

Body and diet as sales pitches: Spanish teenagers' perceptions about influencers' impact on ideal physical appearance

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Abstract

This project sits at the intersection of three axes: (a) influencers as the increasing focus of minors' attention and trust on-line, (b) sponsored content about eating habits and physical appearance produced by these influencers, and (c) minors' ability to discern and identify the persuasive intent of said content. The usefulness of analyzing the interplay of these three axes lies in the impact that consumption of this content has on minors' self-esteem and on the adoption of certain habits that can directly impact their personal well-being. For this reason, this project seeks to provide insight into the social imaginary that influencers' sponsored speech creates in minors regarding their physical appearance. To this end, a qualitative study with 12 focus groups of minors aged 11–17 years of age who reside in Spain was proposed. Notable among the key results was that the interviewees recognize that they primarily receive commercial messages about food and products related to physical appearance, such as makeup or clothing, from influencers; likewise, they are aware of persuasive tactics used on social networks, such as the construction of a perfect, aspirational world, which minors absorb and accept as part of the digital environment and end up incorporating into their behavior on social networks. This research aims to help demonstrate that teaching critical thinking is a long-term cultural investment that would make the citizens of tomorrow aware, engaged, and active.

Keywords

Influencer marketing; Influencers; Minors; Adolescents; Teenagers; Generation Z; Physical appearance; Food; Body; Social media; Social networks; Media literacy; Critical thinking; Perceptions; Youtubers.

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1. Introduction

For some years now, the effects of the use of social networks on minors has made a huge impact (**Livingstone; Blum-Ross, 2020**). One of the latest leaks of the *Facebook* team’s private research highlights that simply consuming certain content on these platforms influences the mood of young people: more than 40% of *Instagram* users noted that the feeling of being unattractive began while using the app (**Milmo; Skopeliti, 2021**).

This study aims to focus attention on healthy lifestyles for children and adolescents, specifically their eating habits and physical appearance, two issues to which adolescents attach particular importance and which influence their self-perception, as highlighted in the results of the *Unicef Spain’s Opinion barometer of childhood and adolescence [Barómetro de opinión de la infancia y la adolescencia]* (*Unicef, 2021*). Children and adolescents generally have some understanding of health recommendations related to diet and physical activity, but the percentage of those who say they follow these recommendations is clearly lower, especially among those with lower purchasing power.

It should also be added that social networks and, by extension, influencers have become one of the main sources for finding information (*IAB Spain, 2021*). In the context of this digital age, the *World Health Organization* mentioned an infodemia, referencing the excess of information to which the individual is subjected on the Internet (*WHO, 2020*). Therefore, discerning content, knowing how to identify and select sources, and limiting the spread of disinformation, especially on issues that directly affect their self-esteem and well-being, have become fundamental skills for digital media consumption among children and adolescents, an audience that is vulnerable and still in their formative years.

Revelations such as the stories about *Facebook* and *Instagram* in September 2021 focus on the effect that the use of social networks has on adults and young people (**Milmo; Skopeliti, 2021**). Indeed, more and more research (**Coates et al., 2019; De-Jans et al., 2021; Lowe-Calverley; Grieve, 2021; Tiggeman; Anderberg, 2020**) has shown that influencers’ social media posts affect users’ choices, both in the perception of their body image and in their dietary patterns. Experts insist on the need to control and regulate the algorithms that choose and adapt which photos and videos a user sees according to their use, potentially creating a spiral of harmful content; others advocate for educating young people about how to navigate a world dominated by social networks, equipping them with the tools they need to make healthy decisions for themselves (**Milmo; Skopeliti, 2021**). Therefore, in line with *Unicef Spain’s* (2021, p. 52) recommendations to address children and adolescents’ concerns and to promote the practice of healthy habits, this research seeks to approach the social imaginary that minors form on such important topics as nutrition and their physical appearance based on posts made by influencers in collaboration with brands, thereby appropriating these values.

2. Body and diet as persuasive arguments in influencer marketing

Although advertising investment in Spain saw a decrease of almost -18% in 2020 compared with the previous year, influencer marketing was the advertising modality that experienced the most growth along with native advertising (*Infodex, 2021*). Influencers create high-quality aspirational content by getting a following similar to celebrities and famous people, which they monetize by promoting products (**Lowe-Calverley; Grieve, 2021**). For advertisers, they are attractive brand ambassadors, as they are effective in conveying authenticity (**Audrezet; De-Kerviler; Moulard, 2020**), credibility (**Djafarova; Rushworth, 2017; Lim et al., 2017**), and confidence to consumers because they create a closer, more committed relationship with their followers (**Silva et al., 2021**). Under social cognitive theory (**Bandura, 2001**), it is assumed that influencers shape their followers’ behaviors by being observed, by becoming symbolic models that can be imitated to achieve the same results. Moreover, this process is intensified because influencers are seen as “close friends” (**Meyers, 2017**), which reinforces the idea that anyone can attain their level of popularity (**Silva et al., 2021**), a feeling especially widespread among children and adolescents. The stronger the parasocial interaction with influencers, the more trustworthy and engaging their message will seem. Thus, it is most likely that their audience will follow their recommendations with the understanding that the message conveyed is more trustworthy and attractive, values that are then transferred to the products and brands these influencers sponsor (**Lim et al., 2017**).

It is important to note that, although there is no specific regulation in Spain regarding influencer marketing, some self-regulatory initiatives have been launched that aim for more ethical use. Since 2021, there has been a Code of Conduct for the use of influencers in advertising, developed by *Autocontrol* and the *Spanish Association of Advertisers [Asociación Española de Anunciantes (AEA)]*, oversight that is necessary, in particular, with food brands since studies show that influencer marketing aimed at minors preferentially presents products with a high content of saturated fats, salt, and sugar (**Castelló-Martínez; Tur-Viñes, 2020; López-Bolás; Feijoo; Fernández-Gómez, 2022; Tur-Viñes; Cas-**

telló-Martínez, 2021). This exposure is troubling, as the placement of unhealthy foods in influencer posts has been shown to increase intake of these types of foods among children (Coates *et al.*, 2019), thereby increasing the risk of childhood obesity, along with the emotional and self-esteem consequences that this entails (De-Jans *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, in the context of food and fitness marketing, influencers' bodies become brand values to convey an ideal body image (Powers; Greenwell, 2016).

“ A review of the cited literature come from English-speaking or Western European countries, with Spanish studies being anecdotal in nature and varied ”

Younger generations are especially concerned with their bodies, and advertisers know it. Thus, there are several studies that demonstrate the role of the body as effective advertising in the sponsored posts of influencers from the fitness world (Silva *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, the greater the influencers' presence, the more engagement the content generates. These authors emphasize the need for future studies that analyze the role of followers of this sponsored content on social networks; hence, this study, which seeks to analyze the phenomenon of influencer marketing related to food and the body from the point of view of the imaginary of adolescents who follow such brand ambassadors, has been proposed. Therefore, the following research question arises:

RQ1. Do minors realize that influencers are drawing them to brands in the food and body care sectors?

The direct impact of the influencer lifestyle on eating habits (Coates *et al.*, 2019; De-Jans *et al.*, 2021) and on social network users' level of body satisfaction (Lowe-Calverley; Grieve, 2021; Su; Kunkel; Ye, 2021; Tiggeman; Anderberg, 2020) has been observed, most markedly among younger audiences. Tiggeman and Anderberg (2020) report that exposure to idealized images on social networks causes an increase in body dissatisfaction in both women and men, albeit with certain differences between the sexes. Men are especially affected by images of other men with bare torsos; a muscular body has come to be an element that can be exploited by influencer marketing (Su *et al.*, 2021). Brown and Tiggemann (2016) compared the influence of *Instagram* images of celebrities versus those of unknown attractive peers on women's mood and body dissatisfaction. It was found that, in both cases, negative mood and body dissatisfaction increased on account of the influencer, whether celebrity or peer (Chae, 2018). Lowe-Calverley and Grieve (2021) concluded that idealized images of thin women result in body dissatisfaction among followers, regardless of the number of likes that the post receives. In regard to the impact of influencer marketing on minors' food choices, there is evidence to demonstrate that this persuasive method can be effective in promoting foods with low nutritional quality but not in promoting healthy nutrition (Coates *et al.*, 2019; Smit *et al.*, 2019; De-Jans *et al.*, 2021). However, showing the negative effects associated with a high-fat, high-sugar diet on social media does play a role in reducing consumption of those products (De-Jans *et al.*, 2021), but showing an athletic lifestyle does not necessarily encourage habits that are more beneficial to health. Given these findings, further study should be devoted to the beliefs that minors form about such issues that directly affect their self-esteem and that influence their choices, with the aim of using their critical competence to counteract this idealized, intentionally persuasive content. Based on this, a second research question arises:

RQ2. What perceptions do minors construct based on influencers' persuasive messaging about diet and the body?

On the other hand, much of the research about new media advertising directed at minors that was reviewed (De-Jans; Hudders, 2020; Feijoo *et al.*, 2021; Feijoo; Pavez, 2019; Hudders *et al.*, 2017; López-Villafranca; Olmedo-Salar, 2019; Ramos-Serrano; Herrero-Diz, 2016; Rozendaal *et al.*, 2013; Tur-Viñes; Núñez-Gómez; González-Río, 2018; Van-Dam; Van-Reijmersdal, 2019; Van-Reijmersdal; Rozendaal; Buijzen, 2012; Van-Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2017; Van-Reijmersdal; Rozendaal, 2020; Vanwesenbeeck; Walrave; Ponnet, 2017) highlighted the increasingly blurred line that differentiates what is entertainment content and commercial content, especially on social networks. Consequently, it is necessary to put particular focus on what minors process when they consume this content, which does not have a standardized format, though in many cases it depends on the context in which they are developed. When faced with such advertising content, advertising literacy based on not only a conceptual dimension but also a critical one becomes crucial (Adams; Schellens; Valcke, 2017; Hudders *et al.*, 2015; Rozendaal *et al.*, 2011). The importance of critical thinking in advertising literacy was observed by McLean, Paxton, and Wertheim (2016), who concluded that adolescents with low critical skills suffer a more negative effect upon seeing an idealized version of feminine beauty in conventional ads, an issue that becomes particularly troubling upon reviewing the results of the *EU Kids Online 2017–2018* survey, which revealed that Spanish minors between 12 and 16 years of age have the lowest levels of information navigation skills and critical assessment in Europe (Smahel *et al.*, 2020). Thus, it seems appropriate to raise a third research question:

RQ3. Do minors activate their critical thinking when faced with the type of persuasive content published by influencers?

It is important to pay attention to the level of advertising exposure to which the minor is subjected through mobile phones, which have become the main device used to access the Internet (IAB Spain, 2021). An exploratory study on smartphone usage (Feijoo; Sádaba; Bugueño, 2020) shows that children and adolescents spend a large part of their time connected to platforms such as games and social networking apps, on which the level of advertising exposure is 14 minutes per hour of use, a level of consumption slightly higher than that of other types of media such as television. At

times, advertising was even present in >80% of a minor's browsing time. Additionally, one of the common categories in the digital environment and on social media is food, drinks, and sweets, mostly unhealthy products and brands (Alruwaily *et al.*, 2020; Coates *et al.*, 2020; Feijoo; Sádaba; Bugueño, 2020).

A review of the cited literature on minors, influencer marketing, eating habits, and body image reveals that a majority of the studies come from English-speaking or Western European countries, with Spanish studies being anecdotal in nature and varied, focused on influencers' effect and/or the analysis of content published by influencers, without considering the minors' perspective (Castelló-Martínez; Tur-Viñes, 2021; Fanjul-Peyró; López-Font; González-Oñate, 2019; Feijoo; Fernández-Gómez, 2021; Fernández-Gómez; Díaz-Campo, 2014; González-Oñate; Martínez-Sánchez, 2020; Tur-Viñes; Castelló-Martínez, 2021). This study seeks to fill this gap and go beyond the suitability of the published content and the study of the effects influencers' lifestyle posts have on minors. It considers minors' reactions, processing, and beliefs as well as the imaginary formed around these issues, which is necessary to understand in order to develop proper training and debunk myths and misinformation. The desired outcome is that this new type of user would be able immerse themselves in the consumption of advertising content with skepticism and restraint. In short, as Barbieri (2020) indicates, teaching critical thinking is a long-term cultural investment, making the citizens of tomorrow aware, engaged, and active.

Consequently, the main objective of this research is to understand the impact branded content posted by influencers on social networks has on Spanish minors' (between 11 and 17 years of age) perceptions of habits that affect physical appearance. The aim is to study what they think about these issues that can directly affect both their physical and mental well-being modeled on the content posted by certain brand advocates.

3. Methodology

A qualitative study of an exploratory nature was proposed through the development of focus groups of minors between 11 and 17 years of age who reside in Spain. A qualitative approach was chosen because one of its great advantages is that participants have a voice and provide insight into the "what" and "how," yielding information on decisions, trajectories, and degree of participation in the digital environment. In short, qualitative strategies are the best way to become immersed in the day to day of the participants (Silverstone, 2005), achieving an inclusive approach that provides insight into, in this case, the imaginary that minors form around the content they receive at the hand of influencers.

The minors were moderated by the researchers who make up this work team, specialized in the topic under discussion and trained in moderation skills, because it was essential to create a relaxed environment to promote interaction between the participants and ensure that the discussion focused on the subject at hand (Stewart; Shamdasani; Rook, 2007).

The focus groups were designed in accordance with a semistructured discussion guide, with the aim of addressing the same issues in all groups but allowing for some flexibility. Because they were minors and because of the moderator's difference in age, the dynamization began with a detailed explanation that the focus groups were not a test, so there were no correct or incorrect answers, judgment, or evaluations, given that everything they discussed would be very enriching for the researchers. Because of the pandemic, we chose to hold the focus groups virtually (in *Microsoft Teams* and *Zoom* rooms), so permission to record the session was always requested (with the signed consent of their parents or legal guardians), also explaining that the recordings were exclusively for scientific use, to transcribe in detail what had been discussed. This first segment, although it did not provide information about content, was crucial to gaining the minors' trust and making them feel comfortable to talk sincerely about their routines and preferences on social networks.

After this introduction segment, between five and ten minutes of conversation were dedicated to understanding what perceptions they had about social networks, taking the first steps toward understanding their relationship with these platforms: which ones they use, how much time they spend on them, how they rated them, etc. Once this was done, we entered into the central part of the research by asking what type of people they follow on social networks, turning the conversation towards the influencers they follow to gain insight into the relationship they have with these influencer profiles, why they follow them, and what level of credibility and trust they elicit. Finally, we also wanted to understand minors' point of view on the role of influencers as brand collaborators and their reaction with respect to it. It is important to clarify that the minors' statements about influencer marketing and physical appearance do not come from suggested questions on the subject but rather arose spontaneously and naturally in the dynamic of the focus groups. Upon reviewing transcripts of the conversations, the recurrent presence of this unexplored topic was detected in the digital discourse of preteens and adolescents. Hence, we decided to analyze this in the research in greater detail and in an exploratory way.

They perceive that the industries that collaborate most with influencers are the fashion, makeup, food, and technology (apps, electronic devices, etc.) sectors

Table 1. Connection between the research questions and the structure of the questionnaire that guided the focus groups

Research questions	Focus group discussion guide
Minors' perception of the role of influencers as brand ambassadors (RQ1 and RQ2)	<p>On your social networks, do you follow famous people/influencers? Whom do you follow? What is an influencer to you?</p> <p>Relationship with brands: Have you seen the influencers you follow promote products on their social networks? Why do you think influencers promote products and brands? What do you think of influencers promoting products and brands while you are viewing their content?</p>
Minors' critical analysis in the face of influencer marketing (RQ3)	<p>Why are you following influencers? Have you ever seen an influencer talk about a new product and then informed yourself about what they said, or is the information they provide sufficient? Do you trust what the influencer says on their social media? Why? Do you think influencers exaggerate or modify things from their experience to make their posts more attractive?</p>

Each focus group lasted approximately 50 minutes, and they were held between April and June 2021.

Qualitative data were obtained through a thematic analysis in *NVivo* (Boyatzis, 1995). The research questions and topics included in the focus group script guided the coding categories established.

3.1. Characteristics of the sample

Because it was a study of a qualitative nature, the sample was nonprobabilistic (Bernal, 2010). Thus, 12 focus groups, in which a total of 62 students from different parts of Spain participated (5–6 members per group), were conducted.

The sample was recruited through schools. Two filter criteria were defined for the establishment of the focus groups:

- the minor's age: establishing four categories according to academic year: 6th grade, the first cycle of Spanish secondary school, the second cycle of Spanish secondary school, and the last 2 years of high school
- the socioeconomic profile of the educational center, determined by its type (private, charter, or public) and by its geographical location, which serves as a previous indicator of the socioeconomic level of the households from which the minors come (Andrino; Grasso; Llaneras, 2019). According to the last segmentation criterion, schools were differentiated between high (>€30,000 in income), medium (€11,450–€30,350) and low (less than €11,450) socioeconomic levels, according to statistics from the *Spanish National Statistics Institute* (Andrino; Llaneras; Grasso, 2021). This double segmentation was established because the minors' age and the socioeconomic status of the family were believed to influence their level of digital critical competence (Smahel *et al.*, 2020). Efforts were also made to maintain, as far as possible, a ratio of men and women in the composition of the working groups.

Thus, in the first place, schools throughout Spain with these three profiles (private, charter, and public) were contacted according to their geographical location to meet the indicated filter variables. The project was explained to the directors of the centers and/or those responsible for the classes, who served as intermediaries to get in contact with the minors' families, the ones who ultimately did or did not authorize participation in the research. Establishing contact in two steps slowed down the sample selection process, but this intermediation was considered necessary to target the student's profile and avoid cold calling, which in research with children is not very effective.

Table 2 presents the distribution of the focus groups according to the two filter variables defined.

Table 2. Total number of focus groups developed

Focus group		Socioeconomic profile of the center			
		High	Medium	Low	Total
Academic year	6 th grade	1	1	1	3
	First cycle of Spanish secondary school	1	1	1	3
	Second cycle of Spanish secondary school	1	1	1	3
	Last 2 years of high school	1	1	1	3
	Total	4	4	4	12

In the end, 17 schools –8 private/charter, 9 public; 6 high socioeconomic group (SEG), 8 medium SEG, and 3 low SEG– that were located in different parts of Spain, managing to represent the whole reality of the national geography (the North, the South, the Center, the Levant, and the Islands) lent their cooperation. The centers connected us to 62 students, who made up the sample that ultimately participated in the focus groups and that was distributed as follows: 25 were boys and 37 were girls; according to class, 16 minors were in 6th grade (11–12 years of age), 13 were in the first cycle of Spanish secondary school (12–14 years of age), 18 were in the second cycle of Spanish secondary school (14–16 years of age), and 15 students were in their last 2 years of high school (16–17 years of age); according to the socioeco-

conomic level of the neighborhood in which their school was located, 20 minors came from a high SEG, 22 came from a middle SEG, and 20 came from a low SEG.

The nature of this study involves a series of ethical considerations that must be taken into account, in particular regarding the participation of minors in fieldwork. Therefore, we always had express parental authorization, supervised by the ethics committee of the university that financed this research, which also supervised and approved the report of this research project.

4. Results

4.1. Relationship with brands

First, it is necessary to point out a distinction used by the minors interviewed to classify influencers that affects how they perceive the brand messages influencers can spread as ambassadors: on the one hand, there are those who owe their popularity to the profession they had before social networking, such as singers, actresses, or athletes, and, on the other, those who got their start and developed as content creators on social networks. Whereas the former tend to be seen by students as idols, since they believe their life story and experience validate their online activity, they are, a priori, more skeptical of the latter:

“A person who is expert in something, for example, if someone is a tennis player and you play tennis, recommends, “Buy this racket because it is the best,” in that case I might trust them, but as an influencer, a person who lives on social networks and who has to do that sort of advertising, well, no” [focus group (FG) 7, girl, first cycle of Spanish secondary school, middle SEG].

As can be seen from this reflection, the interviewees assume that brand promotion is part of their job for those famous for their life on social media; on the other hand, when presented with posts published by celebrities who are also famous outside of social networks, they were more confident and relaxed.

“I do follow people who work as influencers. For example, in the case of Elsa Pataky [...] who is an actress and has an amazing body, she’s of a certain age now... she has gone through three pregnancies and everyone knows what having a baby entails... and she’s remarkably well preserved. So, in the case of diets, well, I understand that she would be an idol ... she has no reason to lie to me, I don’t think they would pay her to do it. I wouldn’t say that María Pombo is lying to you, either, but it turns out that now, with the new protection regulations, the one about advertisements, you have to post when it’s advertising” (FG6, girl, last 2 years of high school, high SEG).

In addition, they perceive that the industries that collaborate most with influencers are the fashion, makeup, food, and technology (apps, electronic devices, etc.) sectors. These are markets in which the minor acquires the role of buyer and primary consumer and for which brands, especially makeup brands, have created specific product lines that appeal to the small out-of-pocket expenses that adolescents can afford with their resources, often purchased compulsively.

“Yes, I did. I bought makeup. I had seen a video that spoke very well of it and I bought it. It was cheap and it went a long way” (FG12, girl, last 2 years of high school, medium SEG).

Likewise, although in a less pronounced way, even from the age of 12 years, they are already target audiences of food products that trigger concerns over physical appearance:

“I also see a youtuber who is always promoting *Myprotein*, protein shakes to get in shape” (FG11, boy, 6th grade, low SEG).

In this scenario, signaling a sponsored post with the hashtag #Ad influences the imaginary that the minor formed about the message’s level of credibility differently depending on whether it comes from one type of influencer or another.

“I follow Rafa Nadal and [...] he has super dark skin, well now he has a collaboration with *Cantabria Labs*, which makes sun creams, and I know he means it.” (FG6, girl, last 2 years of high school, high GSE).

In any case, for the participants, the presence of the hashtag #Ad, or any other such signalling, is key in them viewing the content as advertising and not so much as an exercise in interpreting the message:

“Interviewer: What indicates to you that they are promoting something?”

Interviewee 2: They usually say so.

Interviewee 5: Many times influencers make videos with the clothes they have been sent, and they say I love these comfortable, stylish pants from... from this brand.

Interviewee 4: from a brand and they label it. And they say, ‘Go over there that... that there is...’ [...] and there is a discount code in my name.

Interviewee 5: or there is a drawing” (FG5, girls, second cycle of Spanish secondary school, high SEG).

Promotional techniques and discounts are resources that capture their attention and intention. In any case, it is important to note that minors are not repulsed by influencers acting as brand ambassadors provided they have a genuine connection to that brand and it fits in with the lifestyle they maintain.

“There are influencers whom I do not feel have credibility, because all of the sudden, they advertise one thing, then another... But if you then see another person who, for example, you see that they have been using a cream and then they advertise it, then okay” (FG6, girl, last 2 years of high school, high SEG).

4.2. Perceptions built on physical appearance

The minors interviewed recognize that most of the collaborations they perceive between influencers and brands come from the fashion, makeup, and food sectors and that they are directly related to the cultivation of an image and physical appearance. It was found that the imaginary formed by the students who participated in this study—aged between 12 and 17 years of age—regarding appearance, based on this exposure to sponsored content, revolves around external care, looking good outside, and following the trends set by influencers. Thus, one of the key words from this analysis most mentioned by the participants in the focus groups, especially by the female audience, was “makeup.”

“I have a friend who follows Milly Bobby Brown, an actress who works in *Stranger Things*. She’s not an influencer, but she is a little like one, because she has her social networks and she has created a makeup line and then my friend became convinced that it was good and bought the whole line” (FG2, girl, first cycle of Spanish secondary school, high SEG).

The clothes and trends shown by influencers is another topic that draws interviewees of all ages and social classes, so much so that they take influencers’ advice and suggestions as an example to inspire aesthetic taste:

“If I follow someone it is because I like the way they dress, their clothes, and I am interested in their life... then suddenly within two months, I no longer care, and I stop following them” (FG6, girl, last 2 years of high school, high SEG).

However, in conversations with older minors (last 2 years of high school) other deeper and more weighty concerns begin to appear, such as social pressure, body worship, eating disorders, or the need to present the appearance of perfection on social networks. These are reflections that arise in the older profiles of minors when they consume the material influencers post; these thoughts do not really go unnoticed and impact them.

“Kylie Jenner who is an important girl, very famous, edits her photos and makes a reality that doesn’t exist, then in those of us whom it reaches it creates discomfort in ourselves because we do not look like them” (FG9, girl, last 2 years of high school, low SEG).

In particular, the female audience between 15 and 17 years of age confesses that the force of this constructed reality pressures them to some extent, although they are aware that influencers present a retouched world:

“Interviewee 3: They create a perfect body that is not normal.

Interviewee 1: and that in the end it normalizes a body that very few people have... and that creates anxiety disorders and that type of thing, well, not anxiety, anorexia, sorry” (FG9, girls, last 2 years of high school, low SEG).

4.3. Is critical exercise perceived among the minors interviewed?

Minors face an increasingly hybrid scenario in the context of social media. Recognizing the origin and intentionality of the content becomes key in correctly managing the impulses received. Thus, this study sought to analyze what interpretations students make when faced with content posted by influencers. It is relevant to verify that minors have established in their imaginary the assumption that these opinion leaders build a world and speech for social networks, as if they were fictional characters but with the difference being that they “operate” in a real context.

“I have a love–hate relationship with social networks, [...] and it’s that on *Instagram* it’s all appearances and that’s better to realize that, because you see influencers with a perfect body, with a face without pimples, and many people compare themselves with that and we have to keep in mind that it’s not real” (FG5, girl, second cycle of Spanish secondary school, high SEG).

The students interviewed, mainly the older ones, accept that what influencers publish about their routines is distorted, since they almost always show their nice and attractive side, and moreover, they are aware of the use of the aspirational appeal that celebrities use to keep the interest of their audience. Likewise, minors also seem to be clear about the consequences of a “naive” exposure to influencers’ discourse, a stance they believe is key for social networks not to be “toxic”:

“Perhaps everyone wants to be like María Pombo because it seems that she has the perfect life, but we have to see that María Pombo’s life is not like that. That’s the first thing before following an influencer or anyone on *Instagram*... you have to know that the information provided will not always be 100% true” (FG6, girl, last 2 years of high school, high SEG).

Therefore, there is an exercise in questioning the content posted by influencers; moreover, if the content is of interest to them, they often evaluate it in much greater depth and more analytically, something characteristic of young profiles and prosumers:

“there was an influencer who said ‘I love this makeup’ and was wearing it [...] And then I got a good look and she was using a beauty filter, too. I was very surprised because if she was saying that the makeup suited her well, why was she using the filter?” (FG5, girl, second cycle of Spanish secondary school, high SEG).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The value of this research lies in addressing the exposure of adolescents to commercial content about food and body worship that is generated by influencers on social networks, but from the perspective of the minors themselves, taking into account their perceptions and concerns and not the effect generated on their behavior (Coates

et al., 2019; De-Jans *et al.*, 2021; Lowe-Calverley; Grieve, 2021; Tiggeman; Anderberg, 2020; Su; Kunkel; Ye, 2021). Thus, it was possible to verify that the promotion of products and services related to food and care of physical appearance are present in a minor's imaginary: the interviewees spontaneously confirmed primarily receiving commercial influences on food and products related to the care of their physical appearance, such as makeup or clothing, on social networks.

“ Even though minors are aware that influencers present a sweetened vision of their lives, this is not sufficient reason for them to withdraw their support ”

Analyzing their statements, it is concluded that the adolescents interviewed, especially the older ones (second cycle of Spanish secondary school and last 2 years of high school), are aware of the influence and effects that these posts promoting a world with a perfect aesthetic can have on their habits and behaviors. Moreover, they assume that influencers build an ideal world with the aim of exploiting the aspirational relationship created between follower and celebrity as a persuasive tactic. However, it seems that, in their critical exercise, they relativize this appeal by accepting exaggeration and superficiality as part of influencers' content and also as something characteristic of social networks, thus tending to incorporate it into their own digital habits. A tendency was found among minors to have two separate accounts on the same social network, one as a “display” for which they accept contacts from their different circles (family, friends, and school) and on which they take great care in what they publish, especially photos, and another more personal one, on which they have their closest friends and show themselves more naturally. This could be a consequence of the fact that, in effect, for adolescents, influencers are symbolic models to imitate (Bandura, 2001), as well as being seen as “close” (Meyers, 2017), values that are also transferred to the products and services that they endorse (Lim *et al.*, 2017). The interesting thing is that the minors interviewed are aware of the parasocial relationship (Silva *et al.*, 2021) that they maintain with the influencers, which demonstrates a certain critical exercise; however, the adolescents did not delve into a greater questioning of the moral and ethical implications that this double role entails in their digital life (Adams; Schellens; Valcke, 2017).

It should be noted that certain differences were observed in the minors' statements according to the age and socioeconomic level of the focus group. Though inconclusive, as study continued to be deepened along these lines through quantitative methodologies, it was found that the most elaborate reflections by adolescents on the effects of being exposed to sponsored content related to food and body care came from older profiles (second cycle Spanish secondary school and last 2 years of high school) and from high socioeconomic groups.

As a result, minors also view the commercial role as part of the essence of an influencer, especially those who have developed their career as content creators in social networks. The credibility attributed to them as brand ambassadors varies according to whether or not they are considered “experts” in the product or service they promote. However, their ability to recognize the persuasive intention of these publications often depends on the presence of some signals, such as the hashtag #Ad, rather than their ability to interpret, as indicated by previous research on digital advertising and minors (Feijoo *et al.*, 2021). Thus, on many occasions, especially when faced with those celebrities who owe their popularity to their previous profession, they are not able to recognize product placement if it is not marked as such, since they do not associate it with a collaboration of self-interest but rather see it as a genuine recommendation which they trust.

This research offers some lines of thought and work that are not intended to be conclusive, given the limitations implied by the qualitative method, which precludes making general conclusions, both because of the sample size, and because it was decided to approach the topic of discussion based on the perceptions and interpretations of the adolescents. Therefore, future lines of research may consider the analysis of this phenomenon from a quantitative perspective that explores the role of critical thinking in the moral and ethical values that influencers transmit to adolescents as symbolic models to be imitated, as well as the need to continue analyzing the influence of sociodemographic variables of households on the critical capabilities of the minor to mediate with the content they consume through social networks.

6. References

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