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"I'm not sure how they make money": How Tweens and Teenagers Perceive the Business of Social Media, Influencers and Brands

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Abstract

Young people are active participants in the digital environment, in which they find opportunities but also face challenges and risks. One challenge is the non-transparent nature of the relationship between digital influencers and brands, which renders influencer marketing more effective but exploits the vulnerability of those unaware of its persuasive intent. Another challenge is understanding the nebulous business model of algorithmic social media platforms which operate based on trade-offs between users' data collection and advertising. Our study aims to understand to what extent tweens and teenagers from a Portuguese cluster of schools understand these complex relationships. We combined a survey of 429 participants between 10 and 17 years old (5th to 9th grades) and four focus groups. Our findings reveal that tweens and adolescents display satisfactory advertising literacy regarding the relationship between influencers and brands but reduced awareness about the commercial nature of social media platforms.

Keywords: teenagers, social media, platforms, brands, influencers
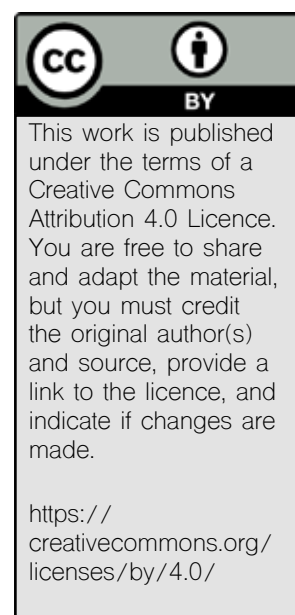
Introduction

Today's youth digital culture is profoundly affected by the political economy of digital technologies marked by the platformisation of the internet (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Platformisation can be defined as "the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms" (Poell, Nieborg & van Dijck, 2019, p. 5). Platforms such as YouTube or Instagram do not produce or own most of the content they host, but they co-opt regular users to become producers that feed their content and data into a datafied and commodified environment (Stehling et al., 2018).

Thus, understanding how the main digital media platforms work, with their underlying algorithms, data collection and filters, is a fundamental challenge that young people face to engage critically with digital technologies. It is also very important to recognise the relationship between brands and influencers (Buckingham, 2009; Potter, 2014; Livingstone, 2016).

Aware that young people start facing the challenges posed by today's complex and often unclear digital environment early on, sometimes without being provided with the necessary knowledge and skills to cope with them, our research sets out to uncover how tweens and teenagers in Portugal navigate this digital landscape and to what extent they understand the intricacies of the relationship between social media platforms, influencers and brands.

Tween is an expression used in marketing to describe the age range from 8 to 12 years old as a market segment. Their behavior is seen as uniform and characteristic, as they are transitioning from childhood to adolescence (be "tween") (Prince & Martin, 2012). We are adopting this terminology because our work also deals with the relationship between youngsters, influencers and brands, therefore they are consumers both of social media and digital content, and also of brands, products and services.

Social media platforms and digital influencers

Social media were recognised for bringing about a profound shift in communication, as they enabled media users to also become content producers and broadcasters. These technological networks, based on peer-to-peer connections and user-generated content, brought about a process of participatory cultural convergence, in which users became prosumers (Jenkins, 2006). However, social media have also radically changed since they first emerged. The content hosted on them became so overwhelming that these platforms took on an algorithmic nature, selecting, filtering and personalising content for each user, based on data collected from their previous behaviour. Also, many of

these emerging platforms underwent mergers and acquisitions, begetting media conglomerates whose business model utilises the vast data collected about their users to sell targeted, personalised and effective advertising. These media conglomerates function based on the processes of datafication and platformisation, as they are infrastructural platforms upon which many other specific platforms operate (for example, Uber relies on Google Maps) (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018).

Social media platforms intensively encourage their users to become credible content creators (Bakioğlu, 2018), "rewarding them economically for promoting themselves" (Raun, 2018, p. 100). As a result, in the space of a few years "digital influencer" became a job title recognised not only by marketing companies and academics but also by the public at large (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016).

This term can be defined as content producers "who accumulate a relatively large following through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles", while at the same time "monetising their following by integrating 'advertorials'" (Abidin, 2015, n.p.). Influencers usually specialise in a specific topic such as fashion and beauty, food, fitness, travel, health or gaming (Hudders, de Jan, de Veirman, 2020). They can be divided into five categories: celebrity influencers (the only ones whose fame lies outside social media), mega-influencers (more than one million followers), macro-influencers (between 100,000 and one million followers), micro-influencers (between 10,000 and 100,000 followers), and nano-influencers (fewer than 10,000 followers) (Campbell & Farrel, 2020). In recent years, they have become central to the economic imperatives of social media platforms (Bakioğlu, 2018).

Digital influencers are shaped by promises of visibility on social media, but also by a high level of precariousness due to the unpredictability of markets, industries as well as platform features and algorithms (Duffy, Pinch, Sannon & Sawey, 2021). In the context of such instability, they promote a consumerist discourse using strategies and logic from commercial brand culture to attract attention measured in numbers of subscribers, views and "likes" (Banet-Weiser, 2011). On one hand, these strategies have contributed to the recent professionalisation of content producers because they respond to the social media business model and consequently to the needs of marketers and advertisers to communicate commercial messages to target audiences (Hou, 2019). Brands have also learned to select the most beneficial partners for their influence marketing strategy, considering criteria such as "brand suitability", "brand friendliness" and "brand risk/safety", drawing on big data to make their own assessments (Bishop, 2021). These criteria and selection processes pressure emergent influencers to conform to brands' norms and preferences, in order to become professionals, or to maintain such status. On the other hand, digital influencers have had to negotiate the tension between appearing

authentic and at the same time being strategic in their approach to followers in order to appeal to advertisers (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021).

The digital world results from an intricate interdependency between agents, algorithms, and platforms (Cotter, 2019). The author explains that influencers and brands consider strategically and instrumentally how ever-changing algorithms work in order to play "the visibility game". Influencers in particular seek self-promotion (Klug, 2020) and rely on followers to maximise the reach of their content (Wang, 2020). One of the strategies that influencers use is embracing the aesthetics and purpose of each platform, contributing with their creativity but also remixing and mashing up content and trends (Bresnick, 2019). Another tactic, studied by Bishop (2019), is strategically creating content that performs well regarding "algorithmic visibility", engaging in unethical practices such as using clickbait and "algorithmic gossip". The author further studied the emergency of a new player in this market - "algorithmic experts". They are intermediaries between influencers, brands and platforms, who "teach creators to be complicit with YouTube's organizational strategies and business models" (Bishop, 2020, n.p.).

Influencers share common characteristics in three areas: personality (competence, expertise, personal branding, knowledge of social media platforms), social relations (ability to manage and nurture social relations and discussions in a trusted manner, to be connectors and to exhibit openness to messages), and expressive ability (capacity to regularly create and distribute interesting digital contents) (Locatelli, 2020). Their self-presentation techniques include micro-celebrity tactics, a communicative practice in which social media users behave as public personas to be consumed by peer users (Senft, 2013; Hou, 2019, Marwick, 2015; Marwick & Boyd, 2010). Thus, "micro-celebrities must signal accessibility, availability, presence, connectedness, and, perhaps most importantly, authenticity – all of which presuppose and rely on some form of intimacy" (Raun, 2018, p. 100).

In this context, Abidin (2015) calls attention to the specificities of the parasocial relations between influencers and their followers (mainly youths) in what the author calls perceived interconnectedness: the impression that influencers are constantly sharing aspects of their personal lives, invitations to followers to interact with influencers and to contribute to the curation of content from informal polls, and to improve the content through solicited feedback. Young people feel close to and understood by influencers: followers send affectionate messages and praise influencers' performance while seeking exclusivity, interaction and guidance. They also exhibit interest in products and brands that influencers promote and rarely criticize commodification (Jorge, Marôpo & Nunes, 2018).

Several studies demonstrate that younger generations form their opinion on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram since influencers on these

social media are perceived as trusted sources of information (Jorge et al., 2018; Eurointelligence, 2019). Balleys, Millerand, Thoër and Duque (2020) maintain that YouTubers act as mediated mirrors because teenagers see them as "real" and familiar, as amateurs with passions, as having similar experiences, problems and interests and as everyday companions. Maclsaac, Kelly and Gray (2018) say that online presentation of the self is very important to youngsters and that they emulate celebrity culture to be popular and to achieve an elevated social status among peers.

In this context, Zuboff (2019) is particularly concerned about users, who often are oblivious to and unaware of how this digital world operates, in spite of being essential to it. Thus, our study sets out to explore how pre-teens and teenagers in Portugal perceive the dynamic between social media platforms, influencers and brands, and whether they have the necessary advertising literacy to fully comprehend it.

The advertising literacy of tweens and teenagers

Advertising literacy corresponds to the ability to identify and understand the persuasive intent of promotional media content (Šramová, 2014). Research points to the interval between 8 and 12 years old as the time when tweens start to be able to develop this ability. Development Psychology frames this vulnerability of younger children to advertising as part their normal development, as they need to expand their context beyond their first sphere of socialization, the family, to develop critical skills that will allow them to understand how media, and particularly advertising, work (Buckingham, 2009). This means that younger children are particularly vulnerable to advertising, which has become a concern as children are increasingly exposed to media and promotional content since young age. In addition, findings reveal that many teenagers face shortcomings in advertising literacy as well (Šević, N., Šević, A. & Živković, 2017).

The digital world is particularly prone to "grey areas" when it comes to promotional content, as strategies of content marketing and influence marketing often have an intentional lack of transparency. Digital influencer is a recent career that is based on the thin, blurred line between organic content and sponsored content, and the promotional intent is often hard to spot (Hudders, van Reijmersdal & Poels, 2019). The vulnerability of tweens and teenagers to influence marketing is further exploited by the frequent lack of proper identification and disclosure of sponsorships, partnerships and agreements between influencers and brands (van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019). There have been several calls for regulation on this matter, and legislation has been approved recently in many countries (van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019).

Nevertheless, another aspect that enhances this vulnerability is the algorithmic nature of the social media platforms (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018). On the one hand, tweens and teenagers know that social media platforms select content for them but frequently believe that the

goal is presenting them with content that they will like. Most of them are unaware of the criteria embedded in algorithms, and of the commercial exploitation that underlies them (Sweeney, Lawlor & Brady, 2021). Digital influencers, by tailoring their content in order to perform better on these platforms, often use unethical strategies, such as clickbait, which also reinforce the vulnerability of children and teenagers (Bishop, 2020).

The vulnerability of tweens and adolescents to influencer marketing is further reinforced by the parasocial bond (Wang, 2020) that is formed and nurtured between them and influencers that they follow. The communication of digital influencers is close and intimate, as they reveal their daily routines, share their opinions and views, and often interact with their followers (Abidin, 2015; Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Consequently, followers feel as if they truly know them and consider them as close friends. This leads to enhanced trust and willingness to support them. Wang (2020) found that when tweens and teenagers do identify the promotional nature of influencer content, they are sympathetic to influencers, recognising that they are doing what is necessary to succeed in their careers (a career that many youngsters also aspire to). Buckingham (2015) notes that advertising literacy does not fully protect young consumers from consumerism. In addition, van Dam and van Reijmersdal (2019) concluded that youngsters dislike disclosures that interrupt or affect the quality or flow of digital content. They also evaluate influencers who display disclosures as more trustworthy, but de Jans, Cauberghe and Hudders (2018) found that influencer content with disclosures has less influence on the purchasing intent of followers when compared to promotional content without it. In addition, Lou, Ma and Feng (2021) observed that influencer content with disclosures is less shared by followers, leading to a decrease in eWOM. Kay, Mulcahy and Parkinson (2020) studied the case of micro- or nano-influencers, content creators that have narrower reach but a higher level of trust and influence, and found that their followers consider them more informed about what they endorse, more attractive, and more influential, regardless of their willingness to disclose their relationship with brands.

Research about the relationship between influencers, followers and brands struggles to map a moving target, as the landscape of social media platforms changes continuously. Ethical concerns stand out from research, particularly when considering the '3 Ps framework'. The adaptation of Children's Rights (UNICEF's Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) to the digital age is based on the rights to protection, participation and provision – provision being the key to allowing the reconciliation of protection (instead of restriction or exclusion) and participation (Livingstone & Third, 2017; Lievens, Livingstone, McLaughlin, O'Neill & Verdoodt, 2018).

The business model of these platforms relies heavily on data collection and advertising, thus influencers and brands struggle to adapt

to their algorithms (Cotter, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). In this sense, understanding how the main digital media platforms – grounded in algorithms, data collection and filters – function is a challenge essential to young people acting consciously, critically and autonomously in such an environment (Livingstone & Helsper, 2006).

Our study intends to uncover the advertising literacy of teenagers in Portugal regarding social media platforms' business model and influencer marketing. The goal is to better understand how they are navigating the opportunities and challenges of the digital world.

Materials and methods

Research questions

Aiming to determine to what extent tweens and teenagers understand the business of social media, digital influencers and brands in a Portuguese context, our study addresses the following research questions:

> RQ1: How do participants perceive the business of social media platforms?

> RQ2: How do participants perceive influencers and their relationship with the brands on social media?

> RQ3: What is the advertising literacy of participants regarding influence marketing on social media?

Research design and methods

This article reports on part of a broader project entitled "Information Skills for Young People in the Digital Age", aiming to understand how young people (students of the 2nd and 3rd cycles of education, between the ages of 10 and 17) cope with digital media in Portugal.

This study applied the mixed method, following a sequential design (Creswell, 2014). The mainly quantitative data collection technique applied was a survey (it also included two open-ended questions), and the qualitative data collection used focus groups.

The survey was divided into four main topics:

> 1) digital practices (devices, online activities, smartphone use, social media use);

> 2) knowledge about digital platforms (business model and digital influencers);

> 3) online information (search and sharing of news, analysis of sources, awareness about national and global current events, misinformation and fake news);

4) sociodemographic data.

The survey was carried out in November 2020, online but in a classroom context, and we obtained a total of 429 responses. In this article, we will report mainly on the data related to topic 2, which included 7 questions covering the participants' use of social media, their relationship with influencers, and their understanding of the business model of these platforms. Among these, two questions were open-ended: one asked them to insert the names of their three favourite influencers, justifying their choices, and the other asked them to explain how the social media platforms make money. We decided this was the best format for asking about these topics because we didn't want to limit the answers with pre-given options. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics from Microsoft Excel and the open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), grouping similar results in categories.

Concerning qualitative work, we conducted four focus groups with a total of 27 students, following a semi-structured script designed to enhance knowledge about digital practices, media literacy and the critical ability of students to cope with algorithmic platforms, influencers and misinformation online. The discussions lasted, on average, one and a half hours and took place face to face in schools. Two discussions took place in November 2020, two in December 2020 and the fifth was only possible in April 2021 due to the lockdown in Portugal between January and mid-April following the outbreak of Covid-19, during which schooling was remote. These encounters included activities to elicit discussion, namely:

i) each member building an individual digital profile on a template, indicating the main devices, activities and social media in their digital practices;
ii) a game with keyword cards that each participant could pick as an advantage or disadvantage of social media.

Figures 1 and 2 present, respectively, examples of the material used for building the social media profiles, and for the game with keyword cards.

When conducting qualitative work with children and teenagers, the particularities of these age groups should be considered in order to minimize biases and ensure ethical compliance. Children and teenagers look at adults as authority figures, and an extra-effort must be made by researchers to ensure their voluntary participation, and to prevent biases such as researcher-awareness and research-pleasing desirability (Bayle-Tour-Toulou & Badoc, 2020). Using ice-breaker activities helps build empathy and trust between participants and researchers, which are key for collecting rich and genuine data. It is also a strategy for optimizing data collection in the short time during which researchers are able to hold the attention of young participants (Brito & Dias, 2017). In addition, younger participants may not have a high level of language

Figure 1 Template for "The Digital Profile" ice-breaking activity

Figure 2 Keywords for eliciting focus group discussion

domain or self-expression capability, and a game such as the keyword cards can support them in their self-expression. Regarding the choice of focus groups instead of individual interviews, this was also an ethical choice, as young participants may feel intimidated when alone with a researcher, and it more comfortable for them if they are surrounded by their peers (Brito & Dias, 2017). We are aware that group discussions may entail social desirability bias or pressure for social conformity (Bayle-Tour-Toulou & Badoc, 2020), which can be minimized by using individual data collection tools, such as the individual digital profile, and then discussing that data in the group. In our focus groups, it was more common that each participant expressed their own opinion and added ideas to what had been said by others previously, rather than engaging in a debate of opposing views. The data was also analysed through thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), using the software MAXQDA.

Our research adhered to strict ethical guidelines. All participants were informed that their participation would be voluntary, anonymous and only for research purposes. We obtained signed consent forms from both the tweens and adolescents who participated, as well as from their legal representatives. We respected their willingness (or lack thereof) to participate throughout the process.

Sampling and sample
The research took place in a School Cluster within the scope of a partnership with the authors' host institution. It is in a city in the southwest of Portugal, with around 120,000 residents. This School Cluster has six schools: three preschool and 1st cycle, one 1st cycle, one 2nd and 3rd cycle, and one 3rd cycle and secondary, with a total of 135 classes and about 3,000 students. Student ages range from 4 to 17 years old.

The students who participated in the research are from the 2nd and 3rd cycle school and from the 3rd cycle school. The Directorate-General for Statistics of Education and Science (DGEEC) of the Ministry of Education uses the percentage of students without "Ação Social Escolar" (state support for families with economic needs) and parents' average years of education to characterise a school's socioeconomic context. In the 2018-2019 school year, this School Cluster had 26.5% students who qualified for "Ação Social Escolar", with parents having an average of 11.61 years of schooling. The national average of 2nd and 3rd cycle students qualifying for "Ação Social Escolar" is 39.4%, and in Portugal only 43.78% of the population has completed 12 years of schooling. Considering the national context, this School Cluster has a positive socioeconomic context.

The survey was answered by 429 students between the 5th and 9th grades, between 10 and 17 years old, corresponding to 54% girls and 46% boys. Figure 3 characterises the students
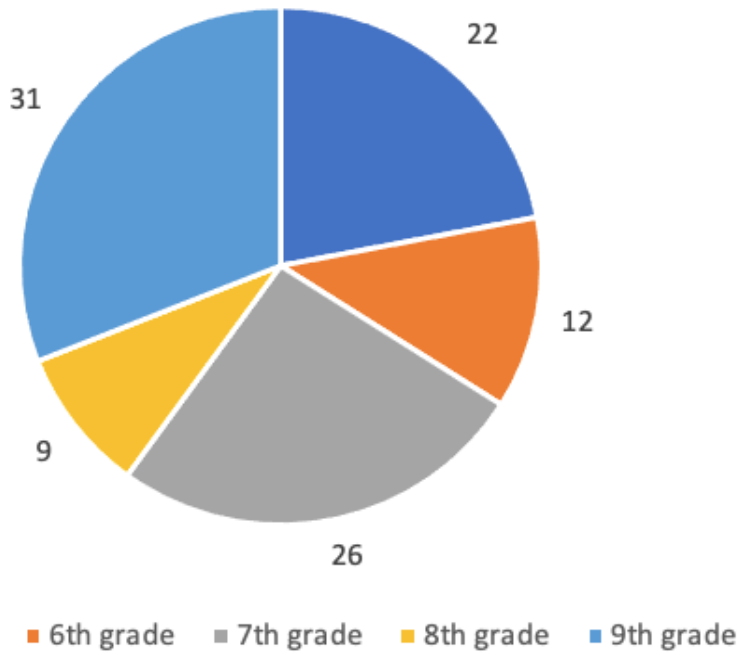
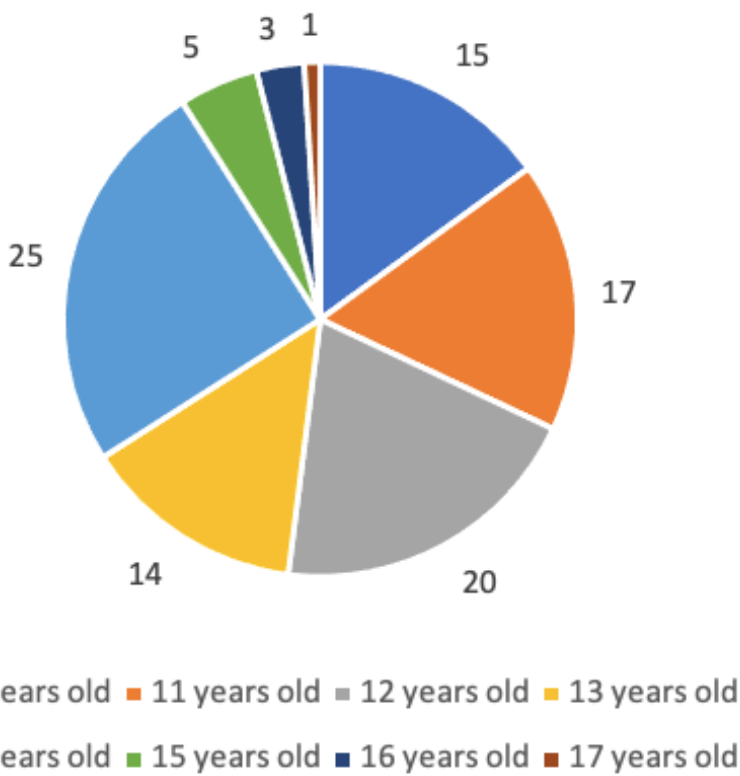**Figure 3** Percentage distribution of the surveyed students, according to school year

Figure 4 Percentage distribution of the surveyed students, according to age

according to school year, and Figure 4 according to age. The focus groups included a group of 27 students, also ranging from the 5th to the 9th grades. This purposive sample of students was generally balanced concerning gender and age, as shown in Table 1.

School Grade	Alias	Gender	Age
5th/6th	Kate	Female	12
	Verónica	Female	11
	Cherry	Female	11
	Luana	Female	10
	João	Male	11
	Ana Lídia	Female	12
7th	Dériki	Male	12
	Dobby	Male	12
	Jéssica	Female	12
	Kevin	Male	12
	Reis	Male	12
	Lorena	Female	12
8th	ReiNogueira07	Male	13
	Filipa	Female	13
	Muitofixe	Male	13
	Deadpool	Male	13
	Crocodilo_bebe	Male	16
	Krimz	Male	13
	TP7	Male	13
	PolarTuga	Male	13
9th	Alexandra	Female	16
	Emily	Female	14
	Monteiro	Male	14
	Pereirinha	Male	15
	Nike	Male	15
	Juju	Female	14
	Raphau	Male	15

Table 1 Constitution of the focus groups

Results

The digital practices of Portuguese youth

The Portuguese digital landscape is, aligned with the global panorama, rich and complex. About 84.2% of the Portuguese population are internet users, and among these, 76.6% are active social media users, spending, on average, 2 hours and 18 minutes on social media daily (Hootsuite, 2021). YouTube and Facebook are the most popular platforms, with 92.1% and 88.2% of active users. Instagram and TikTok are the platforms currently growing in Portugal, representing 89.6% and 33.2% of the Portuguese internet users, respectively. Twitch and Telegram are emerging as the platforms that grew the most in Portugal in 2021 (Marketst, 2021). The time the Portuguese children and teenagers spend online increased significantly during the mandatory lockdown periods regarding Covid-19 (Dias & Brito, 2021). In general, this younger audience seeks entertainment and socialization online, and reports shortcomings when coping with online risks, highlighting fake news, cyberbullying, and internet addiction (Ponte & Batista, 2019). The traditional media discourse also emphasizes the risks over the opportunities, and feeds concern among parents and educators (Milosevic, Trültzsch-Wijnen, Mifsud & Dias, 2018). While efforts have been made to enhance media literacy in school curricula, particularly by the Portuguese Ministry of Education, as part of the profile that this entity established for the "student of the 21st century" (Sousa et al., 2017), research consistently reveals the need to invest more and earlier in the development of media literacy among children.

Looking into our sample, first we present a brief characterisation of the digital uses and practices of our survey sample. The most important device for the youngsters is the smartphone, owned by 90.4% of them. The main appeals of the digital world are socialisation and entertainment, but they also mention using digital tools to learn, study and search for information. As Figure 3 shows, girls prefer interacting on social media (77%), while boys dedicate more time to watching videos on YouTube (73%). Most youngsters – 89% – have at least one social media profile. The favourites are YouTube (particularly among boys – 22.6%), TikTok (particularly among girls – 20%) and Instagram.

Perception of the social media business

The majority of our survey sample – 75.5% – agreed that social media are a business. However, 25% were unable to distinguish how the relevant content producers on social media (influencers) and the companies who own these platforms make their revenues. In the focus groups, when questioned about how the "owners" of social media "earned money", the answers mentioned selling space and time for advertising, and brands sponsoring influencers for creating content – "It has to do with sponsorships, I think." (15-year-old boy, 9th grade) – but the participants failed to mention the collection and exploitation of user data. They were able to explain that influencers

attract brands according to the number of views and likes obtained with their content. They said these brands may offer them products, become their sponsors or even hire influencers to create content about them. In addition, they are aware that some social media platforms pay them sums according to the views and likes of their content.

When questioned about how the business model of platforms works, the participants in focus groups posited inaccurate explanations: "Maybe they earn money every time someone installs their app." (16-year-old girl, 9th grade); "If we download an app, and it doesn't say how much it costs, we are not robbed. I can't explain how it works." (14-year-old girl, 9th grade).

Only three open-ended survey answers across a total of 273 cited social media platforms utilising users' data to generate business based on selling advertising that is more effective and appealing to target groups:

> "Social media have a lot of information about their users and all the companies want information about their clients, so social media sell this information to other companies. Others also gain money with advertising and subscriptions." (14-year-old girl, 9th grade);

> "The owners of these companies [social media] earn money by selling the personal data of their users." (14-year-old girl, 9th grade);

> "They steal information from their users, using apps, and sell it for millions of euros." (14-year-old girl, 9th grade).

Unaware of how these platforms operate, youngsters also failed to mention their Terms of Service or concerns about their own privacy.

Perception of influencers and their relationships with brands on social media

The majority of our participants have a significant understanding of the business model that sustains digital influencers. In the survey, we asked them about their agreement with claims concerning what an influencer is. Thus, 54.8% agreed that "an influencer is a social media user that has many followers", and 41.7% agreed that "an influencer is a social media user that launches trends and fads". The first claim focuses on visibility (Pedroni, 2016) and popularity (Klug, 2020) and does not include any reference to how they obtain financial return on the content that they create and publish. Concerning influence, 61% of respondents agreed that social media influences the products that they buy or would like to buy. The claims that referred more directly to the commercial ramifications of digital influencers were selected by fewer respondents as 35.4% agree that "an influencer is a social media user that shares opinions about products" and 27.5% agree that "an influencer is a social media

user who is paid to post content about brands and products". Thus, for tweens and teenagers, being an influencer is more related to achieving visibility and popularity on social media and creating content about their lifestyle that might influence the consumption choices of their followers than with being a professional content producer whose income derives from advertising, digital platforms and contracts with brands.

The survey respondents were asked to name their top 3 influencers. We obtained a total of 164 different

TOP10	INFLUENCER	# OF MENTIONS
1	Felipe Neto	38
2	RicFazeres	23
3	Charli D'Amelio	22
4	Wuant	15
5	Addison Rae	14
6	Mafalda Creative	13
7	Cristiano Ronaldo	12
8	Renato Garcia	9
9	Billie Eilish	8
10	Franciny Ehlke	8

Table 2 Favourite influencers of our survey sample

choices and display the most frequently cited in Table 2.

It is interesting to note that only two of them could be included in the category of celebrity influencers (Campbell & Farrel, 2020) since they are well known outside the digital world – Cristiano Ronaldo is a globally famous Portuguese soccer player considered the most popular digital influencer in the world (Visual Capitalist, 2021) and Billie Eilish is an extremely popular singer from the US. The others are mega or macro influencers (Campbell & Farrel, 2020) Therefore, more frequently youngsters recognize as digital influencers those who have become famous exclusively because of their digital content over those whose celebrity is due to other activities. Although many of these digital influencers are active on many different social media, most of them started on YouTube (Felipe Neto, RicFazeres, Wuant, Renato Garcia, Mafalda Creative e Franciny Ehlke), while there are also digital influencers who recently emerged on TikTok (Charli D'Amelio and Addison Rae). Second, it is interesting to note that Portuguese youngsters follow mainly international influencers, mostly from Brazil (Felipe Neto, Renato Garcia and Franciny Ehlke) and from the US (Charli D'Amelio, Addison Rae and Billie Eilish). Only four in the top 10 are Portuguese (RicFazeres, Wuant, Mafalda Creative and Cristiano Ronaldo). Third, tweens and teenagers follow mostly teenagers and

young adults (only three of them are over 25, Felipe Neto, RicFazeres and Cristiano Ronaldo), revealing that they identify more with influencers whose age is closer to their own. Finally, among digital influencers who became famous due to their activity on social media, the content that they produce includes different categories of entertainment – games and humour (Felipe Neto, Wuant, Renato Garcia and Mafalda Creative), beauty and lifestyle (Franciny Ehlke) and dance (Charli D'Amelio and Addison Rae). After an exploratory analysis of the content, it is possible to state that they are usually presented in a personal and intimate way, as Balleys et al. (2020) describe YouTubers. In addition, we also highlight that products and brands populate the snippets of the daily lives that these influencers share with their followers in a very natural way. Most of the content that they create is light and fun, but some of these influencers have taken stands on political and social matters. Felipe Neto is a strong critical voice against the Bolsonaro government in Brazil, Billie Eilish positioned herself against Donald Trump in the recent US Presidential election and Charli D'Amelio uses a Black Lives Matter symbol on her profile photo on TikTok. This may be the first opportunity for children to come into contact with these important issues.

In the focus groups, the participants valued the entertainment that influencers are able to afford them and about two thirds of them claimed to consider them as role models (for lifestyle but also for moral guidance and actions). Besides being conscious about how digital influencers relate to brands and include them in the content that they produce and about the income they obtain from them, participants were also able to discuss aspects of their promotional action that they consider questionable, unethical or even incorrect. For example, five participants argued that influencers should not promote excessively expensive products deemed not to be worth the prices charged for them or which are not affordable to tweens and teenagers. Three disliked it when the titles of posts do not fully correspond to the content (serving as click bait). Two argued that digital influencers should not promote illegal activities for youngsters such as gambling platforms and investing in cryptocurrencies. Another two went further and argued that they should not promote products which are not suitable for the age range of their followers. However, they did not question the advertising itself, the fact that it may be excessive, or even its disclosure.

Advertising literacy and influence marketing
In general, when addressing media literacy, the focus group participants were concerned about addiction. Many admit to having had conflicts with their parents due to the time they spend online and having studied or slept less or not at all in order to dedicate more time to digital activities. Many consider that streaming platforms featuring series are particularly addictive, while boys mention gaming as more addictive, and girls allude to late-night conversations on social media or instant messaging.

An additional problem for girls, particularly younger ones, is feeling pressured to meet beauty standards, in spite of being aware of the digital manipulation of social media content:

> "I don't like social media such as TikTok and Instagram because I feel pressured to want to be like those people. Everything is too perfect, beautiful, and then I want to have a life like that and become upset, although I know it's not true." (10-year-old girl, 5th grade)

> "We want to be like those people, a lot of people develop eating disorders to become like those people and it's impossible because they're not real." (11-year-old girl, 6th grade)

Regarding advertising literacy, although the relationship between influencers and brands is relatively clear to youngsters, the relationship between influencers and social media platforms and between both of these and young people is much more nebulous. The latter are not aware of how their data is being collected and used to fuel the business model of these digital platforms and in turn to influence them yet again through personalised and highly targeted digital ads and content (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018). In addition, the participants in our focus groups did not mention the use of the hashtags #pub (the Portuguese equivalent to #ad) as a strategy to identify when the influencers are promoting brands, nor did they reveal any knowledge about the regulatory framework applicable to influence marketing.

Being aware of the relationship between influencers and brands and being able to spot influencer marketing even when the promotional intent is not disclosed, and even being aware that the way influencers portray themselves on social media is strategically built and digitally manipulated, does not mean that young users are free from influence:

> "We do not know how influencers are on the inside. We only see their lives on social media, and we must remind ourselves that what they show us, to influence us, might not be how their life really is, in a world where there is no internet." (10-year-old girl, 5th grade).

Finally, about one third of the focus groups participants held digital influencers accountable for their position as role models for youngsters.

Discussion

Our study reiterates the importance of the digital world for the youngsters. About 90% of our respondents own a smartphone, which they received on average at 9 years old (transitioning from the 1st cycle in school to the 2nd cycle). Also, 89% have social media profiles and many of them are younger than 13 years old, the minimum age recommend-

ed by digital platforms for their use. The survey also demonstrated that the most popular social media are YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, used daily by the majority for entertainment and socialisation purposes.

Nevertheless, this omnipresence of digital technologies is considered overwhelming by many of the focus groups respondents who say they struggle with excessive use of digital media, which they consider addictive. This 'addiction' is framed in individual terms, as a problem that they must address on their own. Thus, the role of digital media in this challenge they face is ignored since they manifest an unfamiliarity about the platformisation of the Internet (Poell et al., 2019) and its algorithms created to encourage as much attention time as possible.

Although the majority of our sample recognise social media as a business (75.5%), with a few exceptions they are not capable of explaining the business model of social media platforms based on the co-option of data and content produced by users to attract advertisers. In addition, we note that one quarter of respondents do not recognise the financial interests behind social media. The worldwide domination of few technological companies is not a topic of concern for tweens and teenagers, nor the inherent ethical problems of their business model concerning the appropriation of users' data or the exploitation of influencers' labour. As Zuboff (2019) points out, the false notion predominates that they are simply enjoying a vast diversity of platforms, utilities and content free of charge.

Thus, one of the main findings that arises is the participants' lack of awareness about the political economy of the digital environment in which they are immersed. A problem that must be addressed as essential to promoting media literacy. As Livingstone and Third (2017) argue, the technology should not be seen in a deterministic and asocial way because actors and institutions are shaping the Internet under their economic and political interests.

As far as digital influencers are concerned, the results show that they act to the respondents as mediated mirrors, to use the term from Balleys et al. (2020), due to several characteristics. First, the influencers are primarily associated with those who gain popularity through social media, thus the youngsters devalue the economic dimension of the content producers' activity. Although the participants demonstrate a significant degree of advertising literacy, when it comes to how influencers collaborate with brands and become professional digital content producers, they seem to consider their revenues mainly as a natural and fair consequence of their successful work. In such a way, influencers are seen mainly as amateurs rewarded for their passions. The promotion of brands by influencers is not criticised as such. In addition, 61% agree that social media influences the products that they buy or would like to buy, alerting us to the fact that advertising literacy does not imply an immunity against influencer marketing.

Second, the influencers are someone that they can identify with, learn with and have fun with. The vast majority of the participants in the survey were able to cite preferred influencers. Most of them are teenagers and young adults (close in age to their followers), particularly from Brazil and the US and less frequently from Portugal. The youngsters also explained why they chose them. They value the influencers for the entertainment they provide, as role models and as a way to learn about topics they are interested in. On the one hand, these common identity markers (Balleys et al., 2020) seem to favor the identification process between followers and influencers, increasing interest in the latter lifestyles and products they promote. On the other hand, it seems to lessen potential criticism due, for example, to the lack of transparency in sponsored content.

Third, although the participants see the digital performance of influencers as different from real life, they like to follow their staged everyday life on social media and praise their authenticity. During the focus groups, it was possible to observe the participants' feeling of proximity to many of those content producers leading to the development of a parasocial bond (Wang, 2020), which could reinforce the power of influence marketing.

Even though the youngsters do not question the commodification of the influencers' performance, the focus groups' respondents mentioned several practices that they consider wrong or unethical. These were mainly connected to influencers' business strategies such as promoting illegal activities like gambling and cryptocurrencies, sale of products that they consider to be of poor quality or inappropriate for the target audience or showcasing unrealistic lifestyle and beauty patterns. A few also point to a lack of important topics such as climate change and political matters in what they refer to as the "superficial" discourse of influencers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a lack of media and advertising literacy concerning the nature and operation of algorithmic social media platforms, since most of our respondents believe that influencers are the only ones doing business on social media and overlook the commercial nature of the platforms themselves. They recognise the fact that there is advertising on social media, but fail to understand how its effectiveness is dictated by the collection of user data and commercial exploitation.

Our research points to the crucial necessity of including this topic in media literacy. Media educators should promote a better understanding of the process of platformisation of the internet, calling attention for its opaque algorithmic system based on the co-option of users' data and content. Regarding digital influencers, teachers ought to address their increasingly professionalized relationship with the platforms and digital marketing agencies, their strategies to get and maintain followers and their relationship with brands, taking into con-

sideration the regulatory framework applicable to influencer marketing.

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Declaration of interest statement

The authors have no potential competing interests to report.

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