Social Media Influencers Defined by Adolescents[1]

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Social media influencers have emerged as digital celebrities, positioning themselves as role models for different audiences, particularly young people. Due to the inherent social and psychological immaturity of adolescents, they are considered a more vulnerable group, and thus, their digital behaviour and its potential impact on their identity development should be carefully studied. This study aimed to explore how adolescents perceive social media influencers. Sixty-two adolescents between the ages of 11 and 17 living in Spain participated in 12 focus groups. The study attempted to understand how adolescents define the concept of social media influencers and which profiles they follow in order to identify the attributes they prioritised. This study describes the categories proposed by the adolescents, as well as the influence generated by social media influencers based on the age and socio-economic status of the interviewees. Additionally, the study reveals that adolescents from lower socio-economic levels and adolescents between 16 and 17 years old expressed a desire to become social media influencers.

Keywords: social media influencer, social media, entertainment, followers, parasocial relationship, brands, adolescents

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Introduction

According to Statista (2022), the global social media influencer marketing industry has more than doubled in size since 2019, reaching a record value of 16.4 billion U.S. dollars. In Spain, influencer marketing and native advertising were the fastest-growing categories, despite a nearly 24% drop in advertising expenditure in 2021, as reported by Infoadex in 2022. Advertisers find social media influencers attractive as brand ambassadors because they are perceived as authentic (AUDREZET et al. 2020), credible (DJAFAROVA–RUSHWORTH 2017; LIM et al. 2017) and trustworthy, creating close, engaged relationship with consumers (SILVA et al. 2021). Social media influencers can be seen as modern-day, whose practices and impacts resemble those of traditional celebrities, which have been extensively researched in the past (MOWEN et al. 1981; PETTY–CACIOPPO 1980; PETTY et al. 1983).

Social media influencers are skilled in creating high-quality content that inspires and resonates with their audience, which allows them to cultivate a following comparable to that of celebrities and film stars. They can then monetise this following through product promotion (LOWE-CALVERLEY–GRIEVE 2020). According to social cognitive theory (BANDURA 1999), followers tend to model their behaviours on those of influencers they observe, which makes them symbolic models to imitate. This effect is amplified by the perception of social media influencers as "close, intimate friends" (MEYERS 2017), which reinforces the idea that anyone can achieve their level of popularity (SILVA et al. 2021). This perception is particularly strong among children and adolescents. The stronger the parasocial interaction with influencers, the more reliable and attractive their message becomes. As a result, followers tend to view their recommendations of social media influencers as more trustworthy and attractive and are more likely to follow advice. These values are also transferred to the products and brands influencers endorse (LIM et al. 2017). Governments and institutions have become increasingly interested in the phenomenon of social media influencers. According to the European Parliament, "influencers are content creators who aim to build authentic and trusted relationships with their audience on social media, primarily on social media platforms" (MICHAELSEN et al. 2022: 9). Although laws and self-regulation guides for social media influencers vary between countries in the European Union, the European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA) has proposed recommendations for brands collaborating with content creators since 2018 (EASA 2018). As the boundaries between mass communication and interpersonal communication, and between producers and consumers become increasingly blurred, there is growing urgency to ensure transparency and protect vulnerable groups, particularly children and adolescents (BUCKINGHAM 2003: 310).

Given the strong link between adolescents and the consumption of influencer content, there is a pressing need to better understand the perceptions and attitudes of this age group towards this phenomenon (ZOZAYA-DURAZO et al. 2023).

From opinion leaders to social media influencers

Various professionals such as musicians, scientists, athletes, actors and politicians, have the ability to influence people through their work, often being identified as role models due to their admirable qualities and inspiring attitudes. This influence is amplified when the influencer and influenced share similar characteristics such as profession (Lockwood–Kunda 1997). The power of influence exerted by a third party has been explored through the study of individuals who hold influence in specific fields, such as executives or superstars influencing university students, or in immediate environments (Scheer–Stern 1992; Lockwood–Kunda 1997). The emergence of social media influencers has shifted the focus towards those who have established themselves as opinion leaders through online platforms.

Social influence is a crucial factor in decision-making for individuals and groups, which has been studied in the context of communication and human behaviour. The influence of opinion leaders on mass audiences has also been widely explored through the media. The two-step flow theory of communication suggests that the information transmitted from one person to another has a stronger effect on the receiving party than if it were obtained through the media (McQuail 1997). This emphasises the role of opinion leaders as an important conduit for disseminating messages through mass media with exposure, medium, content and audience attitudes being the key factors that facilitate communication flow (Katz–Lazarsfeld 2006).

Opinion leaders possess the ability to influence others by changing their opinions and behaviour. Their dynamic, active profiles, vast exposure to information, and position of authority in their group make them capable of expressing persuasive opinions. The effectiveness stems from being trusted and esteemed by their followers, allowing them to persuade those close to them effortlessly and subtly in their daily interactions. This influence is stronger in some areas, and each opinion leader has a unique set of characteristics, making them prevalent in fields such as public affairs, fashion, marketing and cinema (Katz–Lazarsfeld 2006).

The impact of celebrities or famous individuals on consumer behaviour has been explored for decades from a commercial perspective. Studies have demonstrated that even when endorsing products that may not be of personal interest to consumers, the favourable effect of a celebrity's recommendation can be considerable because of their credibility, attractiveness and status in the eyes of consumers. This effect is further enhanced when consumers already associate the celebrity with the product being promoted (Mowen et al. 1981; Petty–Cacioppo 1980; Petty et al. 1983).

Celebrities are known for their talents or successful careers, and many of them have also built a strong presence on social media. Along with sharing content related to their personal and professional lives, they endorse commercial content with their followers.

Social media influencers are similar to traditional celebrities in their ability to convey authenticity (Audrezet et al. 2020), credibility (Djafarova–Rushworth 2017; Lim et al. 2017) and trust (Silva et al. 2021). However, for influencers to be successful, the audience must be able to identify with or relate to them (Kamins et al. 1989; Schouten

et al. 2020). With the rise of social media and increased connectivity, the concept of influence has evolved and expanded beyond traditional specific spheres or privileged profiles. Social media influencers have emerged and taken on functions that were once reserved for opinion leaders and celebrities (Thelwall et al. 2022).

Social media influencers are perceived by adolescents as personal, credible and relatable, which leads them to view them as close friends (De Veirman et al 2017). In fact, some adolescents develop a parasocial relationship with influencers (Lou–Kim 2019). The influencers create a natural image, which persuades viewers to follow and engage with them emotionally, despite the lack of affective reciprocity. This naturalness is consciously cultivated by celebrities, who encourage viewers to form imaginary relationships with them (Horton–Wohl 1956). Similarly, social media influencers foster a false sense of friendship with their followers (Lou–Kim 2019).

Social media's defining characteristics facilitate the idea of enhanced intimacy between communicators and their audience given the channel's potential for more frequent interaction and informal conversations, and openness to engagement. In addition, influencers can speak directly to the camera and involve the audience in relevant moments of their lives, creating a stronger sense of connection (Reinikainen et al. 2020). Users themselves have access to more resources than traditional media allows, such as commenting on, sharing and liking content posted by social media influencers, allow them to establish bilateral relationships with these influencers. As a result, viewers may be more easily influenced by the recommendations and advice of social media influencers (Caro-Castaño 2022), who are perceived as acquaintances and even friends. Previous research has shown that parasocial relationships can lead to an increase in the consumption of products promoted by social media influencers (Jin–Ryu 2020; Xiang et al. 2016).

This introduction provides the context for this study's RQ1:

RQ1. What defines a social media influencer and what characteristics do adolescents take into account to classify them?

The study also explores what motivates adolescents to consume influencer content. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) is applied to understand how individuals actively engage with media content to meet social, informative, entertainment and learning needs. UGT proposes that individuals search for media content to interact socially, gain information about their environment, escape from routine through entertainment, build personal relationships and express their personal identity. The gratifications sought in the media are based on the audience's expectations and emotional evaluations, which influence their choice of media and content. This theoretical framework draws on the works of (Lasswell 1948; Nordenstreng 1970; McQuail 1984).

In this context, the second research question this study aimed to answer was:

RQ2. What gratifications do adolescents obtain when consuming content generated by social media influencers?

Despite the variation in critical capacity among this age group, previous studies have highlighted age and gender (Goodrich 2013; Roedder 1981; Sokolova–Kefi 2020) as variables that can affect the development of a critical attitude towards online content. Additionally, socio-economic status has been shown to play an important role in the individual development (Adler et al. 2019). In both research questions, we aimed to

determine whether there were differences in terms of age or socio-economic level. While several studies have attempted to define and categorise the phenomenon of social media influencer marketing, this research study takes an innovative approach by answering these questions from the perspective of the consumers of this content, particularly adolescents.

Method

Methodological procedures

To address our research objective, the authors conducted an exploratory qualitative study that included focus groups with adolescents aged 11 to 17 years of age in Spain. Using a qualitative approach allowed us to give participants a voice and gain insight into their decision-making, career aspirations and digital media habits. By using inclusive strategies, we were able to immerse ourselves in their day-to-day experiences and understand their perceptions of social media influencers (Silverstone 2005).

Focus groups are a valuable tool for gathering information, aimed at encouraging participants, particularly adolescents, to interact in a relaxed and informal setting to discuss a specific topic and generate group knowledge and agreement (Hernández et al. 2014). For this case, the focus groups were moderated by researchers who were specialists in the topic of discussion and trained in moderating to create a relaxed atmosphere that promotes interaction among participants and ensures the discussion remains focused on the topic of interest (Stewart–Shamdasani 2014).

To minimise any discomfort, the participants might feel being moderated by an adult on a virtual platform, we opted to select participants who already knew each other, even though this approach deviates from the typical recommendation for organising focus groups. This measure is often necessary in school-based research, as noted in previous studies (Gómez Espino 2012; Horner 2000; Smith et al. 2008). Despite this non-traditional approach, we took steps to ensure that the discussions were focused on the topic of interest and that all participants had an equal opportunity to share their views.

Due to the context determined by the Covid-19 pandemic, the focus groups were held virtually (in Microsoft Teams and Zoom Rooms), and the participants were always asked for their permission to record the session (with consent forms signed by their parents or legal guardians). The participants were told that the recordings were exclusively for academic use and would be used to fully transcribe the discussion.

The focus groups were organised with a semi-structured guide of questions with the aim of addressing the same topics in all groups while allowing for some flexibility. Our research questions came from the three main topics of the debate: conceptualisation, characteristics and the gratifications that influencers provide adolescents.

To encourage interactive and informal discussion, it was emphasised that the focus groups were not exams, so there were no right or wrong answers, and no one would be judged or evaluated based on their responses. After this introductory section to build

rapport, we spent a few minutes asking about the participants' general perceptions of social media. After this, we discussed the focus of the study by asking about the type of people they followed on different social media platforms. We directed the conversation towards the profiles of famous users/social media influencers they followed, delving into their relationship with these profiles to better understand why they followed them, and what level of credibility and trust they attributed to them. Finally, we also wanted to know the adolescents' opinions of social media influencers' role as brand collaborators and ambassadors and their reaction to it. The focus groups last between 45 minutes and 60 minutes. This fieldwork was conducted between April and June 2021. Table 1 shows the correspondence between the research questions and the guide of questions asked in the focus groups.

Table 1: Correspondence between the research questions and the structure of the questionnaire used to guide the focus groups

RQ	Guide of questions for focus groups
RQ1. What defines a social media influencer and what characteristics do adolescents take into account to classify them?	− Do you follow famous people/influencers on social media? − Who do you follow? − In your opinion, what is an influencer? Relationship with brands − Have you seen the influencers you follow promote products on their social media platforms? − Why do you think influencers promote brands? − What do you think about influencers promoting products and brands while you're watching their content? − Have you ever heard an influencer talk about a new product and then done some research about what the influencer said? Or is the information the influencer provides you with enough? (Situation presented using an example mentioned in the conversation.)
RQ2. What gratifications do adolescents obtain when consuming content generated by social media influencers?	− Why do you follow them? − Do you interact with the influencers you follow? − Do you trust what the influencer tells you on social media? Why? − Do you think influencers exaggerate or change things about their experience to make their posts more appealing?

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Procedure

The information analysis process is presented below:
- Phase 1. Literal transcription. The recordings of each focus group were transcribed verbatim.
- Phase 2. Identification of dimensions. The research team read the transcripts and reached a consensus on identifying the dimensions based on the scientific literature reviewed in this study.

– Phase 3. Categorisation process. The transcripts were reviewed once again, and the statements were sorted into categories based on the previously established dimensions defined for this study. The content analysis of the transcript was carried out using NVivo 12 Plus program (Boyatzis 1995).

The process used to categorise the proposed themes can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Categorisation process

RQ	Dimension	Categories	Description	Example
RQ1. What defines a social media influencer and what characteristics do adolescents take into account to classify them?	Conceptualisation of the phenomenon of social media influencers among teenagers	Defining characteristics	Content creators; number of followers; collaborations with brands	"They spend their days on social media creating content that resonates with their audience and attracts followers, as this is how they earn their income." (FG7, girl, 8th–9th grade, middle SES.) They inspire others to adopt similar behaviours, purchase their products, and take an interest in their lifestyle. (FG12, girl, 12th–13th grade, middle SES.)
		Typology of influencers according to minors	Classification of influencers based on two factors: their professional trajectory and the social media platforms on which they create content	"It depends on the person; I may be less likely to trust an influencer who constantly does four collaborations a day, compared to someone like Rafa Nadal who has faced real problems and been in the news. In his case, I have greater trust because I know he has overcome challenges through his actions." (FG6, girl, 12th–13th grade, higher SES.) "An influencer is not the same as a YouTuber. While a YouTuber is someone who regularly uploads content to YouTube, an influencer can be found across various social media platforms. For example, many influencers on Instagram do not upload videos to YouTube and focus primarily on that platform." (FG12, girl, 12th–13th grade, middle SES.)

| RQ2. What gratifications do adolescents obtain when consuming content generated by social media influencers? | Gratifications of following influencers among teenagers | Needs
− social needs
− information needs
− entertainment needs
− other needs | Motivations (social, informational, entertainment) driving the consumption of Influencer content among this age group | "Influencers often share dance videos and offer recommendations for various products or services. For example, during quarantine, I followed a celebrity's social media account and noticed that fans frequently recommended movies or TV shows in the comments section. It was a great way to discover new content and ultimately led me to watch something new." (FG10, girl, 8th–9th grade, low SES.) |

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Sample

A total of 62 adolescents from various regions of Spain participated in 12 focus groups, each comprising 5–6 members. The sample was recruited with the assistance of schools. To organise the focus groups, two filter criteria were established: the age of the adolescents and their socio-economic status (SES), the SES of the educational centre was determined, considering its type (private, subsidised or public) and geographic location, which was employed as an indicator of the socio-economic level of the minors' households (Andrino et al. 2019). Based on the academic year, four age categories were created, which included 11 years old, 12–14 years old, 14–16 years old and 16–17 years old participants. This approach provided a preliminary indicator of the socio-economic level of the households the adolescents came from (Andrino et al. 2021). Based on these criteria, the schools were segmented into higher level (income of > €30,000), medium level (€11,450–€30,350) and lower level (< €11,450), according to statistics from the National Institute of Statistics (Andrino et al. 2021). This two-fold segmentation was established because it was considered that the age of the minors and the socio-economic context of their families could impact the level of critical digital competence among adolescents (Smahel et al. 2020).

We reached out to schools across Spain that matched the three different profiles (private, subsidised and public) and had a suitable location to comply with the specified filter criteria. We explained the project to the directors and/or course instructors, who acted as intermediaries to contact the parents of the adolescents. The final decision on whether to allow their daughters and sons to participate in the study was made by the parents. Although the two-step contact process slowed down the sample selection process, it was considered necessary to segment the student profile and avoid using the ineffective cold-calling technique in research involving this age group.

Table 3 presents the distribution of the focus groups according to two defined filter variables.

Table 3: Total number of focus groups held

	Participant grade	Socio-economic profile of centre			
Age	Grade in Spain	Higher	Medium	Lower	Total
11–12	6th grade	1	1	1	3
12–14	7th–8th grades	1	1	1	3
14–16	9th–10th grades	1	1	1	3
16–17	11th–12th grades	1	1	1	3
	Total	4	4	4	12

Source: Compiled by the authors.

We selected a total of 17 schools to participate in the study, representing different regions of Spain and encompassing a variety of school types, including private, subsidised and public schools. These schools were chosen based on their socio-economic status (SES), which was determined by their type and geographic location. Six schools were classified as being at the higher SES level, at the medium level, and three at the lower level, to ensure that the sample was representative of the country's reality (north, south, centre, east and islands). The schools facilitated access to the 62 adolescents who comprised the final sample and participated in the focus groups. Of the 62 participants, 25 were boys and 37 were girls. These were distributed across four different age groups: 26% of ages 11–12; 21% of ages 12–14; 29% of ages 14–16 and 24% of ages 16–17. Participants of different ages were not mixed in the focus groups. The socio-economic level of the neighbourhood was assigned by the location of the schools: 20 adolescents belonged to the higher level, 22 to the medium level, 20 to the lower level (see Table 4).

Table 4: Grade and socio-economic level of participants

Grade	SES	Girls	Boys	Total
7th grade	Higher	1	2	3
	Medium	4	2	6
	Lower	3	4	7
8th–9th grades	Higher	4	1	5
	Medium	2	2	4
	Lower	4	0	4
10th–11th grades	Higher	5	2	7
	Medium	1	5	6
	Lower	1	4	5
12th–13th grades	Higher	4	1	5
	Medium	4	2	6
	Lower	4	0	4
Total		37	25	62

Source: Compiled by the authors.

This project involved several ethical issues to consider, especially regarding the participation of adolescents in the fieldwork. Therefore, prior informed parental authorisation was obtained, which was supervised by the Universidad Internacional de la Rioja Ethics Committee, that financed and reviewed this research project and approved the report.

Results

Definition: What is a social media influencer?

The adolescents interviewed identified three key requirements for a social media influencer: first, the profile must generate and share valuable content on social media; secondly, it must have a considerable number of active followers; and it must engage in product promotions. Interestingly, all interviewees, regardless of age, or socio-economic level, spontaneously mentioned that social media influencers sell products and attempt to persuade their followers of the benefits of those products. Therefore, it is not surprising that for them being a social media influencer is a viable profession for financial gain.

Define them through the content created

The adolescents associated the word "influencer" with someone who worked on social media and posted content for financial gain, regardless of their occupation: "They're on social media all day long creating content that people like and so people end up following them because that's how they make money" (FG7, girl, 12–14 years old, medium SES). Although the adolescents immediately assigned social media influencers a commercial role, they did not define them solely by their relationships with brands, but by their constant presence on the social media platform. In general, they saw them as content creators who aimed to influence the audience by sharing content: "They influence other people to do similar things, buy their products, look into their lifestyle" (FG12, girl, 16–17 years old, medium SES).

The adolescents also stated that what social media influencers shared was not always true: "You have to know that everything [the influencer] tells you is not true" (FG11, boy, 11–12 years old, lower SES). Younger adolescents said that shared interests were enough to trust social media influencers' recommendations on topics such as video games: "If they have the same interests as us, then I do [trust them]" (FG1, boy, 11–12 years old, higher SES). However, credibility was not always essential: "I follow him because I like to see what he wears, new things, and because I like the style. I like what he does, so I follow him. Even though he has a fake life and all that, it's because I also like his content" (FG2, girl, 12–14 years old, higher SES). Their appreciation of shared content was more important than the influencers' credibility. Social media influencer's likeability and engagement were also very important factors, although the adolescents also expressed a sense of distrust towards them.

The adolescents evaluated the shared content based on the time and effort the social media influencer invested in producing it. They recognised that uploading content alone was not enough, as the quality of the content was essential. As one participant stated: "Right now, being an influencer has become quite fashionable, but it's one thing to upload edited videos … and a very different thing to upload unedited four-minute videos and things like that" (FG 11, girl, 11–12 years old, lower SES). Therefore, the quality of the content had to be high enough to demonstrate the influencer's investment in time, effort and knowledge.

Define them through the number of followers

One of the most common ways among participants of defining social media influencers is to check the number of followers they have. This quantitative feature has become the measuring stick for determining if someone is a social media influencer or not. "They are people with the capacity to reach many people and it's usually related to a special talent" (FG12, girl, 16–17 years old, medium SES).

According to the interviewees, physical attractiveness and beauty were key features for attracting followers and were seen as comparable to developing any other skill. "If you're able to reach a lot of people, you're an influencer, either because you're pretty or handsome, or because you have or are developing a special talent" (FG12, girl, 16–17 years old, medium SES). These attributes were seen as the deciding factors for having the greatest reach on social media. "It's not easy [to have followers] unless you're a model or something, or you're pretty or handsome, but the best place to attract followers is on TikTok" (FG8, boy, 11–12 years old, medium SES). The adolescents perceived aesthetics to be a crucial factor when social media influencers presented themselves.

Define them through their brands collaborations

In terms of the influence of recommendations on product and services, the older adolescents interviewed said that they searched for different opinions and used their own criteria when deciding a purchase, but they expressed some vulnerability and scepticism towards the products recommended and the behaviour of the social media influencers they liked the most. For example, one participant said: "There was one influencer who said, 'Wow! I love this make-up product'. And she was wearing it and everything, and said it looked great and everything. And then I checked, and she was using a beauty filter as well. So, I was really surprised because, if she was saying that the make-up was great, why was she using the filter? So, yes. I was very surprised" (FG5, girl, 14–16 years old, higher SES).

The older adolescents in the study associated the social media influencers' behaviour and the needs of their audience with the product they promoted. They naturally linked with the content their followers expected as one participant noted: "It depends a lot on

the kind of content the influencer makes ... a boy who only drinks energy drinks will be sent energy drinks to drink and sponsor because he has a specific audience" (FG12, boy, 16–17 years old, medium SES). The adolescents not only recognised the commercial value of the social media influencers but also understood the importance of the affinity that must exist between the influencer and their audience.

The adolescents spoke candidly about the commercial aspect of social media influencer activity and considered product promotion to be a defining characteristic of the term. As such, they excluded certain people they followed from the influencer category because they did not meet this requirement.

The classification

The interviewees considered the professional and personal trajectory of social media influencers, as well as the social network on which they most frequently publish content, as important factors in classifying and determining their typology. These aspects also relate to and justify the influencers' recommendations, including their authenticity, practicality and credibility.

Social media influencer as a profession

During the interviews, it was interesting to discover not only classified social media influencers based on their fame and impact on social media but also differentiated them according to whether they had gained their popularity through their profession or social media activity. As one participant pointed out: "Even football players are becoming influencers, so they also sponsor many sports things" (FG8, boy, 11–12 years old, medium SES). The adolescents further emphasised that those who regularly post content on social media, are on their way to becoming influencers. For example, one interviewee stated: "I would consider influencers to be people who regularly post content on social media" (FG2, girl, 12–14 years old, higher SES).

The adolescents valued celebrities who had gained their popularity through their profession before social media, such as singers, actors and athletes, as authorities. They believed that the celebrities' life story and experience provided credibility to their online endorsements. As one participant said, "It depends a lot on the person. I don't trust an influencer who's made it a profession and does four collaborations a day as much as I trust Rafa Nadal, for example, who had a real problem and who was in the news and everything, so I say, 'OK. I trust him', because I know that it happened to him and he solved it with that" (FG6, girl, 16–17 years old, higher SES). The adolescents recognised the importance of verifying the authenticity of social media influencers' recommendations by examining their offline behaviour. They understood that celebrities' online persona may not always align with their real-life actions and used this as a way to assess their credibility. The interviewees displayed greater scepticism towards social media influencers who owed their popularity solely to social media. For instance, one

interviewee stated: "If I see that she's an influencer who works full time on this, well, I might not trust her as much as someone who has no need to share it" (FG6, girl, 16–17 years old, higher SES). In both cases, the adolescents were focused on confirming authenticity of what they saw, particularly the participants between 16 and 17. As a result, native social media influencers did not generate as much trust. Viewers could not verify these details through other channels like they could with social media influencers with a known profession, which incited greater trust.

Importance of the social media platform and the content posted

One approach that the adolescents commonly used was to distinguish social media influencers based on the platform where they shared content: "A YouTuber is not the same as an influencer. A YouTuber is just someone who regularly uploads content to YouTube, but there are many influencers on Instagram, for example, many people who don't upload videos to YouTube, but focus much more on that platform. They're also influencers" (FG12, girl, 16–17 years old, medium SES). The adolescents also did not usually associate YouTube content creators with the term "social media influencer". They acknowledged that "there are YouTubers who are influencers and YouTubers who are not influencers" (FG2, boy, 12–14 years old, higher SES).

TikTok content creators were evaluated based on their ability to create impactful posts and generate new trends, particularly in the realm of dance. According to one participant: "All you have to do on TikTok is watch a celebrity or one of your idols dances, and you can learn that dance and start doing it" (FG10, girl, 12–14 years old, lower SES). The participants also distinguished between a YouTuber and a social media influencer and referred to those who posted on TikTok as TikTokers. As one participant put it: "I don't see her as an influencer. I see her as a TikToker" (FG9, girl, 16–17 years old, lower SES). Participants in the study reserved the term "social media influencer" for individuals who used Instagram. As one participant explained: "A YouTuber is just someone who regularly uploads content to YouTube, but there are many influencers on Instagram, for example" (FG 12, girl, 16–17 years old, medium SES). Instagram was perceived as a platform that prioritises the influencer's image over the content they share, whether it be a story, video game, challenge or trend.

Once the adolescents acknowledged the influence content creators had on them, they began to recognise the differences between social media influencers based on their characteristics. They made this distinction when evaluating the effects that posted content had on their feelings and behaviour as one participant noted: "An influencer who helps people with depression or whatever is not the same as an influencer who just dances" (FG3, boy, 12–14 years old, lower SES). By assessing the impact of influencers' posts on the audience they could differentiate them, as another participant says: "There's another YouTuber I really like who doesn't upload video games. He uploads soccer videos … I really like them. They're the ones I watch now, the ones that give me inspiration to maybe play soccer or do something" (FG11, boy, 11–12 years old, lower SES).

Gratifications adolescents sought from influencers

Younger adolescents, between 11 and 14 years old, sought closeness and interaction with celebrities. They looked to connect with influencers who shared their interests and values, as one participant explained: "In the end, you're the one who chooses an influencer because you supposedly like the same things and what she shows is supposedly in line with your tastes" (FG9, girl, 16–17 years old, lower SES). Adolescents were aware of their ability to curate their social media feeds and sought out profiles that were compatible with their interests to ensure that they saw content that matched their preferences. The study participants recognised that social media users choose who to follow based on their individual needs and interests. As one participant said, "It also depends on the person, for example, my little brother loves Legos and loves Star Wars and he follows Lego influencers and everything. On the other hand, my mother, who likes healthy cooking, follows influencers who cook healthy food and things like that" (FG5, girl, 14–16 years old, higher SES).

The adolescents' experience on social media was dynamic, and they reported frequently following and unfollowing social media influencers based on the content they shared. As one participant said: "You see that she's going on a trip somewhere, so maybe I'll follow her while she's on that trip and then unfollow her. It's more so I can see the content she has on her profile at that moment" (FG6, girl, 16–17 years old, higher SES).

Although identifying with the social media influencers they followed was a basic requirement for the adolescents, once that criterion met, they followed influencers as a form of entertainment and distraction. For instance, male participants reported enjoying watching video game commentary, as one participant explained: "He also plays the video game I like the most, which is *Fortnite,* and when he makes comments, I'm entertained and watch how he plays" (FG11, boy, 11–12 years old, lower SES). Sharing interests with the social media influencer remained a crucial factor in their decision to follow them. Social media influencers provided entertainment for adolescents both on and off social media because their recommendations, advice, and trends were incorporated into the adolescents' daily lives. As one participant said: "They have a lot of dances, and they also recommend things. You can log on to any celebrity's account and, during lockdown, for example, I used to log on to a celebrity's account and there were always fans in the comments recommending a film or a series and it was very cool, because you ended up watching it" (FG10, girl, 12–14 years old, lower SES).

For many adolescents, social media influencers served as newscasters, providing a window to reality. As one participant explained: "They give you fun facts. I follow one that sometimes talks about politics and he's very funny. I have a TikTok for every topic I like" (FG5, girl, 14–16 years old, higher SES). The study participants sought humour as a fundamental and relevant attribute when consuming content, regardless of the subject matter, including politics. This demonstrated that the principle of entertainment took precedence over other factors. Participants signed up for and followed various accounts to satisfy their individual tastes and needs. Another reason adolescents followed social media influencers was to stay informed about the influencer's personal interests without intermediaries: "I follow quite a few rappers because, within music, rap is not very

mainstream, so that's where I find out what topics are being discussed, what songs, who's releasing albums and things like that, and I find out mostly through Instagram, which is what I mainly use it for. There are actors too and some that make me laugh and not much else" (FG12, boy, 16–17 years old, medium SES).

Social media influencers were a fundamental part of the adolescents' online experience, and they expressed interest and curiosity in learning more about them beyond what was presented on their profiles. Some adolescents even followed social media influencers who exposed other influencers. As one participant expressed: "It's a person who reveals scams by different companies and who focuses on people who do things like try to fool their followers on social media, for example. I think that, for me, I'm really interested in things like that because I like to read and acquire information on all those kinds of topics" (FG3, boy, 14–16 years old, lower SES).

Those participants who had hobbies or other extracurricular activities mentioned a certain educational intent in viewing social media content shared by experts. Their interests that linked them to social media influencers provided personal enrichment and self-benefit, as they reported viewing certain influencers to resolve their concerns and doubts on specific topics and to learn from them. As one participant explained: "Once I needed to buy a specific kind of paint, so what I did was to see which paint was most recommended by the artists (and therefore YouTubers) I liked the most, so I used them as a reference" (FG12, girl, 16–17 years old, medium SES). Some of them followed specialised social media influencers because they were authorities in their respective disciplines, making them valuable sources of information on aspects of their extracurricular lives. As one participant said: "They can give me advice about what I'm interested in, about certain hobbies I have or sports videos, for example. I play badminton as a hobby and watch videos of professionals playing to learn new techniques" (FG4, boy, 14–16 years old, medium SES).

For adolescents, anything social media influencers did was subject to being reproduced and shared among peers, creating opportunities for socialising on and off social media. Dance proposals, for example, served as a kind of social glue, providing a reason for socialising. As one participant said: "Some do dances and I like how they dance, and I get ideas for me and my friends. Or some because ... they're fashion designers or hairdressers and I get ideas for when I dye my hair ... I get ideas from each one of them for myself and there are some that, for example, day after day upload videos to raise your self-esteem, so to speak, and it kind of, in a way, makes the public feel good about these people" (FG3, girl, 14–16 years old, lower SES).

Differences based on age and SES

The age, and socio-economic status (SES) of participants highlighted differences in their opinions and positioning regarding social media influencers. Although some differences have been mentioned earlier, it was generally found that the age and SES variables were inversely related. Adolescents with lower income tended to be less interested in social media influencers than those in higher socio-economic groups. For example, students

between 11 and 12 years old from lower socio-economic backgrounds were less attracted to the online world and less interested in social media influencers than their peers in the same grade. As one participant explained: "Well, I don't follow anyone. I usually watch videos. I usually watch AuronPlay or Ibai who react or play a video game" (FG11, boy, 11–12 years old, lower SES). The level of income earned by social media influencers from their online activity was a variable that was more important to higher-income adolescents and became less important as the interviewees got older.

Younger adolescents were increasingly drawn to profiles that were more focused on social media and became famous through their online activity, such as Charlie D'Amelio, Rubius, Wismichu and AuronPlay. However, participants between 14 and 16 years old tended to follow individuals who were famous for activities beyond social media, such as singers, athletes and actors, including Elsa Pataky, Rafa Nadal, Millie Bobby Brown and Will Smith. This shift in preferences may be related to the fact that adolescents between 11 and 14 expected a more intense and personal relationship with social media influencers.

Figure 1: Influencers followed by adolescents by age
Source: Compiled by the authors.

They valued the number of followers social media influencers had and appreciated when influencers responded to them directly through comments and private messages. As one participant explained: "It's cool that they respond to you if you've been following them for a while, but even if you've been following them for a little while, still, it's cool that they respond to you because, if you follow them, it's because you like what they do" (FG7, girl, 12–14 years old, medium SES). However, these feelings of admiration for social media influencers tended to diminish with age, and other variables became more important.

Adolescents were more interested in seeing real aspects of influencers' lives, perhaps because it was easier for them to identify with them.
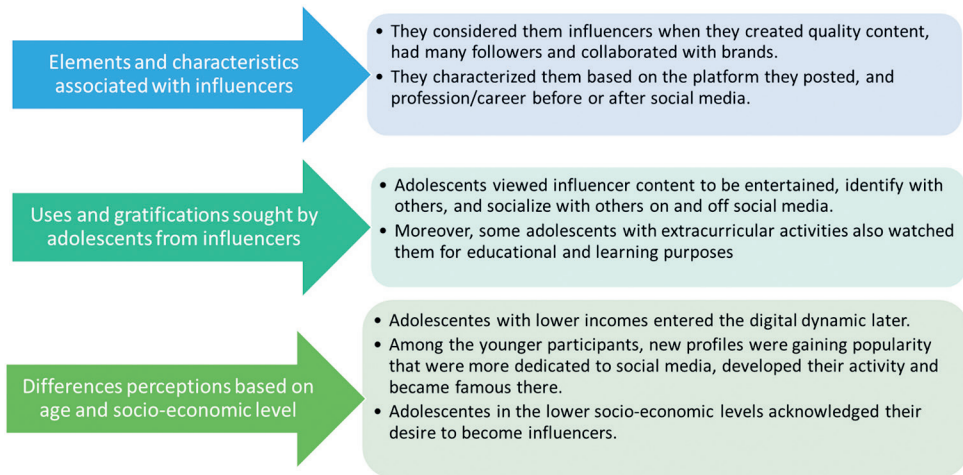
The main results are summarised in Figure 2.

Elements and characteristics associated with influencers	• They considered them influencers when they created quality content, had many followers and collaborated with brands. • They characterized them based on the platform they posted, and profession/career before or after social media.
Uses and gratifications sought by adolescents from influencers	• Adolescents viewed influencer content to be entertained, identify with others, and socialize with others on and off social media. • Moreover, some adolescents with extracurricular activities also watched them for educational and learning purposes
Differences perceptions based on age and socio-economic level	• Adolescentes with lower incomes entered the digital dynamic later. • Among the younger participants, new profiles were gaining popularity that were more dedicated to social media, developed their activity and became famous there. • Adolescentes in the lower socio-economic levels acknowledged their desire to become influencers.

Figure 2: Adolescents' considerations about influencers
Source: Compiled by the authors.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand how adolescents perceive social media influencers and identified three essential characteristics: constant activity on social media, significant number of followers and brand collaborations. While social media influencers share many characteristics with celebrity endorsement, as the ability to create and transmit authenticity, credibility and trust (MOWEN et al. 1981; PETTY–CACIOPPO 1980; PETTY et al. 1983; AUDREZET et al. 2020; DJAFAROVA–RUSHWORTH 2017; LIM et al. 2017; SILVA et al. 2021), they also possess new characteristics that arise directly from the social media platforms on which they post their content, such as the number of followers they have. Adolescents were aware of the significant impact that social media influencers had on their daily lives and recognised that they were often influenced by their recommendations. The capacity of social media influencers to influence the behaviour and decisions of their audiences is akin to that of opinion leaders (SCHEER–STERN 1992; LOCKWOOD–KUNDA 1997). However, in this case of social media influencers, their potential to influence is not based on specific knowledge or talent but on their ability to relate to their audience capacity (GALEOTTI–GOYAL 2009; HARRIGAN et al. 2021; PILGRIM–BOHNET-JOSCHKO 2019).

Although there were some similarities in the adolescents' understanding of the role of social media influencers, one significant difference emerged. For adolescents, credibility was not a necessary trait for social media influencers, unlike the opinion leaders

proposed by Katz & Lazarsfeld (2006). On the contrary, adolescents were aware that social media influencers often fabricated or exaggerated their posts. However, this did not result in any penalty, such as unfollowing them, because adolescents followed social media influencers for entertainment purposes, rather than credibility.

The importance of entertainment in this age group's affinity for the content or platform where the social media influencer posted cannot be overlooked. As other research has shown, entertainment was crucial in retaining the attention and interest of the audience on social media. Any interruptions, such as persuasive messages or insipid comments, were perceived as obstacles by the adolescents, making the online experience sluggish (Feijoo et al. 2023; Kadekova–Holienčinova 2018; Sádaba–Feijoo 2022; van Dam – van Reijmersdal 2019).

The attraction that adolescents felt towards social media influencers was based on the parasocial relationship that could be established between them. It is important to understand this relationship in order to fully comprehend the role that social media influencers play in the lives of young people. It is important to note that participants between 11 and 14 years old saw social media influencers as closer figures (Meyers 2017), leading to a more intense parasocial relationship. As a result, they desired greater interaction with social media influencers compared to adolescents between 16 and 17. Participants between 11 and 14 often had more intense parasocial relationships with social media influencers and expected greater interaction from them than older adolescents. Therefore, it is important for influencers to manage expectations regarding response frequency to avoid triggering frustration. Additionally, the friendship-like relationships that adolescents formed with social media influencers contributed to the belief that anyone can become a media figure (Silva et al. 2021). Technical elements of the platforms used by social media influencers such as talking to a camera, liking comments and sending direct messages enhance this sense of closeness and contribute to the creation of a parasocial relationship between the influencers and the adolescent.

There are great challenges from a social point of view as adolescents are consuming in a regular way the content produced by social media influencers. On the one hand, to assure that this content is adequately identified when commercial interests are present should be a priority for responsible brands and companies (Zozaya–Sádaba 2022); on the other hand, media and advertising literacy efforts should be improved to properly include the particularities of digital and mobile consumption and of social media influencers content.

Limitations and future lines of research

The present study provides valuable conceptualisations and characterisations of adolescents. However, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding, future research should also include children of younger age. The use of the focus group technique limits the sample size, and the qualitative nature of the method means that general conclusions cannot be drawn from the results. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the sample size in this study was limited and the conclusions drawn are based on the inter-

pretations of the participants, which may not be representative of the broader population of adolescents. Authors did not encounter any issues related to conducting the focus groups online since participants had held classes online due to the pandemic. Therefore, future research should strive to include a larger and more diverse sample to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Additionally, it would be beneficial to explore the source effects and psychological impact effect that social media influencers have on adolescents' self-concept and perception of their environment. Further investigation into the parasocial relationship between adolescents and social media influencers would also be valuable. Besides conducting the focus groups, the authors designed the focus group guide, facilitating the task of interpreting the results.

Conclusions

The study confirms that adolescents are highly receptive to the commercial recommendations, advice, image and lifestyle shared by social media influencers. The criteria used to classify each social media influencer included the platform where they posted the most, the type of content they produced, the products they promoted and their professional background or experience prior to social media. Especially for older adolescents, the background of influencers becomes relevant for following them, while teens aged 11 to 14 are particularly interested in those content creators who are exclusively dedicated to social networks.

The participants valued feeling a sense of identification or inspiration from the profiles they followed, but entertainment remained a fundamental requirement for all social media influencers without exception. While entertainment may be the primary reason for following social media influencers, credibility also played a crucial role, especially when adolescents sought content related to specific topics such as sports, hobbies, etc. In fact, recommendations from influencers who are considered specialists in their fields can be highly persuasive for this age group. The study concludes that adolescents, regardless of age, did not consider credibility as a key factor when following or validating a social media influencer. Rather, they viewed them as entertainers who exaggerated their experiences to promote products; younger participants tend to view social media influencers as a universal source of entertainment, providing access to humour, controversy and gossip, and often develop a sense of closeness with them. Girls tend to follow influencers to discover new trends, while boys tend to explore current affairs, particularly in the areas of technology and video games.

Social media influencers possess some of the traits of conventional opinion leaders, such as the ability to sway opinions, beliefs and behaviours regarding personal appearance, purchasing options, etc. For influencers who have experience beyond social media, their background is a crucial component of their influence on the consumption choices of their audiences which aligns with source perception theories concerning the credibility of social media influencers. This point underscores the significance of the trajectory of social media influencers in relation to the credibility of their influence.

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