

# Young Digital Citizens: Perception of their Media and Transmedia Competence

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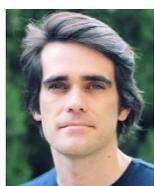
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## Abstract

The development of media and digital competences among the new generations is a requirement for their democratic participation in today's technological society. This article takes an approach to young people's perception of their own media competence, based on their comments on the use and sense of consumption of social media. The results of 14 focus groups (N= 83) of young people from three Spanish regions between 12 and 18 years of age are presented. Based on two theoretical models, a content analysis considering gender and age was carried out using Atlas.Ti software. The results indicate a greater presence of the Interaction dimension among girls and of Production and Dissemination among boys, and in general a familiarisation with preventive measures on safety on the networks and a review of the media diet, up to the age of 12-13. The adolescents themselves identify how, from this age onwards, the use of social networks is amplified and point out difficulties in self-management well into the university stage (18 years old). Although the participants show a high level of knowledge of social media marketing strategies and influencers' "authenticity" tactics, they recognise that they are driven by the search for entertainment and a need for approval from



their peers in the digital space. Based on the results, we identify the need for further research in the period between 12-13 and 14-16 years of age in relation to the paradox between adolescents' conviction of their expertise in certain dimensions of media competence and their poorly reflective and critical consumption.

## Keywords

Media Competence, Transmedia, Social Networks, YouTube, Instagram, Adolescence, Youth, Gender, Age, Digital Citizenship.

## 1. Introduction

The media ecosystem is a transversal element of almost every social democratic environment (**Boczkowski; Mitchelstein, 2021; Deuze, 2012**). In that context, debates about the concept of digital citizenship (**Richardson; Martin; Sauers, 2021**) entail an analysis of the education of the population in (trans)media skills and their use of those skills. The notion of digital citizenship is a subject of study not only in political science, but also in a wide range of disciplines such as education and sociology, reflecting the multidimensional nature of digital citizenship, which encompasses access, literacy and digital skills (**Estanyol et al., 2023**). How to assess such skills is a recurring debate (**Mateus; Andrada; Ferrés, 2019**) that has tracked the development of the concept of media education and changes of paradigm (**Aguaded; Civilá; Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2022**) given the speed of technological change and the educational implications of such change, particularly in research into the (trans)media competence (**Scolari, 2018**) of young people. The participation of young people in the construction of society should include social media, which are also a space where members of society play the role of “a political subjectivity that takes on specific characteristics in cyberspace” (**Dussel; Cardona, 2021**). It is in fact critical analysis of social media in terms of its social, economic and cultural implications (**Buckingham, 2007**) that allows us to observe the connection between young people's perceptions and representations on social media and to position such connection within contemporary ideologies. Situated in the so-called digitisation stage, this research conceptualises (trans)media competence from the perspective of (desirable) proactive cybercitizenship (**Aguaded et al., 2022**) and focuses on adolescents as a group in order to address their perceptions of (trans)media competence. Support for the personal and social development of young people through education must start from their perceptions and understandings (**Aierbe Barandiaran; Concepción Medrano Samaniego, 2013**). We understand a perception to be the apprehension of reality by an individual (symbolic interaction) whereby the individual (a) selects messages in function of their pre-existing interests, attitudes and opinions and (b) receives messages through the filter of the groups to which they belong (theories of perception and selective exposure). Thence the interest in analysing the actual perceptions of social media of adolescents and young people.

In this article we offer, first, a formulation of the skills comprising media competence based on the comments of participants on the use and significance of consumption of social media platforms. Second, we explore the impact (if any) of age and gender on their understanding of the importance that they attribute to the use and significance of online platforms.

To that end, our research follows a qualitative method with a design that uses 14 focus groups (N = 83) of young people in Spain aged 12-18 (an age range that spans the early adolescence, mid-adolescence and late adolescence (to use the stages put forward by **Steinberg (2016)**) of Gen Z, which in Spain comprises nearly eight million people). A study carried out in Spain by **UNICEF (Andrade et al., 2021)** with two million students (aged 11-18) concludes that 31.6% of respondents spend more than five hours every day using the internet and social media, a figure that rises to 49.6% at the weekend. In addition, 98.5% have at least one social media account and 83.5% have three or more. The most commonly used are YouTube (90.8% of respondents), Instagram (79.9%), TikTok (75.3%) and Twitch (46.4%). In line with academic recommendations to use qualitative methods to disentangle the most complex aspects of the use of social media by adolescents (**Davis; Charmaraman; Weinstein, 2020; West; Rice; Vella-Brodrick, 2023**), this study is built round a discursive-theoretic model of the negotiation undertaken by our young participants in relation to the use of that age group's most popular social media platforms, principally YouTube and Instagram and, increasingly, TikTok.

### 1.1. Digital Environments and Youth Citizenship

The widespread description of twenty-first century teenagers or Millennials as ‘digital natives’ should not be misunderstood because, as noted by a number of authors (**Mesquita-Romero; Fernández-Morante; Cebreiro-López, 2022; Camps-Cervera, 2009; Cuervo; Medrano, 2013**), the use of social media does not in itself entail critical reflection, just as technology alone does not make a society more democratic (**Carpentier, 2007**). We adopt the description by **Gozálvez; González-Martín, and Valero (2022)** in their analysis of the foundations whereby critical thinking is:

required for the construction of digital citizenship in digital environments, a task that requires strengthening of the role of schools and educational institutions in their endeavours to teach young people how to make intelligent use of new democratic debate spaces in an independent, considered and responsible way.

Different institutions and writers (**Rodríguez-Canfranc et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2018**), have raised concerns about how

little education in digital literacy and evaluation of information people generally receive (UNESCO, 2018). And it is now even more imperative that today's young people should acquire the media and digital skills required for their participation in democratic life from an early age onward (European Commission, 2021) safely and responsibly (O'Neill, 2023). Thus, our research is relevant to all stakeholders in the education of young people, principally but not only families, schools and teachers. The results of this study provide a framework of knowledge that can support the development of educational content and programmes to foster the critical thinking skills of students in the online digital world and specifically in the social media space. According to Cortina (2008), critical thinking entails skills that support the development of more democratic societies anchored in the appropriate use of freedoms and public debate.

The aim of this study is thus to gather the opinions of adolescents around their use of social media in order to determine the centrality of their praxis, which is very often intuitive. As noted by Clark *et al.* (2009), 'educators must take account of the types of skills and knowledge that young students bring to the environment.' This double trajectory, of the practice of young people in analysing their perceptions of their use of media (and vice versa), should help to minimise the gap between intuitive informal learning and formal education, sometimes referred to as digital dissonance (Black; Castro; Lin, 2015).

We follow Miller *et al.* (2016) who take an ethnographic approach to the study of social media, putting the focus on the content published by users and their motives for publication, with the perceptions of adolescent users of social media as the starting point. Specifically, in relation to discourse on social media, the context requires the adoption of new principles: 'we need to adopt principles from informal logic, cognitive psychology and communication education, to complement traditional definitions of critical thinking' (Gozálvez *et al.*, 2022). As those authors continue in their rigorous analysis of the classical model of critical thinking, from traditional skills and attitudes to a 'digital critical ethos', we should take time to describe in detail the fallacies and biases that prevail online 'that include cascade effects, at speeds that make them unstoppable, full of images and concepts freighted with strong emotional and symbolic significance' (Gozálvez *et al.*, 2022).

In light of those particularities, this research offers an approach to the relationships of very young people with social media and online influencers on the basis of their own experience, opinions and perceptions. The selection of YouTube and Instagram to observe the participants' interaction springs from the fact that they are two of the most-followed social media platforms among young people (Andrade *et al.*, 2021; IAB Spain, 2022; We are Social, 2023). In that sense, we follow Ríos-Hernández *et al.* (2022) in limiting ourselves to YouTube and Instagram 'where the participation of users is more significant' (2022, p. 245). On both platforms we can see the pre-eminence of the language of image, albeit in different ways.

YouTube is not only suitable for content creation by audiences, it can also be used and analysed in formal and informal learning (Miller *et al.*, 2016). As presented in Scolari *et al.* (2018):

The dual nature of YouTube content has led to the coexistence of educational and entertainment material. However, what distinguishes YouTube is the creation of specific narrative formats with their own tone and aesthetic. Their discourses are intended to be simple, recognisable and pragmatic.

Since its creation in 2005, YouTube has been adding functionalities and according to some research 'alongside television, YouTube is the media source most strongly embedded in the daily lives of young people' (Scolari, 2018). Alongside content monetisation, YouTube still streams material from individual creators with varying degrees of authorial intent. As stated by Jenkins (2006), tutorials are increasingly participatory, to build a collective intelligence.

Although Instagram provides fewer opportunities for followers to be actively involved (González-Carrión; Agueded, 2020), it is based on the centrality of (self-)image in line with the (hyper)visibility of today's society (Imbert, 2003). A society in which, following Boyd (2014), there is no divide between online and off-line spaces as individuals adapt their personality in a system of communication based squarely on representation, appearance and public approval, as Guardiola (2018) adds. Various sources have found that Instagram is the social media platform that has grown the most in Spain in terms of user numbers over recent years (IAB Spain, 2022). In relation to age, 71% of Instagram's users are under 35 (Statista, 2022). It has even been noted that 'Instagram has established itself as an online space that forms part of everyday life for young people' (Santos; Fernández-Planells; Naberhaus, 2022) and that it is 'one more space where young people negotiate and construct their identities' (Araña; Tortajada; Capdevila, 2014). Kadekova and Holienčinová (2018) also identify four types of influencer (blogger, celebrity, youtuber or vlogger, and Instagrammer). That classification allows this research to focus on vloggers and instagrammers, with whom the majority of young people identify (IAB Spain, 2022).

## 1.2. (Trans) Media Skills

Just as the notion of media literacy has been becoming ever more complex, the notion of media competence is developing and diversifying from a variety of perspectives. A brief survey shows us how in many instances the approaches of researchers have been based on a range of understandings from the strictly instrumental ('technical digital skills' in line with Choi (2016)), through ethical or moral focuses (a 'control focus' according to Yue; Nekmat, and Beta (2019)) to trivialising notions (close to the 'freedom focus' articulated by Yue *et al.* (2019)). Our perspective

converges with that of **Yue et al.** (2019), who follow other researchers such as **Estanyol et al.** (2023):

in their critical understanding of young people, not as passive subjects or active agents in themselves, but as users enmeshed in a complex technical, commercial, cultural, social and political framework in two interrelated environments: the online and the off-line. In specific terms, that understanding requires us to engage with the digital behaviours of young people, especially the differences within this age group (**Porat et al.**, 2018).

Under that shared perspective, our study starts from models of media competence accepted by academic researchers internationally, particularly in Europe and Latin America. Those models include the four concepts determined by **Buckingham** (2007) to be key to media education: production, language, representation and audience. As Buckingham explains and as would be reported in subsequent works (**Cuervo; Medrano**, 2013), these aspects reflect the theoretical foundations of flexibility in the articulation of media education.

First, we refer to the iconic formulation of media competence proposed by **Ferrés and Piscitelli** (2012), the subject of consensus among fifty Latin American experts, which contains six dimensions: Language, Technology, Interaction Process, Production and Diffusion processes, Ideology and Values, and Aesthetics. That model was ‘developed and refined’ as subsequently described by Ferrés himself (**Ferrés; Figueras; Ambrós**, 2022) in many research works over the last twenty years (**Ferrés et al.**, 2017; **Ferrés; Masanet; Blanco**, 2014; **Ferrés; Aguaded-Gómez; García-Matilla**, 2012; **Masanet; Contreras; Ferrés**, 2013) and been extensively applied in much research (including among the most recent works, **Fernandes; Matos; Festas**, 2022; **Rodrigo-Moriche et al.**, 2020; **Ríos-Hernández et al.**, 2022).

Second, we draw on the transmedia skills proposed by **Scolari** (2018) –production, management, performative, media and technology, narrative and aesthetics, risk management, ideology and ethics– in the scope of transmedia competence more specifically aimed at social media.

Both models see media competence as the capacity to critically interact with media messages, from the perspective of analysis of messages received by an individual and the production by individuals of their own messages. Although various works highlight the lack of consensus in the scientific literature around a single conceptual framework for the assessment of media skills (**Roosen**, 2013; **Potter**, 2010; **Pereira; Pinto; Moura**, 2015; **Fernandes et al.**, 2022), the two models that we have used adopt the definition of the **European Commission** (2009) of media competence as “the capacity to access the media, to understand and to critically evaluate aspects of the media and media contents, and to create communications in a variety of contexts.”

Based on the responses of participants in this research, we have developed a formulation that adds to those of **Ferrés et al.** (2022) and **Scolari** (2018) the skills that are most conducive to the analysis and operativity of the perceptions of young people of YouTube and Instagram.

In summary, we propose the following (trans)media skills (Table 1):

Table 1: (Trans) Media Skills.

(Trans) Media Skills	Definitions
1. Narrative and Aesthetics - as in the <b>Scolari</b> (2018) model, groups together the original Language and Aesthetics, distinguished in <b>Ferrés and Piscitelli</b> (2012).	Knowledge of codes and the capacity to use them and analyse messages in a multimedia, transmedia and multimodal culture in terms of their meaning and significance in light of narrative structures and genre conventions. And, capacity and sensitivity to analyse, weigh and enjoy the aesthetic quality and originality of artistic trends.
2. Technology and media environments - groups Technology, from <b>Ferrés and Piscitelli</b> (2012) with Production and part of Media and Technology, <b>Scolari</b> (2018).	Knowledge and capacity to handle technological innovations that support multimodal and multimedia communication in hypermedia, (trans)media and multimodal environments. It also includes the evaluation of, and reflection on, the qualities or characteristics of software, hardware and apps, and the skills required to put that knowledge into practice.
3. Interaction- as proposed by <b>Ferrés and Piscitelli</b> (2012), Interaction explicitly includes Risk prevention, management and (in part) performative skills, from <b>Scolari</b> (2018).	Capacity to select, review and self-evaluate a person’s own media diet (in particular, a person’s skill in managing their own resources and time), in function of conscious, rational principles. Knowledge and capacity to take preventive measures in relation to privacy (management of personal identity) and safe use of media, with particular attention to social management of social media participation (for example, from parental control to risk-taking and exploiting opportunities). Capacity to evaluate the cognitive effects of emotions: awareness of the ideas and values associated with personalities, actions and situations that generate positive or negative emotions. Capacity to manage leisure screen time to make it a learning opportunity.
4. Production and Diffusion Dynamics - the term ‘dynamics’ is new and groups together <b>Ferrés and Piscitelli</b> (2012)’s modality, including deontology, with the dynamics of production, management and (in part) performative dynamics with media and technology dynamics from <b>Scolari</b> (2018).	Knowledge of the basic differences between content produced by individuals and corporate content, and knowledge of the socioeconomic context of the industry. Basic knowledge of the systems of production, programming techniques, how to reach audiences (including knowledge of the use of algorithms, monetization, sponsorship,...). Knowledge of the legal and regulatory framework in terms of self-regulation and external regulation (ethics and rights of author).
5. Ideology and ethics - brings together Ideology and values from <b>Ferrés and Piscitelli</b> (2012) and Ideology and ethics from <b>Scolari</b> (2018).	Capacity to identify and critically evaluate representations of gender, racial, cultural and other stereotypes and ethical issues around the processes of emotional identification, manipulation, deepfakes and hacking.

As underlined by **Pereira et al.** (2015), ‘media literacy competencies should be approached holistically.’ That does not mean we should not focus on one particular dimension, as the authors continue, but ‘it is from a global perspective that details and even logical overlaps can be identified’ (for example, hacking can fall under both the ethical dimension and technology). For that reason, in the coding process the most obvious indicator has been assigned, as agreed in each case within the research group. For this work, we have restricted ourselves to the field of analysis, since we are not considering participants’ productions, rather their perceptions. The questions posed are: What skills are most commonly mentioned by young people when they reflect on their use of social media? Is there a similar pattern across genders and ages, or are there any differences? Do they express in their discourse any contradiction between their self-perceived skills and their use of social media?

Finally, the two chosen objectives of this study are:

**O1:** To analyse the perceptions of young users of YouTube and Instagram of their own (formal and informal) knowledge of (trans)media skills, in terms of gender and age.

**O2:** To interpret the perceptions of young users of YouTube and Instagram as to their skill in identifying contradictions between capability and action.

## 2. Method

In the context of broader research, we present here the phase of qualitative audience analysis. In this phase (late 2021-early 2022), and despite the problems presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, fourteen focus groups (FG) were held in eleven publicly and privately funded educational institutions in Catalonia, the Balearic Islands and the Spanish Basque Country, as follows: five FGs of students aged 12-13 (Year 1 Mandatory Secondary Education), five FGs with students aged 15-16 (Year 4 Mandatory Secondary Education) and four FGs with students aged 18-19 (first-year university students reading for degrees in Communication and Education, and Sport). The sample was selected on the basis of age, in order to cover the different stages from pre-adolescence to early adulthood in three distinct geographic areas and by convenience in the selection of the three specific geographic areas (Autonomous Communities), in which the participating universities are based (*anonymised*). The focus groups consisted of groups of 5 to 7 participants, mostly gender-balanced (3 females and 3 males), supported by two moderators to oversee the students’ interaction and promote a climate in which the participants felt comfortable and free to express their opinions. A total of 83 students took part and each FG lasted 60-80 minutes. The research team prepared an open script for the focus group sessions based on a review of the literature (**Aran-Ramspott; Fedele; Tarragó**, 2018; **Buckingham**, 2008; **Boyd**, 2014; **Ferrés**, 2013; **Ferrés; Piscitelli**, 2012; **Jenkins et al.**, 2006; **Livingstone; Sefton-Green**, 2016; **Scolari**, 2016; 2018; **Pérez-Tornero**, 2008), the method used (**Barbour**, 2021; **Izcara-Palacios**, 2014) and the objectives of the study. The FGs were transcribed in full and subsequently analysed using Atlas Ti content analysis software. In this process, (trans)media competencies were identified (Table 1) and the categories that emerged from the analysis of the FGs were defined. Those items were considered and agreed by the research group in successive readings (**Bryman**, 2012). Those categories were grouped into significant analytical sets, in light of their shared characteristics and how well they fitted with the content of the category.

Participants were protected as set out in the protocols approved by the public funding institution and by the Research Ethics Committee of the study's coordinating university (*anonymised*).

## 3. Results Analysis

The results of this study from a deductive content analysis, given that we analyse the perceptions of adolescents and young adults, are described below by reference to the (trans)media skill categories in Table 1. Out of 1176 quotes (596 girls and 580 boys), 352 quotations were assigned to Competencies in (trans)media education. In descending order within that category, 115 related to Interaction, 89 to Production and Diffusion Dynamics, 69 to Technology and media environments, 59 to Ideology and ethics, and (many fewer), 20 to Narrative and Aesthetics.

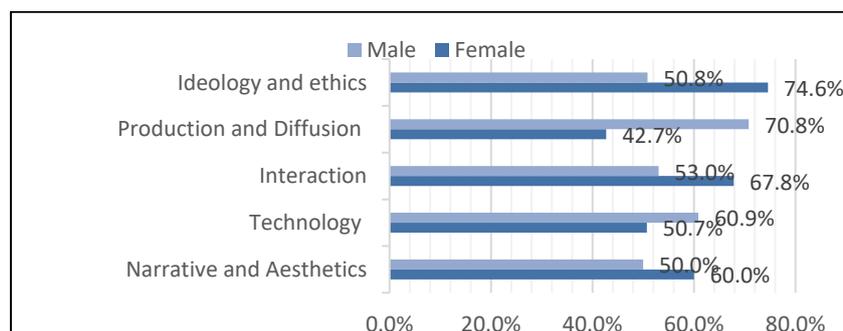


Figure 1: (Trans) Media Competencies by Sex.

Although a given comment may be made by both females and males, the disaggregated data (Figure 1) show gender differences, whereby female participants are more strongly represented in Ideology and ethics (74.6%), Interaction (67.8%) and Narrative and Aesthetics (60%). Conversely, males participants have a larger number of comments in Production and Diffusion (70.8%) and Technology (60.9%).

Figure 2 below shows the proportion of quotations in the dimensions of (trans)media competence by age of the participants.

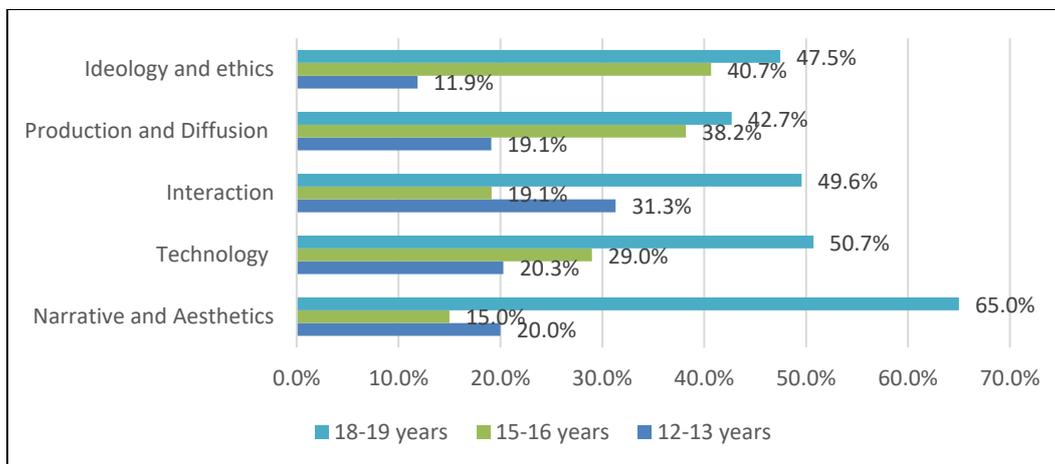


Figure 2: (Trans) Media Skills by Age.

The predominance of comments by older participants is notable in all the skills considered. They are most prevalent in Narrative and Aesthetics (65%), Technology (50.7%) and Interaction (49.6%). In the other results, it can be seen that (trans)media skills follow an age-related pattern, whereby the greater a person’s experience, the more developed their skills. The exceptions are Narrative and Aesthetics, and Interaction, where we see fewer remarks from 15-16-year-old students than from those in the 12-13 age band. However, it is worthy of note that the jump in the number of comments concerning (trans)media skills comes between the 12-13 and the 15-16 age groups. Between the ages of 15-16 and 18-19 the differences are not so great (for example, in Dynamics of Production and Diffusion and in Ideology and Ethics).

In the overall data, the results show that competence in Narrative and Aesthetics received the fewest remarks (20.5.6%). That is due in part to the natural overlap with Interaction, for example when the participants comment on specific emotional strategies in the use of codes and paralinguistic elements that form part of the performativity of some influencers. Although this dimension had fewest mentions, it is noteworthy that it is the only dimension in which more than half of mentions (some 65%) are from university students.

Finally, the varying ownership and locations of the educational institutions proved not to be significant, principally because there were no substantial differences in the results, as was the case with the quantitative results in this investigation (Aran-Ramspott; Moro-Inchaurtieta; Botella-García-del-Cid, 2022).

We set out below illustrative examples of remarks coded by dimension during the focus group analysis.

### 3.1. Interaction

Despite the knowledge of certain risks shown by the participants, they make numerous mentions of a lack of self-control in the use and selection of content.

[Girl, 12-13, Balearic Islands] It’s like for me, that [...], it’s your problem. I do get stuck on TikTok, and they say that’s enough and I stop. It’s like lots of people ask you, people you don’t know from Adam and some people accept them to get more followers, but they could start talking to you any time and you don’t know what to say.

Explicitly, they mention cyberbullying, the comparison with addiction, the attraction of the forbidden, the bad influence of pro-bulimia and pro-anorexia content, and posting pictures of a person without the person’s consent. It is observed that the youngest students turn to their family or teachers to deal with such conflicts, but they report exceptions:

[Interviewer] Don’t their parents control those children?

[Girl, 12-13, Balearic Islands] It depends, my cousin is nine, she has TikTok with no filters and often she calls me and says ‘What’s this?’ And I’m like ‘You shouldn’t be watching that.’

In their remarks about the use of images without consent, which came up quite a lot, they told several stories about their own experience (all with a favourable outcome thanks to family support) and about other people (sometimes they talk about a girl who had been threatened and changed schools –different to what bullying experts say should happen,

so as not to revictimise the victim). It is common for older participants (aged 15-16 and 18-19) to show greater concern for younger children, in whom they see the risk of imitation and bad influences.

[Female 2, University, Basque Country] The youngest kids don't see the danger and then there's a lot of bullying and,

[Interviewer] Not just the youngest children, up to sixteen...

[Female 2] But it depends how mature someone is, then lots of problems come from it, like bullying, and

[Male 4] Right, yeah, you see they have completely free access, there's no control of any kind

[Female 2] Yes, there must be some control, privacy

[Male 5] That's a problem.

The participants also refer to reporting mechanisms, blocking, quitting a platform and privacy settings. Students aged 12-13 in particular mention strategies agreed and/or supervised by their families (parental controls), including password sharing and viewing content together.

[Girl, 12-13, Balearic Islands] On my phone, they've just put parental controls on and they don't let me access any social media –apart from Netflix and Spotify– but I don't have TikTok or Instagram. I do have it on my mother's phone, but of course my mother won't give me her phone, so I don't watch it that much.

Students start to see themselves as transitioning from childhood to adolescence at 12-13.

[Girl, 12-13, Balearic Islands] I think parental controls are a bit ridiculous because social media's not bad, I don't find it bad, people can abuse social media, but I think my parents can trust me, like, if they tell me not to have anything to do with people I don't know, so I think it's dumb for them to let me keep my phone if they don't want to trust me.

[Male 5] Instagram, it should only be for people over sixteen [...]

At 15-16 we begin to see self-evaluation of ongoing social media use and individuals express a level of concern about overuse, which seems almost unstoppable. In some cases, we even see regret for going on social media early.

[Girl, 15-16, Catalonia] Once you're on there and when you see what's going on and everything, it's like an addiction. Of course, you want to do it, but afterwards you can see what's bad about it, the things people say and you could leave, but...

[Boy, 15-16, Catalonia] If I could go back in time, I would never have gone on social media, never, never. WhatsApp, full stop.

### 3.2. Production and Diffusion Dynamics

In participants' remarks, we can discern a certain level of almost intuitive knowledge of how content platforms work, the processes of production, the subjection of social media to their algorithms and practices like monetisation and sponsorship, in particular for youtubers and Instagrammers.

[Boy, 12-13, Basque Country] For example, I know two youtubers and they often say 'blow up the Like button' and, get this, the big one says to the small one: 'this video will get you 50,000 more subscribers in 24 hours' or 'blow up the Like button everybody' and that's how they get tons of followers.

[Boy, 12-13, Basque Country] Yes, and lots of times they have clickbait with 'something exciting' and they put 'Part 1, Part 2 after however many Likes' and so on. And they get that many Likes and then they don't post the second part.

The participants seem to feel greater resentment of the role of algorithms than the acknowledged presence of advertising. That is an aspect that connects with the results from recent research (Zozaya; Feijoo; Sádaba, 2022) into how adolescents activate a critical perspective on their affinity with influencers, whose development over time and adaptation to the dynamics of the platforms they also evaluate.

[Boy, 12-13, Basque Country]: Normally, it's like this: you become famous making good videos and then, because you make brilliant videos and you don't have enough time to upload as many, then you start doing dumb things, not so dumb, but you end up doing videos that aren't as good as the other ones. Even like that, you get some (Likes), because of course if you have tons of followers and you only post one video a week, because you have to edit it etc., you just don't have time. Normally people make super-good videos and then they start to make videos down from 10 minutes to 3 or 4, whatever you've got time for, you know, what you can do well.

[Female 1] [...] But the only thing you have to give them when you create an account is your date of birth, so you just put that you were born in 1980 and they let you.

As mentioned, there is a notable number of comments by males (70.8%) relative to females (42.7%). By age group,

students aged 18-19 and 15-16 account for 80.9% of references. Age also affects the capacity for self-reflection on social media experience. The participants explicitly acknowledge the things youtubers and Influencers do to sway them, they even have a 'genuineness' scale for social media.

[Male, University, Catalonia] [...] when you watch someone live or in a 10-15-minute video it's much more difficult to fake it than in a picture or a story that lasts like , 15 seconds, [...] I would say that Number 1 is Twitch, 2 is YouTube for that, because you watch one (Twitch) live and the other is long videos, 3 is probably Twitter, I think people are more likely to show things like they are if they've had a bad day, then Instagram and TikTok and for me that's it. Instagram and TikTok, I'm not sure which one people do more faking on...

### 3.3. Technology

In this dimension, the most noteworthy remarks show good knowledge of software terminology and characteristics and technical applications, that they often link with marketing strategies.

[Boy, 12-13, Catalonia] There's something that's a score [...] of views, the clicker you see on your home page before you click on a video. On a video shown on the home page, then you can put what interests you or that might interest other people in the title, but you click on the video and that's not what comes up [...] but it still counts as a view, you just have to click on it, and maybe it's a scam. Its says 'I'm going to kiss a girl' and at the end, it says 'in the next video...' and so on.

Peers share knowledge with each other in terms of technical skills, including browsing the internet and access to content.

[Boy, 15-16, Balearic Islands] And later, too, when it comes to putting a title on a video, if they want to put 'weapon', people replace the letters with numbers, so it's not caught [...] For example, if you want to put 'weapon', instead of the 'w' you put a number. Or an asterisk.

### 3.4. Ideology and Ethics

There is a notable capacity in participants' remarks to critically weigh ethical issues concerning processes of manipulation to serve interests and to advantage some people, unsuitability of content for the age of participants, the need to protect younger children from certain content and a sense of civic duty. For example, there is some debate around the stakeholders and interests involved in social media:

[Boy 1, 15-16, Catalonia] Also, if you really look into it, it's in the interest of the man himself (Ibai), because the more views, the more people who connect, the more money they make. And everything, everything, everything, that happens on social media comes down to money.

[Boy 2. 15-16, Catalonia] Although they do it for money, it's like you could say people are finding the cure for cancer for money.

In terms of the appropriateness of content, among other examples, in the three Autonomous Communities, the case of a TikTokker in Mallorca was spontaneously volunteered; he is known for his controversial sexist videos, to the point of having been accused of trying to justify rape and sexual abuse.

[Girl, 12-13, Basque Country] So some people, some people at school, and I know it's true, even if they won't admit it, they watch porn. And I don't think it's right to upload porn. Often on TikTok they upload videos of showing their bum, and I don't think that's right.

[Girl, 15-16, Balearic Islands] Basically, he (Naim Darrechi) said he wasn't fertile and that he didn't use protection when he had sex. [...] imagine if people saw him as a role model. There are people who follow him and the worst thing about it is that he's proud, and what's more, he has lots of followers, and that person should in fact have his computer and phone, everything, taken away. Because, it's impossible that someone like that should have social media and be able to influence, make very young boys think it's okay, because he is followed by really young boys.

The concern shown for the protection of younger children (even in those aged 12-13), is often focused on the obsession with physical appearance, particularly among girls.

[Girl, 15-16, Basque Country] Because people don't understand anything.

[Boy, 15-16, Basque Country]: Because, physically, he's handsome.

[Boy, 15-16, Basque Country]: I mean, he's a handsome lad and they will be...like Justin Bieber with girls, I don't know, of 8, 10, lots of girls and boys too there with him.

[Interviewer]: Okay, so you think younger boys...

[Girl, 15-16, Basque Country]: They concentrate on what they're watching, not on what's being said. And they don't

really understand, but ... if you do listen, then ...

[Female, 18-19 years, Balearic Islands] And it has a good side and a bad side, it may lead me to dress one way, because I like it, but then, with younger girls, they won't see it that way, what they are going to see, they will feel pressured for not being well dressed.

References to 'civic duty' show a notable connection of young participants with today's reality in every age band.

[Boy, 12-13, Catalonia] So the other day, a while ago, when it was the elections in the US and Trump won, and Trump, like a lot of people here know, started to say things on social media, and he was banned, they took him off the social media platform.

[Female, 18-19 years, Balearic Islands] On Instagram, stuff is more likely to be fake news than on the TV News.

[Girl, 15-16, Catalonia] Well, I think that newspapers think about things before they publish, but on social media anyone can post whatever they want.

### 3.5. Narrative and Aesthetics

As part of this dimension, participants' remarks show that they are able, especially at university level, to identify the use of codes and paralinguistic techniques in the performativity of some influencers. For example, the purported naturalness of some youtubers.

[Female, University, Balearic Islands] Yes, because then you get what's going on now, the Feed, all the publications sort of work together, and of course it's a set-up, you say ...

[Girl, 12-13, Basque Country] After those words there are stickers. From 'joke' maybe you get a picture right then and there's a text with 'joke' and so on. Or Ibai Llanos, it says Ibai Llanos and it says 'Madness'. I, for example, have that sticker.

[Girl 12-13, Basque Country] [...] there are lots of people you follow because they play well, but it's easier to watch the videos of people who play well and connect well [...] if you're someone who connects well or finds it easy to talk to people, and you can play well, I think you get more subscribers.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

In terms of the first objective, the results for the perceptions of young users of YouTube and Instagram around their (formal and informal) knowledge of (trans)media competencies, by age and gender, we can reach the conclusions below.

The (trans)media skills most mentioned in the discourse of the young participants were Interaction, and Dynamics of Production and Diffusion. However, in terms of gender it is male participants who make most remarks about Dynamics of Production and Diffusion, and Technology, whilst Ideology and Ethics, and Interaction are the skills that female participants mention most. Their remarks attribute particular importance to knowledge of the steps that can be taken to be safe on social media, and to an appropriate diet of social media content. The results also allow us to observe that from 12 to 18 years of age, (trans)media skills follow an age-related pattern. On the principle of the older the person, the more developed their skills, adolescents show in their discussions a (mainly informal) knowledge of the necessary (trans) media competence. It can be said that up to the age of twelve, families have a role in the selection of content and the management of screen time in agreement with adolescents, who may enjoy that. Possibly, online leisure may still be an opportunity for family time (for example, coming downstairs and watching a series together), which drops away as adolescents become part of (to paraphrase Livingstone (2007)) the 'digital culture of the dorm'. Education in how to manage risks that the youngest (12-13) participants say they are given at school (sometimes by police officers) may also affect their willingness to agree to strategies of parental control. In the oldest age band (18-19), Narrative and Aesthetics is the most salient dimension. Although this dimension is the least commented on overall, Narrative and Aesthetics comes first for this age group. Their contributions indicate that at this age, young adults (and late adolescents) use social media to socialise and meet new contacts, albeit they (particularly young women) are at the same time aware of how social media affect their lifestyle and their body self-image. We observe that age and gender allow us to see the discursive negotiation that young people engage in relation to culture and their moral stance towards it (Korkmazer; De Ridder; Van Bauwel, 2022).

Conversely, and in relation to the second objective of the study, namely to interpret by age and gender the perceptions of young users of YouTube and Instagram of their ability to identify contradictions between capacities and actions, we can note the following. In terms of gender, female participants show greater critical awareness of their own (trans)media skills in Interaction, where there are significant comments about the need to review their own media diet and how difficult it is to self-manage and maintain any privacy on social media. That is consistent with the results of the quantitative analysis in Phase 1 of our investigation, which also provided evidence that female participants were more critical of the use of personal information on social media (Aran-Ramspott *et al.*, 2022).

Second, in relation to age, whilst there are no big differences between the ages of 15-16 and 18-19, 15-16 is an age that marks the onset of a stage of adolescence characterised by a greater reluctance to verbalise the contradictions between personal knowledge and skill in terms of media skills and the actions of the individual. According to **Manago et al.** (2020), in adolescents aged 14-17 digital communication has been associated with a greater sense of volitional control. Even so, it is participants aged 14-15 who acknowledge (under Interaction) that their use of social media is excessive.

For the older generations, it is much easier to point from a posture of concern at the (supposed) ignorance and risky behaviours of younger generations. That mechanism is an example of the third person effect (TPE) described by **Davison** (1983) whereby individuals tend to perceive others as more vulnerable to the effects of the media than they are themselves (**Guerrero-Solé**, 2013). In this instance, the TPE can be seen in the concern of older adolescents for the protection of younger adolescents. We have observed that 12-year-old children express a high level of knowledge of and capability in skills such as managing risk exposure, principally in the Interaction dimension and, to a lesser extent, under Ideology and Ethics.

We observe also from the remarks made by 18-year-olds who are in late adolescence and at the beginning of their university education share, especially in their comments under Interaction and Ideology and Ethics, the contradictions between that (trans)media capability and certain types of use (and abuse) of social media such as YouTube and especially Instagram. Some contributions, particularly from female participants, show a degree of discomfort with their lack of control over their own use of Instagram, but we have not observed the emergence of a critical posture towards the dominant models of consumption and body image beyond the expression of personal choices. That may be due to the logical disconnect between the individualism that today's neo-liberal society espouses and the need for recognition and connection with certain sub-cultures, of both peers and social media.

Consequently, conclusions derived from the results for the second objective lead us to believe that the provision of the education and training on how to protect themselves against cyberbullying and other risks that the youngest participants report having received at school is necessary but not sufficient. Thus, in line with the *European Commission's* BIK+i, raising awareness of risks and teaching digital literacy are key tools to support digital empowerment so that adolescents acquire the skills required to express themselves and make safe, responsible choices (**O'Neill**, 2023). In that sense, we believe that it is essential to have education beyond focused (trans)media literacy, principally focused on instrumental aspects: 'school tends to offer the most education in the only dimension in which students already know what they need to know' (**Ferrés et al.**, 2022). In that way, the addition of training in media skills (in all dimensions) from the earliest years of school education, could continue to improve students' (trans)media skills.

In addition, we can infer from the results of this study the need to take specific actions and implement tailored strategies in the 14-16 age band. This is the core of adolescence, a stage of life in which rebellion against rules and authority is a central feature of normal personal development. At that moment of transition to adult life, we see unconventional, illegal and socially unacceptable behaviours. However, in most cases those behaviours do not lead to other problem behaviours when the person making the transition has the required support and resources (**González de Audikana; Ruiz-Narezo; Moro Inchaurtieta**, 2021). There is a need to continue to research the apparent real links between media literacy and protection against the negative effects of social media. As proposed by **Masur; Bazarova, and DiFranzo** (2023) on the basis of some of their results, it is possible that greater media literacy makes people more aware of potential risks and negative outcomes, but we should note that in that case measurement was based on self-reports and, may therefore be biased by overestimation of respondents' skills and capacities. Future research should develop more objective tools to measure media literacy.

In that sense, although the adolescents we are analysing are part of the generation of so-called 'digital natives', they still need spaces for critical learning in which to develop the digital literacy that can make individuals independent (**Mateus et al.**, 2019), enable them to increase their understanding of the world in which they live and the scope open to them for social participation (**Francisco-Amat et al.**, 2022).

We agree with **Ríos-Hernández et al.** (2022) in saying that YouTube and Instagram could become spaces for education beyond entertainment. It is possible that the affinity of young people for some influencers might allow us to consider formal and informal education that favours a new form of dialogue between students and the social media figures that they follow.

In summary, this study is a contribution to the classification of (trans)media competencies and, in turn, a methodological contribution to the study of a novel contemporary strand of investigation.

This study has the limitations inherent to a qualitative focus, which may be complemented in subsequent phases and further research that considers, for example, intermediate age bands or seeks to determine whether there are significant differences between rural and urban areas or publicly funded vs privately funded schools, and takes a longer view of the impact of lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The work presented opens lines to be followed in future studies: to explore the jump between 12-13 years of age and 15-16 in relation to the media skills considered; to make explicit the values perceived by the young audience (12-18

years of age) on social media and its influencers; to examine in greater depth the relationship between media competence and personal development in adolescence; to examine the ethical aspect of media competence; and, to develop educational material and approaches that can be used to educate competent, critical citizens who are committed to social transformation in an ever more digitised world.

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