, friends, and the media), the relevance of influencers lies in the continuous communication they offer to their followers by sharing moments of their daily lives, which causes their supporters to feel as though they belong to their inner circle. Moreover, unlike family and friends, influencers can fulfil the function of role models as well (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Consumption is also a key to the process of youth identification, as it can support the strengthening of one's own identity, or allow a person to distinguish her or himself from others (Berríos & Buxarrais, 2015). As consumers of online content, minors are characterised by rapid consumption and, due to their imitative style, they are an audience of special interest in advertising

strategies because of the influence they have in the home, and due to their relationship with parents as well (Salgado Carrión, 2006; Bringué, 2001; McNeal, 1992). As a result of the autonomy offered by browsing, together with the ability to choose content, Internet users seem to take an active role in the advertising experiences to which they are exposed, a scenario that has provided an opportunity for the application of marketing strategies. For minors, advertising is eminently digital (Hudders et al., 2019), and social networks are perceived as one of the most relevant media supports for minors who seek entertainment and socialisation. Thus, either because of their own identity or personal needs, or because of their role in household consumption, it is clear that minors are usually the target of advertising strategies in the digital environment, as they are an audience characterised by having less knowledge about advertising and persuasive content. As such, they are more likely to accept messages with little or no critical analysis (Carlson and Grossbart, 1990; Hudders et al., 2021). This research analyses the effects of content shared by content creators on children and adolescents as consumers.

The main objective of this research is to discover how children between 11 and 17 years of age perceive the role of influencers as brand ambassadors and commercial collaborators, as well as the impact that these recommendations have on their purchase decisions. Thus, the following research question is posed:

RQ1- What impact does influencer marketing have on the consumer preferences of adolescents?

2. Methodology

In order to answer the research question and respond to the objectives set out, an exploratory, qualitative study was undertaken in which 12 focus groups were carried out, each of which was coordinated by two members of the research team (Gómez & Jiménez, 1996). Given the situation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection was conducted fully online. Platforms familiar to minors were used (Zoom and Microsoft Teams), and at the beginning of the session, correct functioning of the audio and video connection was verified in all cases. Moreover, the participants were informed that they were going to be recorded, and that access to the resulting material would be exclusively restricted to the researchers involved in the project. The focus groups lasted approximately 50 minutes and had a minimum participation of four minors per group. A total of 62 young people between 11 and 17 years of age in Spain participated from April to June of 2021.

The sample was selected with the assistance of the participants' schools as a way of contacting parents and ensuring their voluntary collaboration, and for the purpose of obtaining authorisation for their participation through the signing of a consent form approved by the Ethics Committee of the University, upon which the project depended. The students were concurrently enrolled in eight private and state-subsidised schools, as well as nine public schools, which were located in such a way as to represent the entire national territory (north, south, east, west, and the islands). Two inclusion criteria were established: the academic year; and the socio-economic status of each school. Regarding the academic year, students were recruited from year 6 of primary school, secondary school, and sixth form. The socio-economic status of the institution was determined by two variables: 1) Type: private, subsidised, or public; 2) and geographic location: this provided a preliminary indicator of the socio-economic level of the households from which the minors proceeded. According to this segmentation criterion, a distinction was made between schools that were high-level (income > €30,000), mid-level (€11,450-30,350), and lower-level (<€11,450) (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística, INE*) [National Statistics Institute] 2018). We also sought to maintain the ratio between females and

males, resulting in a total of 37 girls and 25 boys (see Table 1). A total of 62 minors from 17 different private, state-subsidised, and public schools in Spain participated, representing the majority of the national territory (Galicia, Asturias, Catalonia, Madrid, Canary Islands, La Rioja, Basque Country, the Region of Valencia, and Andalusia); the composition of each focus group averaged between four and seven participants, with the exception of one focus group in which three children participated.

Table 1. Number of participants, school year, and socio-economic level

Year	SEC	Female	Male	Total
Primary School Year 6	High-level	1	2	3
	Mid-level	4	2	6
	Lower-level	3	4	7
Secondary School Years 1, 2 and 3	High-level	4	1	5
	Mid-level	2	2	4
	Lower-level	4	0	4
Secondary School Year 4	High-level	5	2	7
	Mid-level	1	5	6
	Lower-level	1	4	5
Sixth form, years 1 and 2	High-level	4	1	5
	Mid-level	4	2	6
	Lower-level	4	0	4
Total		37	25	62

Source: created by the authors

3. Results

3.1. General associations made by the minors regarding the influencers

Of the main findings, one stands out: for the minors interviewed, commercial collaboration with brands is one of the requirements for giving the name of “influencer” to a content creator or profile on social networks. The interviewees differentiated between two types of influencers to whom they attributed a divergent advertising impact: on the one hand are those who owe their popularity to social networks; on the other hand are the professionals with a presence on social networks, such as athletes, singers, actors, and the like.

The minors are aware that influencers generally exaggerate and show “an enhanced reality”, which is something that has an impact on the content published about brands as well. However, while they give the former type of influencer a moderate level of credibility, they believe that the latter provide a more genuine recommendation, as they promote products and services related to their professional experience. Influencers who are perceived as experts, and who share authentic and intimate content, have a tendency to exert a stronger impact on their followers’ decisions, and their audience grows as a result. For this reason, it is critical for the influencer to have a certain connection with the brand they advertise or recommend to their followers, either because they use it, or because of their lifestyle. One of the interviewees comments as follows:

“If a person is an expert in a certain field, and they recommend something for you, it’s like when you go to a physical therapist, and he or she recommends an ointment, and obviously you use it. Just imagine you play tennis. If a tennis player tells you, ‘Buy this racket because it’s the best’.. In that case, you might do it. But if the person is an influencer, which is what we’re talking about, meaning a person who makes a living from social networks and has to do that kind of advertising, well, then I would say no”. (Girl, FG7, Secondary School Year 1, mid-level SEC).

The minors frequently cited the professional solvency of influencers as a criterion of trustworthiness, to which they gave the same value as their peers:

“Milly Bobby Brown. I don’t know if you know her, but she’s an actress who plays Once in *Stranger Things*. She’s not an influencer, but she’s fairly close to being one, because she has her social networks there and so on. So what happened? She started a make-up product line, and when she created it, my friend was convinced it was good, so she bought the entire line”. (Girl, FG2, Secondary School Year 1, high-level SEC).

In addition to describing the profile of content creators, the interviewees linked certain issues to the influencer marketing industry. Meanwhile, teenagers perceive that the industries that collaborate most often with influencers are those related to fashion, make-up, food, and technology (apps, electronic devices, etc.). These are the markets in which minors take on the role of primary buyers and consumers, and for which brands, especially make-up brands, have created specific product lines that appeal to the small outlays that teenagers can afford, often compulsively. “I did, I bought make-up. I saw a video talking very well about it, so I said, “Yea, let’s go for it”, and I bought it. It was cheap, and we got a lot out of it” (Girl, FG12, Sixth Form, mid-level SEC).

Influencers are seen as a preferred source of information, because far from exploring alternatives on other channels or further references, the interviewees admitted that when they are in doubt about a Tiktoker’s recommendation, they consult another influencer on the same platform to help them make a purchase decision: “Of course, it depends on the influencer. For example, what I mean is that if Monica Moral, or Monismurf, as you probably know her, promotes a product, I buy it. But in the case of Kuno, well, I have to see three more Tiktokers pushing it before I buy it” (Girl, FG10, Secondary School Year 1, lower SEC). It is noteworthy that even when minors have doubts about an influencer, they do not seek other sources of information, but instead look for other content creators on which to base their purchase decisions. The researchers have also observed that among minors from high-level socio-economic backgrounds, an endorsement by an influencer appears to be sufficient reason for the purchase of a specific product. On the other hand, despite the fact that an influencer’s recommendation arouses the same desire to purchase an endorsed product, those from the lower socio-economic strata were prompted to look for a similar but more affordable option:

“It’s true that in some cases items are very expensive, because of what they sponsor, or whatever, so in the end I look for an alternative. But the idea is there. In a way, it’s like I get inspired” (Girl, FG9, Sixth Form, lower SEC).

In both cases, the content creator’s participation in promoting a product has an influence on creating a preference within the minor, although it has a different effect depending on the user’s purchasing power.

3.2. Credibility given to influencers’ promotional content

In effect, the parasocial relationship between minors and influencers has a direct impact on the level of credibility given to a commercial advertisement, especially among children, who also demand a higher level of interaction with their idols. “It’s cool when they answer you, especially if you’ve been following them for a long time, and even if you’ve been following them for a short time. Even still, it’s good when they respond to you, because if you follow them, it’s because you like what they do” (Girl, FG7, Secondary School Year 1, mid-level SEC). The age of the minor has a direct effect on how influencers are perceived as brand ambassadors: as the age of the interviewee increases, the influencer stops being a trigger, and they simply become an additional support for a purchase decision, similar to that offered by friends. The enthusiasm for interacting with influencers is lower among the older age groups, where the excitement of engagement becomes less important: “Usually, they don’t answer, because they have so many followers.... Well, sometimes a person who is not very famous, yes. But usually, no, they don’t answer” (Girl, FG5, Secondary School Year 2), high-level SEC).

With regard to the reliability of the recommendations shared, the link established between minors and influencers was a determining factor for both females and males, who identified publications where collaboration was carried out only for money. The minors stated that they always trust the endorsements of those with whom they are familiar: “It’s an influencer you can trust, and you know that the person will recommend what’s good for you, so the answer is yes, but only if they do it, because many times you notice that they just do it for the money” (Girl, FG8, Primary School Year 6, mid-level SEC).

Influencers have enough qualities to satisfy the consumption needs of minors, as their image is recognised as an agent that enhances any type of product: “I’ve seen one who was promoting shampoos and shower gel. Yea, like that, I mean simple things like that, and of course, what makes the biggest impact is seeing the influencer there in-person. It’s like you just feel more attracted to it” (Boy, FG4, Secondary School Year 2, mid-level SEC).

Furthermore, the minors outlined characteristics considered essential for maintaining both interest as well as a welcoming attitude toward the promotions made by influencers, where the familiarity they perceive plays a decisive role for the youngest, who stated that they always trust those who inspire confidence in them: “You can trust the influencer, and you know that the person is going to suggest what’s good for you, so yes, assuming they actually do it, because many times you see that they do it only to make money” (Girl, FG8, Primary School Year 6, mid-level SEC). It is important to note that the minors did not generally question the persuasive intentions of a particular influencer’s recommendations if they had placed their trust in that person, or if they had perceived a thematic affinity of the influencer with the promoted brand, as emphasised in the paragraph that follows further along.

Moreover, another criterion used by the minors to determine the credibility of promotions was this perceived affinity between them and the content creators. One of the participants comments as follows:

“If the influencer has the same tastes as us, then yes, we trust them” (Boy, FG1, Primary School Year 6, high-level SEC).

The affinity of the promoted product and the influencer’s background are other relevant factors used to qualify the credibility of a commercial collaboration between brand and creator:

“That’s a lot more interesting, because it’s the players themselves who are experts on the subject. So let’s say I would trust more in what they say, because that person already knows what’s good and what’s not. So, I guess I’d be a bit more critical about saying if I would promote it or not, or saying that this product deserves to be promoted or not” (FG4, boy, Secondary School Year 2, mid-level SEC).

The importance of finding an association between the products being promoted and the influencer is highlighted as follows:

“Let’s say I see Ibai promoting, I don’t know, sunglasses, for example. In that case, I wouldn’t trust him at all, because I think we all know that behind those collaborations are products that are not very closely related to his field (FG4, boy, Secondary School Year 2, mid-level SEC).

A wide variety of products advertised by an influencer also has negative connotations for minors, whereas maintaining a consistent narrative, which links the influencer to the brand, is seen as trustworthy:

“It’s like I don’t feel they have credibility, because suddenly they promote one thing, then another... it’s like that... But then if you see another person who always shows something they have a connection with, who is serious, for example, and if you see that they’ve been using this cream, and then you see that they’re advertising it, well, that’s fine (FG6, girl, Sixth Form, high-level SEC).

Despite the fact that the minors associated certain factors with credibility, they gave a positive rating to commercial content that was entertaining, and to which they could relate:

“There’s a girl who sponsors clothes... I like clothes... So I follow her because I like to see how she dresses, and the fact that there are new things. I also like the style and what she does, even if she has a fake life and all that (Girl, FG2, Secondary School Year 1, high-level SEC).

In general, recognising the persuasive intention or authenticity of the content is less important for minors, as long as it is relevant to their interests and serves the purpose of entertaining them. Following are the main attributes that minors associate with influencers and the conditions of credibility regarding their promotions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Main characteristics associated with influencers as purchase motivators

For the minors, influencers...	Exaggerate their experience with the products they promote.
	Collaborate with brands (especially those related to fashion, make-up, food, and technology).
	Offer sufficient reasons to purchase a product, mainly among the higher socio-economic level; those in the lower strata accept the recommendation and look for a similar option that is more affordable.
	Are purchase triggers, especially among younger respondents; for older respondents, they are an additional source of recommendation, similar to that of friends and close acquaintances.
	Must not only entertain, but they also have to “sell things”.
The level of credibility given to their promotions depends on...	The type of influencer: those who are experts in a field share recommendations that seem to be more genuine compared to those who do not have a background outside of social networks.
	Similarities between the influencer’s lifestyle with the advertised product.
	The interaction they have with their audience, especially with older teenagers.

Source: created by the authors

4. Discussion and conclusions

The research conducted herein reveals that the adolescents interviewed do not have a negative perception of commercial communications in general, and of influencer marketing in particular. They are receptive to these promotions as long as they perceive that such content provides them with something of value, either tangible, such as discounts, promotions, etc., or intangible, such as entertainment, useful information, and so on. Thus, unlike previous research, which concluded that young people reject digital advertising (Martí-Parreño et al., 2013; Martí-Pellón & Saunders, 2015; Martínez, 2019; Martínez et al., 2013), the study herein has found that commercial messages promoted by influencers do not generate the same level of mistrust among the adolescents in our sample. Moreover, it is important to note that the minors interviewed consider collaboration with brands to be part of the “work” of an influencer, which is why they assume and consider the intentional presence of products in the publications of these opinion leaders to be perfectly normal.

However, the level of credibility that minors give to these types of promotional messages depends on the bond that the follower feels with the influencer, as well as the affinity of the latter with the advertised product. Therefore, it can be observed that one of the factors that minors value most in influencer marketing is the consistency of the advertised content with the creative style of the influencer, or in other words, they believe it should be a natural part of the content creator’s narrative. Based on comments made by the minors, it is necessary to clarify that their receptiveness as consumers depends on the profile of the influencer, as

they consider that celebrities with recognised professions (singers, actors, sportsmen, etc.) tend to promote products from their position as experts, which gives them more credibility. On the other hand, those who are social media “natives” are viewed as providing their image to any brand that will fund them, which makes adolescents more sceptical of their recommendations, and reinforces the value of consistency and honesty when the celebrity has a link to the products and brands.

Thus, it is becoming increasingly essential for the advertising market to procure relations and compatibility between the values of the brand and the influencer, as these have a direct impact on the trust placed in the advertiser and influencer in prompting a purchase decision. One must also bear in mind that the minors interviewed believe that the make-up industry is one of the sectors that collaborates most intensely with influencers, where the participants tend to make small purchases. Minors are willing to experiment, yet they penalise inconsistency and, if the expectations generated are not met, there is no possibility of getting them back a second time.

Indeed, influencer marketing is perceived as a phenomenon that is closely associated with minors, as they presume to have considerable knowledge about it and are familiar with its promotional resources. Statements made by the participants highlight their awareness that these celebrities tend to show the *nice* side of life, and “to sell things”, which means that their criteria when following an influencer does not depend directly on the level of credibility that their testimony arouses, but rather on their ability to entertain and offer content that captures the followers’ attention and, at the same time, their intention to buy. Therefore, entertainment is a key element used by influencers to attract an audience, as long as the commercial messages are seamlessly integrated into their creative content.

Another important aspect is the age of the adolescent, which becomes a key factor in determining the impact of influencer marketing on their purchase decisions. It was found that younger respondents (12-14 years) look for a relationship with influencers that involves more intense engagement, or in other words, they expect these celebrities to interact and react to their comments on social networks. This level of interaction, more frequent among micro-influencers, can be a key factor in triggering purchase decisions by this age group. It has also been revealed that for this age group, influencers tend to be a stimulus for consumption. However, for the older age group (15-17 years), they are simply another source of information, similar to that offered by one’s peers. Consequently, this situation opens up a new line of research that could explore the impact of interaction with influencers on the audience’s purchase decisions, especially among the younger audience, which is sensitive to this type of input.

In conclusion, the potential of influencer marketing among young consumers is striking. This mode of advertising is present in their digital routines, and they accept it with pleasure as long as they feel that the recommendations are genuine and add value to their lives, either directly by way of discounts and promotions, or indirectly through entertaining content. This appraisal by minors of what is genuine invites us to reflect on the level of awareness and critical competence developed by minors when facing this type of persuasive content, a discussion that could be addressed in further research through other methodologies that offer a qualitative approach, such as ethnography, or by applying projective techniques that would allow for a situational assessment (Hudders et al., 2017) with regard to the level of advertising literacy of minors in the face of influencer marketing.

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6. Specific contributions made by each author

	Name and Surname
Conception and work design	Luisa Zozaya-Durazo; Beatriz Feijoo-Fernández, and Charo Sádaba
Methodology	Luisa Zozaya-Durazo; Beatriz Feijoo-Fernández, and Charo Sádaba
Data collection and analysis	Luisa Zozaya-Durazo
Discussion and conclusions	Luisa Zozaya-Durazo; Beatriz Feijoo-Fernández, and Charo Sádaba
Drafting, formatting, review, and version approval	Luisa Zozaya-Durazo; Beatriz Feijoo-Fernández, and Charo Sádaba

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