

“Influencers are just mannequins”: Decoding teenagers’ perception about advertising content creators

This study investigates teenagers’ skepticism towards influencer trust and its implications for their perceptions of and receptiveness to social media advertising. Employing a mixed-methods approach, we surveyed 1,055 teenagers to gauge their perceptions of influencers’ advertising intensity. Additionally, qualitative focus groups involving 55 participants explored a range of perceptions, addressing their distrust towards influencers and the breakdown of parasocial relationships with these profiles. Findings suggest that teenagers perceive influencers as mannequins aimed at entertainment and attention capture, lacking humanity and credibility as advertising vessels. This perception influences consumption habits, favoring advertising intensity over authenticity. The emergence of influencers as vacuous entities underscores the tangible repercussions associated with monetizing their image over human value.

Keywords: Teenager; influencer marketing; parasocial relationship; trust; social media.

1. Introduction

Understanding teenagers' perceptions of influencers within contemporary marketing and advertising has become increasingly significant in recent years (Lajnef, 2023; Engel et al., 2024). The ubiquitous presence of teenagers on digital platforms (Hamilton et al., 2023) combined with their developmental susceptibility to digital influences (Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017) necessitates a thorough exploration of their interactions with content generated by influencers. Considering the pivotal role that influencers play in capturing transient attention and establishing lasting emotional connections with young audiences (Abidin, 2018), this study aims to investigate the impact of commercialism in influencer content on teenagers' trust and their relationships with these figures.

Contemporary influencers are tasked with the challenge of balancing the creation of short-term viewer engagement through eye-catching and often controversial content, with the cultivation of long-term audience loyalty via genuine interactions (Kim et al., 2021). This equilibrium is further complicated by the dynamics of influencer-parasocial relationships, where audiences develop one-sided emotional bonds with media figures, a phenomenon that, despite its nonreciprocal nature, fosters a sense of companionship and community affiliation (De-Jans et al., 2020; Liu and Zheng, 2024; Yuan et al., 2016). In this context, authenticity—defined as adherence to one's true self and driven by personal rather than commercial motives—is pivotal in strengthening these parasocial interactions (Cohen and Tyler, 2016).

Given the critical role of authenticity in these dynamics, this study investigates how teenagers perceive influencers who incorporate advertising into their content. Specifically, it examines the relationship between teenagers' perceptions of advertising

intensity by influencers, their engagement in parasocial interactions, and their perceptions of the informative and entertainment value of, and trust in, influencer-generated branded content. The findings contribute to a broader discourse on influencer marketing by providing a nuanced understanding of teenagers' reactions to influencer commercialism. Furthermore, this study acknowledges the emerging phenomenon of AI influencers (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024), whose virtual profiles offer an artificial semblance of authenticity, introducing new complexities into the digital marketing landscape, particularly targeting younger demographics (Penttinen et al., 2024).

Literature review

Teenagers, influencers, and their parasocial relationship

Influencers have become increasingly visible on social media platforms, particularly among teenage audiences. Defined by Abidin (2018) as individuals who have amassed substantial followings through relatable personas and perceived authenticity, influencers possess a unique capability to integrate branded content seamlessly (Jorge et al., 2018). Their influence is rooted in their ability to craft content that is both intimate and aspirational, resonating deeply with young audiences and establishing them as significant role models (Marôpo et al., 2020; Bels and Van-den-Bulck, 2019). Indeed, during the adolescent developmental phase, characterized by the pursuit of autonomy and the exploration of new influences (Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017), as well as significant biological and socio-cultural transformations (Blakemore and Mills, 2014), teenagers form complex relationships with these influencers (Sedmark and Svetina, 2024).

Teenagers' connections with these media figures are predicated on the consistent cultivation of familiarity (Brestovanský and Sekerešová, 2022). Therefore, it is essential

to explore the elements that shape interactions with influencer-branded content and how teenagers manage their expectations of such interactions. Notably, their engagement in parasocial relationships—unilateral bonds that audiences develop with media personalities—can be as significant and impactful as real-life interactions (Horton and Wohl, 1956). These relationships are characterized by a perceived sense of intimacy and friendship with the influencer, despite the absence of mutual interaction (Su et al., 2021).

Parasocial relationships, which are one-sided connections audiences form with media figures, can be as meaningful and impactful for teenagers as real-life interactions (Horton and Wohl, 1956). For adolescents, these relationships with influencers can fulfill social and emotional needs, offering companionship and validation (Aw et al., 2023). Moreover, such relationships enhance receptivity to sponsorships (Breves et al., 2021; Bhattacharya, 2022), bridging the gap between aspirational engagement and commercial influence. This underscores the importance of maintaining a sense of friendship in influencer marketing strategies.

Spanish teenagers' positioning in influencer marketing

In Spain, teenagers represent a crucial demographic for brands, viewed as potential future adult consumers (McNeal, 2000). As social media becomes increasingly integral to daily life, companies are leveraging these platforms more extensively to engage them (Rahali and Livingstone, 2022). Teenagers' media habits in Spain have undergone significant transformations; mobile phones are the primary means of internet access, with a penetration rate of 97% among individuals aged 16 and older (IAB Spain, 2023). Nearly 70% of Spanish children aged 10 to 15 own a mobile phone (NSI, 2023), and

their preferred activity is browsing social media. This positions Spain as the developed country where children under 18 spend the most time on social media, averaging almost an hour daily (Qustodio, 2024).

In this context, the influencer marketing industry has experienced exponential growth since 2019, doubling in size globally, and reaching a record value of \$16.4 billion by 2022 (Statista, 2022). Despite a nearly 24% drop in advertising expenditure in Spain in 2021, influencer marketing and native advertising have emerged as the fastest-growing business categories (Infoadex, 2023).

In this sense, teenagers' perceptions of influencer marketing are multifaceted. Their willingness to engage with influencer content and heed their recommendations depends on factors such as perceived authenticity, influencer credibility, and transparency in promotions (Pradhan et al., 2023). While some studies have examined the effectiveness of influencer marketing tactics and their impact on consumers, both positively (De-Jans et al., 2020) and negatively (Alruwaily et al., 2020), little is known about how the marketing strategies employed by influencers can influence new generations (De-Weirman et al., 2019). This study aims to address this gap by analyzing teenagers' perspectives on influencers' brand-generated content, specifically exploring whether they perceive high levels of advertising intensity, which could potentially impact credibility, authenticity, and parasocial relationships.

New generations are keenly aware of influencers' collaborations with brands (Pradhan et al., 2023) and exhibit a receptive stance as long as they perceive that such commercial content provides them with added value, whether (a) tangible, such as discounts or promotions, or (b) intangible, such as useful information or entertainment (Author). Some studies have demonstrated that an influencer's credibility significantly affects purchasing behavior (Chapple and Cownie, 2017; Djafarova and Rushworth,

2017). However, the level of credibility attributed by teenagers to promotional messages depends on the emotional bond the follower develops with the influencer—parasocial relationship as well as the influencer’s alignment with the advertised product, encompassing factors such as reliability and expertise (Bhattacharya, 2022).

The credibility of the product endorser pertains to the perception of its honesty and integrity (Tsen and Cheng, 2021), the coherence of the advertising content with the influencer’s creative style, and its natural integration into the content creator’s narrative. Additionally, the credibility of an influencer is also enhanced by their expertise, characterized by the relevant knowledge, skills, or experience they possess related to the advertised product or service (Author). Given their expertise, influencers are expected to deliver truthful and genuine branded information, offer professional advice in everyday interactions, and provide interactive responses to audience inquiries (Leung et al., 2022). Despite these expectations, however, younger audiences tend to perceive content creators negatively when brands exert control over them (Lou and Kim, 2019).

Pradhan et al. (2023) introduced the concept of “influencer avoidance”, where audiences actively choose to avoid or unfollow influencers’ due to perceived brand control, indicating a significant impact on both influencers and brand perception. This suggests that followers experience cognitive dissonance—a psychological tension between two conflicting thoughts or beliefs (Bolia et al., 2016)—which leads them to avoid influencers due to the discomfort arising from insincere endorsements and the promotion of unrealistic or unsustainable lifestyles. When young people perceive influencers as overtly advertising products and shamelessly promoting brands, they may feel skeptical, annoyed, bombarded, and deceived (Childers and Boatwright, 2021).

Similar to other digital advertising formats, where an overabundance of commercial messages can engender negative attitudes among audiences (Sandberg, 2011), the

indiscriminate acceptance of brand collaborations by influencers can also provoke feelings of rejection. Such saturation occurs when media figures excessively promote brands, thereby diluting the authenticity of their content and potentially triggering backlash from their followers. This saturation effect can lead to “influencer avoidance” and may also erode trust in the influencer marketing industry. This study investigates whether such saturation acts as a demotivating factor for teenagers by examining 'influencer advertising intensity', defined as the frequency of brand collaborations within influencers' organic content (adapted from IAB Spain, 2022). Exploring the impact of pervasive influencer advertising on teenagers is crucial, as it may reveal pivotal points where endorsements become counterproductive, thus informing the development of more balanced, authentic, and effective marketing strategies.

Objective and research questions

The objective of this research was to analyze, both quantitatively and qualitatively, how teenagers' perceptions are influenced by influencers collaborating with brands.

- RQ1. What is the relationship between teenagers' perceived advertising “intensity” of influencers and (a) admiration for the source, (b) engagement in parasocial interaction, (c) perceived informative value, (d) perceived entertainment value, and (e) trust in influencer-generated branded posts?
- RQ2. Among the analyzed variables – admiration for the source, engagement in parasocial interaction, perceived informative value, and perceived entertainment value – which one exerts the greatest influence on teenagers' perceptions of trust in influencer-generated branded posts?

- RQ3. How do teenagers articulate their perceptions of the relationship between the “intensity” of advertising and their trust in influencer-generated branded posts?

Method

Design and sample

The data collected for this research forms part of a broader-scale project (XXXXXX), focusing on the impact of influencers on the dietary habits and body care routines of Spanish teenagers. To investigate this phenomenon, we adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009), to explore the incidence of influencer advertising on teenagers’ perceptions. This sequential methodological design was chosen primarily to determine, through the survey, whether the “excessive” presence of brand collaborations in influencers’ organic content can affect their level of credibility and connection with adolescents. Insights gained from this quantitative phase are then used to guide the subsequent qualitative investigation, aiming to delve into the “how”—exploring the context and arguments that underpin these effects. By examining the sequential link between the quantitative findings and qualitative exploration, this mixed-method approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play. This methodology has previously been validated in research on children's perceptions and digital media interactions (Dias and Brito, 2020).

During the preliminary exploratory phase, we designed and distributed a tailored questionnaire to individuals aged 11 to 17. A total of 1,055 participants were recruited for the study, ensuring a 95% confidence level with a margin of error of +/-3%. The sampling strategy employed a multistage and stratified approach, incorporating

proportional allocation. Initially, we divided the primary stratum into four geographical zones, following the NUT zone classification utilized by the EU.

Subsequently, we stratified the sample based on the socioeconomic status of families, categorized as low, medium, and high. The final selection of participants was determined through cross-quotas related to gender and age. Data collection for the quantitative phase occurred between April and June 2022.

Following the analysis of the quantitative results, we proceeded to conduct twelve focus groups, involving 55 teenagers who had participated in the initial phase. These focus groups were organized according to two main variables: socioeconomic level (categorized as high, medium, and low) and age groups, including 6th grade (11 years), 1st cycle of ESO (12-13 years), 2nd cycle of ESO (14-15 years), and Baccalaureate (16-17 years).

Consequently, three focus groups were arranged for each age group, with each group representing a different socioeconomic level. Data collection for the qualitative phase took place between October and December 2022, with an aim to recruit five participants for each group. However, some sessions had to be conducted with four participants due to scheduling conflicts (Table 1).

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of study participants.

	1 st phase	2 nd phase
	Questionnaire (N=1055)	12 Focus group (N=55)
Age	11 years old (6 th grade): 147 (13.9%)	11 years old (6 th grade): 15
	12-13 years old (1 st cycle ESO): 305 (28.9%)	12-13 years old (1 st cycle ESO): 15
	14-15 years old (2 st cycle ESO): 311 (29.5%)	14-15 years old (2 st cycle ESO): 13
	16-17 years old (Baccalaureate): 292 (27.7%)	16-17 years old (Baccalaureate): 12
Gender	Boy: 566 (53.6%)	Boy: 27
	Girl: 488 (46.3%)	Girl: 28
	Other: 1 (0.1%)	

SES	High: 204 (19.3%) Medium: 532 (50.4%) Low: 319 (30.2%)	High: 19 Medium: 20 Low: 16
Social media influencer follow	62.4% (N=658) follow an influencer on social media. 37.5% (N=396) in TikTok; 36.7% (N=387) in YouTube; 35.4% (N=373) in Instagram; 9.2% (N=97) in Twitch; 3.5% (N=37) in Twitter. 3.5% (N=37) in WhatsApp; 2.7% (N=29) in Facebook; 1.3% (N=14) in Snapchat	For the qualitative part, participants who followed an influencer on social media were selected.

To ensure the integrity of both study participants and researchers, explicit authorization was obtained from the legal guardians of the teenagers, who formally endorsed an informed consent form. This consent form underwent prior validation by the Ethics Committee of the affiliated university (University XXXXX), which scrutinized and approved the methodological design of the project. Both parents and teenagers provided consent before participating in the study. The adults provided written informed consent for the teenagers involved in both the first and second phases of the research. This consent outlined the research project's purpose, the benefits of participation, and included the collection of teenagers' sociodemographic data. It emphasized the voluntary nature of participation and the option to withdraw from the study at any time. The document assured that all collected information would be used solely for the project's specified purposes, and it clearly stated that teenagers retained the right to decline answering any questions. Additionally, considering the interactive and discussion-based nature of focus groups, the teenagers provided verbal consent before participating, ensuring they understood the specifics of this engagement and reaffirming their comfort with the process.

Quantitative measure: Questionnaire

Participants in the study provided demographic information, including age and gender, before completing measures related to the study variables. The construct of “source admiration” was assessed using three items ($\alpha = .778$), while “parasocial interaction” was measured with five items ($\alpha = .768$), both adapted from De-Jans et al. (2020). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale. To evaluate the informative and persuasive value of influencers, we employed the framework proposed by Lou and Yan (2019). For the former, two 3-point semantic differential scales were utilized ($\alpha = .598$), and for the latter, four 3-point semantic differential scales were used ($\alpha = .741$). Trust in influencer-generated branded posts was assessed through four 3-point semantic differential scales ($\alpha = .772$), adapted from Wu and Lin (2017). To streamline the questionnaire for teenagers, a limited number of items were employed for all variables compared to their original versions. Additionally, the variable indicating the advertising “intensity” of influencers was measured using a single item sourced from IAB Spain’s (2022) annual study of social media (see appendix).

For the quantitative phase, we conducted a statistical analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software package, version 25.0. To address Research Questions (RQ) 1 and 2, we performed bivariate analyses through the non-parametric Kendall’s Tau-b test, as the variables did not follow a normal distribution (normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, $p < 0.05$ indicating non-normality).

Qualitative measure: Focus group

After transcribing the focus group discussions, we proceeded with qualitative analysis. For this purpose, we employed the thematic data saturation approach (O'Reilly and Parker, 2012), which involves identifying recurring ideas, concepts, or discourses within qualitative information. This technique is a component of the grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 1990), where theory is systematically developed from data. It prioritizes an inductive approach, forming concepts based on observed phenomena rather than starting with predetermined hypotheses. Specifically, for the focus group analysis, we employed thematic data saturation (Hancock et al., 2016), a method discussed by the authors for approaching qualitative data through individual and group opinions.

To conduct the thematic saturation analysis, we utilized Atlas.ti 24 and its AI-assisted coding system to analyze the transcriptions. This process entailed (a) a memoing process, a core component of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Memoing involves drafting reflective notes or 'memos' that capture essential thoughts, insights, and conceptual connections. From these initial impressions, (b) we manually and inductively derived 164 codes from the transcriptions.

The codes were organized by discursive saturation, where recurring reflections consistently mentioned by teenagers helped to refine our coding scheme. Ultimately, we delineated three primary themes in the analysis: (1) “advertising, brands, and (dis)trust towards influencers,” (2) “parasocial relationship breakdown among influencers and teenagers,” and (3) “the influencer as a mannequin.”

To ensure accurate responses, researchers presented real examples during the discussion groups, offering concrete cases for participants to consider. Facilitators displayed three Instagram posts from a renowned Spanish influencer couple featuring brands related to

technology, fashion and jewelry, body care, and food. Each post included brand-specific hashtags followed by the disclosures #sponsored and/or #Ad. This approach aimed to gauge participants' perceptions on a situational level, moving beyond dispositional analysis. For a comprehensive overview of the questions posed to teenagers, refer to the appendix.

Results and discussion

Quantitative part: RQ1 and RQ2

Research Question 1 (RQ1) investigates the relationship between perceived advertising “intensity” of influencers and various variables, including source admiration of the influencer, parasocial interaction, informative and entertainment value, and trust level in their branded posts. The analysis revealed a positive and significant relationship between the “intensity” of advertising by influencers and trust in influencer-generated branded posts ($b = 0.122$, $p < 0.01$), thereby underscoring the efficacy and relevance of influencer marketing strategies for engaging new generations, as discussed in recent studies (De-Jans et al., 2020; De-Veirman et al., 2019). However, the correlation coefficient indicated that the strength of this relationship was moderate (Table 3), prompting us to further investigate these perceptions with a comprehensive qualitative approach.

Table 3 Correlations between variables and advertising “intensity” of influencers.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Source admiration	-					
2. Parasocial interaction	.607**	-				
3. Informative value	.267**	.281**	-			
4. Entertainment value	.230**	.184**	.299**	-		
5. Trust in branded posts	.223**	.231**	.248**	.260**	-	
6. Advertising “intensity” of influencers	0.004	-0.022	-.074*	0.006	.122**	-

Mean	3.459	3.504	2.305	2.502	2.234	2.373
Standard deviation	0.863	0.942	0.652	0.694	0.623	0.952

** p < 0.01; *p < 0.05.

Research Question 2 (RQ2) focuses in the correlation between teenagers' trust in influencer-generated branded posts and factors such as source admiration, parasocial interaction, and perceived informative and entertainment value. The findings revealed significant and positive correlations between teenagers' trust and variables such as source admiration (b = 0.223), parasocial interaction (b = 0.231), perceived informative value (b = 0.248), and perceived entertainment value (b = 0.260), all of which were statistically significant (p < 0.01). Notably, the variable demonstrating the strongest correlation is the perceived entertainment value attributed to the influencer, suggesting its significance in influencing teenagers' trust in branded content.

Qualitative part: RQ3

Advertising, brands, and (dis)trust towards influencers

To address Research Question 3 (RQ3), we further explored teenagers' perceptions of influencer-generated branded posts. This part of the discussion seeks to understand nuanced perspectives by examining the previously identified significant positive correlations between teenagers' trust and their receptivity to influencer advertisements.

One central point of contention among participants emerged regarding the perceived extent of advertisements delivered through platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. TikTok, with its dynamic and engaging short-form videos, is often viewed as a platform on which advertising exerts a more significant influence. Participants emphasized the visual-centric nature of Instagram as a driving force behind its advertising efficacy. They noted that while Instagram's design plays a crucial role in shaping advertising

effectiveness, their consumption of ads is nonetheless comparable on both platforms, with TikTok's dynamic video format also exerting significant influence.

Upon entering TikTok, ads typically appear for a few seconds and must be viewed before accessing video content. In contrast, Instagram allows users to scroll through stories and easily dismiss ads to continue to the next story

(28_in_12_Baccalaureate_Low)

The social networking sites where I encounter the most advertisements are TikTok and Instagram. However, I find advertisements on Instagram more enjoyable as they pass much more quickly than on TikTok.

(24_in_12_Baccalaureate_Low)

Instagram is the worst in terms of ad frequency. Although ads on TikTok cannot be skipped as quickly, Instagram displays significantly more ads in succession.

(40_in_12_Baccalaureate_Low)

These experiences align with the mechanisms of content delivery platforms. TikTok's content curation algorithm creates an environment in which advertisements are seamlessly integrated with user-generated content, contributing to its perceived influence (Nilsen and Kvia, 2022). Similarly, the visually captivating nature of posts and stories on Instagram amplifies the impact of corporate messages (Leaver et al., 2020). However, these perceptions may be influenced by individual usage patterns, with some teenagers encountering more brand ads on one platform due to algorithmic preferences.

Focusing on influencer-generated branded posts, we found conflicting positions. While some teenagers find it acceptable for influencers to engage in brand collaboration, citing it as a legitimate source of income and a way to sustain their online presence, others express reservations.

I don't believe it's a problem because it's their job and they need to make a living

(44_in_11_Baccalaureate_Medium)

I would not trust them, regardless of how nice and well-known they are, because the influencers are still being paid

(278_in_2_1stCycleESO_Medium)

Despite their ability to distinguish between promotional and entertainment content, participants expressed skepticism about the authenticity of sponsored influencers' statements. This skepticism represents a form of cognitive dissonance (Bolia et al., 2016), as teenagers grapple with the promotional intent embedded within influencers' content:

They promote a healthy lifestyle, [...] every Friday they are eating chicken with salad, yet coincidentally, now they are endorsing Nocilla. It feels somewhat insincere.

(106_in_3_6thGrade_Medium)

Participants consistently emphasized the need for influencers to be transparent about their financial relationships with brands. The perceived lack of transparency fuels pervasive distrust concerning the authenticity of influencers' recommendations, a sentiment echoed in various studies (Author; Jorge et al., 2018; Pradhan et al., 2023). In this context, some participants expressed greater trust in brands, citing established reputations and corporate credibility (first excerpt). Conversely, others placed their trust in influencers, highlighting their ability to curate thematic content that resonates with their audience (second excerpt):

I tend to trust the brand more than the influencer because [...] the influencer simply follows instructions without genuine care. He is going to do what he is told to do.

(178_in_12_Baccalaureate_Low)

When they analyze video games, for instance, and showcase a game [...] because it aligns with what their audience might enjoy, I tend to trust those influencers more.

(95_in_11_Baccalaureate_Medium)

Another recurring factor that may enhance trust in content sponsored by influencers is their expertise. Essentially, teenagers' perceptions of trust appear to be intricately linked to the influencer's knowledge in a particular domain. This alignment not only enhances the persuasive impact of influencers' endorsements, but also establishes them as authoritative figures possessing substantive knowledge in their chosen fields:

It depends on what they have studied. For instance, if their content is generally humorous and suddenly they promote make-up, you won't believe them as much as you would someone who specializes in beauty products daily (121_in_7_1stCycleESO_Low)

In light of these insights, teenagers have noted the significant impact of influencer advertising on their trust, closely tied to the dynamics of parasocial interactions. These reflections underscore the need for a deeper analysis of the connections between influencers and teenagers, particularly how trust and expertise influence their parasocial relationships.

Parasocial relationship breakdown among influencers and teenagers

Parasocial relationships, cultivated by influencers in the realm of advertising serve as persuasive mechanisms that transcend traditional marketing strategies (Liu and Zheng, 2024). These relationships are built upon a sense of familiarity and connection with followers, creating an atmosphere in which influencers' recommendations are not merely perceived as endorsements but as genuine suggestions from a trusted friend (Su et al., 2021).

Despite the effectiveness of parasocial relationships (Aw et al., 2023; Breves et al., 2021), findings from qualitative interviews revealed a significant outcome: growing sentiment among teenagers that influencers were, to some extent, failing to maintain

these connections. Teenagers expressed a sense of disillusionment, citing that influencers appeared less genuine and commercially ambitious,

People end up getting tired and stop watching you because... You insert too many ads.
(36_in_5_2ndCycleESO_Medium)

If they have so many brands, it is like they are selling themselves, and for me it is not credible, they are only looking for money. (85_in_8_2ndCycleESO_High)

Maybe she is a liar, and in order to make money and be ambitious, she publishes whatever. (88_in_11_Baccalaureate_Medium)

This sentiment aligns with the concept of “influencer avoidance” (Pradhan et al., 2023), a phenomenon observed when audiences, overwhelmed by excessive advertising, tend to avoid, unfollow, or reject influencers. As one participant expressed, “if it is very obvious that it's advertising, and they don't disclose it, then you lose a bit of trust” (82_in_11_Baccalaureate_Medium). This sense of disappointment underscores the complexities of influencer marketing and emphasizes the critical need for moderation in the use of advertising within content.

Accordingly, these insights fueled a sense of distrust among teenagers, as they grappled with the realization that influencers’ personas might be more of a marketing strategy than an authentic representation of themselves (Pradhan et al., 2023; Sandberg, 2011). The growing prevalence of advertising in influencers’ content seems to erode parasocial relationships, as young individuals perceive an increasing intrusion of commercial interests that undermines the friendship connection they seek with these figures (Su et al., 2021):

If they have a negative opinion, they might speak positively because they are being paid.
(200_in_4_6thGrade_High)

They have been paid to say that the brand works well. [...] Ultimately, what they tell us could be untrue. (224_in_2_1stCycleESO_Medium)

The influencer as a mannequin

To further investigate this parasocial breakdown, we explored how the lifestyle portrayed in influencers' advertising content affects teenagers' skepticism regarding their credibility and authenticity. Opinions on lifestyle promoted by influencers vary widely, ranging from admiration to apprehension. Some teenagers openly admire carefully curated lifestyles showcased on social media platforms, often aspiring to emulate similar lifestyles.

I believe everyone would like to have a super house with a park and have a super viewpoint or invite all your friends to a super birthday party.
(127_in_10_Baccalaureate_High)

I would like to have, you know, a mansion, for example, or be invited to many important events. (129_in_10_Baccalaureate_High)

These excerpts may arise from the aspirational nature of influencer content (Marôpo et al., 2020), which presents an idealized version of their life (Childers and Boatwright, 2021). From a psychological perspective, the appeal of influencer lifestyles can be linked to the social comparison theory (Kim et al., 2023), wherein individuals naturally engage in social comparison to assess their own lives and achievements.

While many viewers are drawn to these idealized portrayals, not all are convinced by what they see. Conversely, a subset of participants expressed reservations about the potentially overwhelming nature of influencers' lifestyles. Their thoughts suggest that influencers show a daily façade, which is a result of their marketing efforts:

They depict a lifestyle that doesn't reflect their actual living conditions.
(168_in_3_6thGrade_Medium)

They have constructed it with their own money. I mean... if I possessed similar resources, I would likely do the same.

(121_in_10_Baccalaureate_High)

They appear in their homes as though without any issues, portraying everything as perfect, which is misleading because no one leads a perfect life, not even influencers.
(127_in_10_Baccalaureate_High)

The discussion evolved towards influencers devoid of humanity and reduced to mere vessels for promotional content, implying that these figures have become akin to mannequins, perfectly suited to whatever is draped upon them. A prevailing consensus emerged, indicating that the drive to monetize their image on social platforms primarily stems from financial motives. In other words, teenagers hinted at the perception of influencers evolving into instrumental entities engineered to stimulate engagement whose vacuity undermines the potential for a genuine human parasocial connection

They haven't actually used the product; they merely follow a script. Their endorsements aren't based on real experiences or genuine opinions, but are merely texts they are required to recite.

(101_in_10_Baccalaureate_High)

In photographs, their portrayal is one thing, while their actual social life is quite another.
(181_in_3_6thGrade_Medium)

Physical appearance is greatly emphasized on social media, where you only get a first glance at what's there. For example, an ad might say, 'oh, a good-looking person wearing a nice suit that complements their body well'.

(110_in_12_Baccalaureate_Low)

They project an unrealistic image, likely in an attempt to garner attention.(109_in_11_Baccalaureate_Medium)

This critical insight challenges the existing theoretical framework by suggesting that influencers often prioritize corporate interests over genuine interactions, contradicting Cohen and Tyler's (2016) assertion that authenticity is crucial for enhancing parasocial

interactions between influencers and their audience. Current findings indicate that teenagers frequently perceive influencers as inauthentic, primarily serving corporate agendas rather than engaging genuinely.

As Brestovanský and Sekerešová (2022) argue, teenagers require a consistent sense of familiarity with influencers to forge strong connections. However, the perception of influencers as 'valueless mannequins' who merely recite scripts that do not align with reality underscores that familiarity alone cannot counteract the negative impacts of lacking trust and credibility.

Furthermore, Aw et al. (2023) and Breves et al. (2021) have highlighted the social and emotional benefits that parasocial relationships with influencers can offer to teenagers, potentially increasing their receptiveness to sponsored content. Yet, the skepticism regarding influencers' motivations, as observed in our findings, casts doubt on this claim, suggesting that such skepticism diminishes teenagers' receptiveness to brand-generated content. The observed lack of familiarity, trust, and authenticity among influencers has profound implications for their relationships with brands and younger consumers on social media.

Conclusions and future research approach

In today's social media realm, a significant shift in advertising's impact on teenagers has emerged. The omnipresence of marketing influencers on digital platforms has become a common aspect of contemporary youth experiences (Rahali and Livingstone, 2022). This phenomenon not only molds the consumption habits of this demographic, but also shapes their future perceptions of digital identity and social media norms. Therefore, this discussion aims to analyze teenagers' perspectives on the advertising

“intensity” in influencer posts, elucidating significant implications for marketing professionals, influencers, and teenagers themselves.

Influencers prioritizing commercial interests over authenticity contribute to an erosion of trust (Author), a phenomenon with lasting repercussions for teenagers’ consumer behavior. This practice is exemplified by collaborations with brands, wherein influencers seamlessly integrate promotional material into their content, posing a significant challenge to the integrity of influencer marketing. Teenagers, who frequently rely on influencers for genuine recommendations and guidance, feel deceived or misled when confronted with sponsored content masquerading as an authentic endorsement (Author).

The implications of teenagers’ distrust towards influencers extend beyond mere skepticism, significantly impacting their consumer behavior. This distrust fosters a more discerning mindset among teenagers, prompting them to scrutinize the credibility of product recommendations and advertising messages (Tsen and Cheng, 2021; Pradhan et al., 2023; Angmo and Mahajan, 2024). Consequently, teenagers become less susceptible to the influence of sponsored content, challenging traditional marketing paradigms reliant on influencer endorsements and disrupting their parasocial relationships. At this point, influencer advertising content appears to be intricately woven into a broader entertainment fabric, proving to be more effective when it entertains and captures the attention of teenagers than when it attempts to create a supposed friendship bond with the influencer’s profile.

Regarding this shift, we should delve into the incongruity between the seemingly unrealistic lifestyles projected by influencer advertising and the potential struggles concealed behind this façade. Influencer marketing thrives by presenting an aspirational

image of success, beauty, and happiness, seamlessly integrated with promoted products or services.

From luxurious vacations to impeccably styled outfits, influencer advertisements craft a narrative of perfection that captivates audiences. These idealized depictions evoke feelings of inadequacy and comparison among teenagers (Kim et al., 2023). Observing influencers effortlessly endorse products while presenting an unattainable standard of perfection can worsen existing insecurities and foster unrealistic expectations. Moreover, the relentless pursuit of an unattainable ideal seems to result in feelings of frustration, disillusionment, and emotional distress (Childers and Boatwright, 2021).

Despite the allure of influencers, there is a discernible shift in how teenagers perceive these “overadvertised” profiles, viewing them less as relatable individuals and more as detached, unattainable figures devoid of genuine human connections. This means that influencer marketing seems to perpetuate the image of influencers as distant and superficial focused personas solely on commercial gain. This pursuit contributes to the perception of influencers as mere conduits for advertising, as they lack authenticity or engagement with their youngest audience.

As a result, teenagers may increasingly perceive influencers as interchangeable mannequins lacking depth or substance beyond their curated online personas. This perception not only diminishes the sense of authenticity and reliability that initially attracted teenagers to influencers (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Lajnef, 2023) but also fosters a sense of apathy and detachment towards influencer content, viewing it merely as attraction and entertainment products. Rather than considering influencers as trusted friends or sources of inspiration (Yuan et al., 2016), teenagers may come to accept them as impersonal commercial entities to be observed or engaged with only if deemed relevant or entertaining.

In this context, if a highly advertising-sensitive demographic perceives human influencers as mannequins devoid of humanity and driven solely by financial motives, it underscores a critical issue for the emerging trend of AI-driven or virtual influencers (Angmo and Mahajan, 2024). As teenagers increasingly regard human influencers as overly commercialized, they may shift their attention to AI-driven counterparts for content consumption.

AI-driven influencers present a distinct proposition in the influencer landscape (Penttinen et al., 2024). Unlike their human counterparts, virtual influencers are not constrained by human limitations or imperfections. They can be precisely engineered to project an idealized image and persona, devoid of the complexities and vulnerabilities that characterize human personalities (Angmo and Mahajan, 2024). Operating without financial motivations or personal agendas, AI-driven influencers focus solely on fulfilling the objectives of their sponsors. As a result, these virtual entities deliver flawless and compelling endorsements and product placements, aligning perfectly with advertisers' needs and preferences with unparalleled accuracy. However, this relentless productivity may alienate teenagers, who might find it difficult to trust a machine that lacks authentic human attributes (Sweeney et al., 2022). Consequently, the use of these influencers blurs the distinction between reality and simulation, potentially intensifying feelings of disconnection and disillusionment. Given these considerations, it is critical to recognize the inherent limitations of our research design, and to propose future research avenues that aim to address these limitations and deepen our understanding of the complexities involved in teenagers' perceptions of influencer advertising.

While our analysis offers valuable insights into how teenagers in a Spanish context perceive influencer-generated branded posts, our findings may not fully represent the

nuances of such perceptions in different cultural settings. Future research should aim for broader geographical coverage to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics across varied cultural landscapes. Additionally, our study focused exclusively on teenagers—a demographic particularly susceptible to influencer advertising. While this focus has yielded interesting insights, it is relevant to expand the scope of future studies to include other age groups. Exploring the perspectives of various demographic segments can reveal potential variations in response to influencer advertising across generational boundaries.

Furthermore, our study overlooked an important perspective—the viewpoint of influencers regarding their portrayal as mannequins. Gaining insight into how influencers perceive their role and representation in the digital marketing realm is crucial for understanding their motivations, challenges, and ethical considerations related to AI. Addressing these gaps can contribute to a more robust body of knowledge surrounding influencer identity for new generations, who may navigate between influencer identities that verge on the emerging transhuman spectrum.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

Measures of the Quantitative Phase.

Construct	Items	Scale	Reference
Source admiration	-I admire [influencer]. -I would like to be just like [influencer]. -I look forward to watching [influencer]'s pictures.	1=totally disagree, 5=totally agree	Adapted from De Jans et al., 2020
Parasocial interaction	-When I watch [influencer], it feels like (s)he is my friend. -I would like to meet [influencer] in person. -If there were a story about [influencer] in a newspaper or on the internet, I would read it. -[influencer] makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends. -When [influencer] shows me how (s)he feels about a brand, it helps me make up my own mind about the brand.	1=totally disagree, 5=totally agree	Adapted from De Jans et al., 2020
Informative value	Concerning the influencers whom I am following on social media, I personally think their social media posts/updates are	-Unhelpful/Helpful -Unnecessary/Necessary	Adapted from Vos et al., 2003
Entertainment value	Concerning the influencers whom I am following on social media, I personally think their social media posts/updates are	-Not fun/Fun -Dull/Exciting -Not thrilling/Thrilling -Unenjoyable/Enjoyable	Adapted from Vos et al., 2003
Trust in influencer-generated branded posts	Concerning the influencers I follow on social media, I think the advertising they do is:	- Untrustworthy/Trustworthy -Unethical/Ethical -Not credible/Credible -Unreasonable/ Reasonable	Adapted from Wu & Lin, 2017
Advertising "intensity" of influencers	What do you think of the influencers you follow?	(1) They advertise a lot (2) They advertise enough (3) They do some advertising (4) They do little advertising (5) Do not advertise	Iab Spain, 2022

Appendix 2

Questions Asked About Influencer Marketing

1. How do you feel about influencers collaborating with brands? Please explain. Do you prefer it when influencers clearly disclose their brand partnerships? Why or why not?
2. Given that the influencers in the examples collaborate with multiple brands, do you trust the content of their posts? Whom do you trust more: the brand or the influencer? Please explain your choice.
3. Do you consider these influencers to be experts in the products they promote, or do you think they are simply sharing their personal opinions?
4. In the given example, the man is shown eating a delicious cocoa cream (Nutella) for breakfast. Do you believe this is his usual breakfast?
5. Do the posts depict a lifestyle that you aspire to?