

THE SOCIAL MEDIA PHENOMENON: HOW INFLUENCERS SHAPE ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOR

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Article Info

Keywords: Social media influencers, adolescents, brand promotion, influence, digital age

Abstract

Social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as potent agents for brand promotion and awareness targeting specific demographics, notably adolescents. This study investigates the multifaceted influence of SMIs on adolescents' behaviors, attitudes, and communication patterns. Brands strategically collaborate with SMIs to tap into the popularity they hold among adolescents, utilizing them as conduits for product promotion and content dissemination. The captivating reach of SMIs among adolescents is attributed to their significant online presence and the resonance of their content with the young audience.

Drawing upon research that underscores the extensive impact of digital influencers on adolescents, this study sheds light on the profound connection adolescents establish with SMIs. Beyond entertainment, these influencers are sought after for guidance, companionship, and advice, shaping the relational dynamics between adolescents and SMIs. This dynamic interplay is deeply ingrained in adolescents' daily routines, thereby warranting a comprehensive exploration of its dimensions. Notably, the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* has recently dedicated a volume to elucidate the pervasive role of SMIs in the lives of children and adolescents.

The study's findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of how SMIs wield influence, particularly within the realm of adolescent behavior and decision-making. By examining the intricate relationship between adolescents and SMIs, this research offers insights into the evolving landscape of brand promotion and communication in the digital age.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Brands at all levels contract social media influencers (SMIs) to promote their products, services and mostly to generate brand awareness within a specific target audience. This has an important role in influencing adolescents in a variety of ways, mainly because SMIs are very popular amongst this specific age group (Double Click, 2006; Freburg *et al.*, 2011; Kalu, 2019). For example, brands often pay influencers to promote products or content that influencers create (Ryan, 2014).

Social media influencers attempt to impact all areas of their target audience's lives. Examples include, encouraging people to buy or use a particular product/service, using their influence to change habits, attitudes and behaviours including food consumption, lifestyle choices and even how a target audience communicate and the language they use (Ryan, 2014; Solomon, 2020). Research increasingly demonstrates that digital influencers seem to be a crucial influence in the lives of young people, firstly, because adolescents spend a large part of their time online and are therefore very much exposed in a range of ways to influencers' content. Secondly, adolescents increasingly relate personally with SMIs and turn to them not only for entertainment but also for information, advice, company and comfort. Thus, there is an ongoing and dynamic relationship between adolescents and SMIs that is reinforced on a daily basis and deeply integrated into the basic routines of adolescents' lives. The journal *Frontiers in Psychology* recently devoted an entire volume to this phenomenon entitled —*The Role of Social Media Influencers in the Lives of Children and Adolescents* (Frontiers in Psychology, 2020).

It is important to note that SMIs may influence adolescents in both arguably positive and negative ways, for example, motivating them to behave pro-socially or adopt healthier lifestyle choices as opposed to encouraging smoking, drinking, or even criminal behaviour.

This raises several important questions. Should we be concerned about the influence of SMIs on young people? Should this be a concern for the government? Should SMIs be regulated, registered, and policed? Should brands responsible for any perceived undue content be sanctioned in any way, and should such findings be made public? Whilst SMIs have undoubtedly had a profound influence on the lives of young people, it is not easy or arguably not even possible to fully quantify the extent to which this occurs and consequently the extent to which this may impact at a societal level.

The main objective of this literature review is to raise awareness within the marketing field about the influence of social media influencers on adolescents and how brands are promoting their products and content through social media influencers. Also, this paper relies on the literature review as a research method aiming to create a foundation for advancing knowledge, contrasting concepts, and outlining insights (Webster & Watson, 2002).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Teenagers across the globe have been using the internet and social media channels daily. Within the European Union (28 countries), 95% of the 16-19 year old population use the internet daily (vom Orde & Durner, 2020). A survey from EU Kids Online Project collected data in 19 European countries using a population of 25,101 young people ($N=25,101$) aged 9-16 years old and found that the time spent by children on the internet in Spain is about one to three hours per day, and from about two to three-and-a-half hours in Norway (Smahel *et al.*, 2020). In the same survey, 48% of young Polish participants stated that they had been exposed to hate messages recognised as potentially harmful content, whereas only 4% of those in Germany had.

Gen Z is the population that has spent more time in social media channels, about 4.5 hours a day on different platforms, according to a survey in the USA with 1,000 subjects ($N = 1,000$) between 13-39 years old. Generation Z in this survey is represented by subjects from 13-19 years old (Chaffey, 2021; YPULSE, 2021). This research was managed by YPULSE leader in youth research in New York (YPULSE, 2021).

Furthermore, the Digital News Report Ireland 2020, a study for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, depicts that Gen Z in Ireland is also increasingly using social media as their primary source for news consumption, growing by three percentage points in five years (Niamh *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, there is a higher level of social media use for news among 18-24 year olds, and smartphones are used by 71% of Gen Z as their main device for accessing news, and this has increased by 18% points over five years.

The internet and social media use have raised many ethical questions and issues mainly concerning adolescents' online safe protection within the digital environment. For example, problems in this age group might be regarding data protection, regulations, policies, addiction, exposure to harmful content, undue influence by influencers, internet use and parental control, bad dietary behaviour, mental health issues, increase of alcohol consumption, sexual and violent content spread online, and many other issues. Studies representing many of these issues can be seen in the research of (Coates *et al.*, 2019; E. Coates *et al.*, 2019; Hendriks *et al.*, 2020; Lou & HK, 2019; O'Neill, 2013; Qutteina *et al.*, 2019; Smahel *et al.*, 2020; Van *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, this review intends also to raise awareness within the marketing field about these ethical issues and highlight the benefits, challenges, and negative impact of social media influencers in adolescents' lives.

2.1 Social Media Influencers (SMIs) in Context

Postmodernity in the western world can be understood as a period in which capitalism drives society. After several transformations, such as the globalisation of markets, financial deregulation, flexible production methods and the emergence of new industries such as the services and information industries, consumption became the main driving force of postmodern society. In this period a new profile appears, who is assigned the role of consumer, with consumption assuming a central position in their lives (Powell, 2014).

Alongside postmodernity, the recent technological boom has given rise to a true digital culture, mainly based on consumption. The explosive growth of digital technologies has had enormous repercussions on the way companies have been strategically adding value to reach their customers, leads and users (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). The use of the internet also gave rise to social networks, which revolutionised how the world is connected and how people communicate and interact with each other. Predominantly, the new digital age changed the way young people build their relationships as well as how they consume and share information.

As the digital age has been transforming and developing, it has been gaining huge space and becoming a powerful tool in many areas, such as marketing and communication. In recent times, we have been facing a cruel pandemic that drives people to be incarcerated in their homes, avoiding physical contact, and therefore creating a scenario where more time is being spent on the internet, social media channels and consequently there is more exposure to all factors arising from this phenomenon.

More than ever, companies and brands are investing in digital strategies to be competitive and stay updated. The rise of social media networks such as Facebook and Instagram have enabled companies to find more targeted ways to influence people's behaviour through the use of social media influencers (SMIs).

Many researchers say that the SMIs exert an interference power over people, mainly shaping and transforming people's opinions, as well as influencing their purchase decision-making process or just influencing people to buy, exposing them to brands' logos and advertisements (Glucksman, 2017; Kalu, 2019). Some influencers have millions of followers and when they act on their massive number of followers, they have the ability to influence a large part of public opinion, transforming behaviours, changing attitudes, interfering in people's personality and identity and mostly giving rise to consumer products and creating brand awareness.

Ryan (2014), states that SMIs are the online opinion leaders. They harness the power of the web to extol the virtues of products and brands that they like, and equally to denigrate those they find unsatisfactory. It can happen through blogs, podcasts, forums, and social media channels. Therefore, they have the virtual ear of the online masses' (Ryan, 2014). According to Freburg *et al.* (2011), SMI is an independent third party supporter who shapes target audience attitudes through social media and other digital platforms.

Andy Warhol in 1968, anticipated that in the future, —everyone will be famous for 15 minutes‡ (Willett, 2010). However, he could not have predicted that a quick sweep up in Instagram or TikTok using specific algorithms could make thousands of babies, kids, adolescents, and adults famous (Greenspan, 2021). This fame is correlated to what is created and produced by SMIs, because the content will define which target audience, they are focusing on and their interest will generate conversions and followers. Therefore, it is a matter of monetisation and the generation of capital for brands.

The content produced is determined by the relationship of identification of their followers with the content produced by them (SMIs and Brands), that is when a company hires a digital influencer to check its content and its degree of influence. Thus, brands are aware of the power of influence of these people on the consumption behaviours of specific populations and that is why they use the marketing of influence to boost their business.

Accordingly, SMIs sell their image to influence people's consumption habits and thoughts through a process of presenting the self as a commodity, the subject as merchandise. This occurs through building a brand that, a posteriori, will be replaced by the exchange value of the author themselves. This is only possible because of the way society is organised to enhance the image and value of what is being sold as a commodity for its beauty and easy consumption (Nobre *et al.*, 2019).

Therefore, people read and listen to what they (SMIs) have to say; they value their opinion and trust their judgement (Ryan, 2014). Nowadays, there are many SMIs styles, focused on different aspects of daily living, such as travelling, fitness, lifestyle, cuisine, education, fashion and beauty etc. A report issued by Double Click (2006) entitled, —*Influencing the Influencers: How Online Advertising and Media Impact Word of Mouth*‡, helps to understand digital influencers and how to recognise them. The report included a list, and a person who strongly agreed to three or more of the following sentences can be defined as an influencer:

- They consider themselves expert in certain areas (such as their work, hobbies, or interests).
- People often ask their advice about purchases in areas where they are knowledgeable.
- When they encounter a new product they like, they tend to recommend it to friends and followers.
- They have a large social network circle and often refer people to one another based on their interests.
- They are active online, using blogs, social networking channels, websites, e-mail, discussion groups, online community boards, etc, to connect with their peers. (Double Click, 2006)

Arguably SMIs have already won the pivotal battle for the hearts and minds of online consumers (Ryan, 2014). In the end, it is all about consuming, it can be, imagery, information, data, time, advice, and products/services all of which can involve tangible and intangible consumption. This inevitably raises questions as to the impact such influence may have. The proceeding section will focus specifically on the impact social media influences may have on adolescents.

2.2 The Impact of SMIs on Adolescents

Adolescence is a stage of rapid and extensive physical, psychological, and biological change (Gray *et al.*, 2012). Personality tends to stabilise by the age of 30 and remain relatively stable thereafter (Terracciano *et al.*, 2006). However, during adolescence, personality, although still relatively stable, can be a little more flexible. Research using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) involving thousands of subjects shows that whilst

personality tends to stabilise by the age of 30, self-discipline is more common amongst those over 30 whereas thrill-seeking is more common in those under 30 (Solomon, 2020). Therefore, this predisposes adolescents to influence online and as adolescents today were born in the digital age this also predisposes them to have online experiences, in fact it is usual to find a higher number of adolescents following influencers as well as becoming influencers.

Adolescence originates from the Latin —adolescentia, meaning —a period of growth, of developing (Harper, 2020). It is characterised by the experience of passing from childhood to adulthood encompassing roughly the period from the 15th to the 21st year; or age 14 to 25 in males, 12 to 21 in females (Harper, 2020). Although it is important to recognise that the most profound changes occur during puberty and shortly after this. Adolescence is a period of changes in social roles and in the way the subject recognises themselves and is recognised.

The tendency of adolescents to identify with external groups appears not only as a search for identity but also as a search for similarity with peers, where they can find self-confidence and preserve their esteem, therefore there is a massive over-identification process, where everyone identifies with each other (Saidel, 2017; Turkle, 2015). Once a group has been joined, there is pressure to adopt and follow its habits and customs based on ideologies, myths, archetypes and values – it is important to highlight that these aspects and this process of identification can be compared with the creation of a brand personality, as the same features are involved in the development and the study of brands. In sum, adolescents have a higher propensity to interact with influencers associated with their identities, it is basically how they communicate and recognise themselves with their peers. Also, these communication and integration processes among peers identifying themselves with common themes are correlated to SMIs and how they spread their message through online channels. Creating content for a specific niche is based on a target audience and its characteristics relying on demographic and psychographic aspects, and adolescents by their nature are more susceptible to be influenced by specific topics particularly when they correspond with their identities, core personality or any group or individual for which they have positive regard. Typically, brands tend to contract SMIs based on their representativeness within the digital world and the degree to which they are correlated to their brand's personality and values, because the SMIs will be the brand's voice and image for thousands or millions of followers.

SMI is a growing industry, in 2018 Instagram reached 1 billion users and became one of the most important channels for advertising (Moore & Craciun, 2020). As a result, there was a boom in Google with searches for —influencer marketing (receiving an average of 61,000 searches a month (Brooks, 2019). In 2019 Instagram created the possibility for influencers to sell online through its own channel using ‘shoppable’ tags (Brooks, 2019). In the same year, the word —Influencer was officially added to the English dictionary. Nowadays, in 2020, the influencer —industry is deemed to be worth 5-10 billion USD (\$) (Brooks, 2019). It shows just how difficult it is to quantify what the real value and the real impact of SMI is. Based on recent research, Statista (2020) released a graph showing the growth of social media channels by active users. Facebook is still the leader in the market, with 2.603 billion users, followed by YouTube (2 billion) and WhatsApp (2 billion) (Clement, 2020; Statista, 2020; via Statista, 2020). Instagram as one of the most important channels for SMIs reached 1.082 billion, followed by the new trend Tik Tok with 800 million active users (Clement, 2020). These are the most popular social networks worldwide measured by the number of active users. This is a massive industry that seems to be only at the beginning of its growth and development.

Even though many young people spend a great amount of time online and on social media, a later report informs that a significant percentage of them, between 36% and 42% of Gen Zers and 31% of teenagers in the United States, hold undesirable attitudes towards online ads and adopt distinctive behaviours to escape from

advertisements (Media Kix, 2018, as cited in Lou and HK, 2019). The most impacted and susceptible to be influenced by SMIs is Generation Z, made up of those born from 1995 to 2010 (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Therefore, the most efficient way to reach this audience is considering social media influencers (SMIs) as a marketing strategy for brands. Indeed, Gartner (2019) found that an estimated 84% of millennials are likely to be impacted by social media influencers content leading them to make a purchase or be more susceptible to doing so.

Day-by-day more studies are being conducted in an attempt to understand those channels and their impact on society mainly related to young users and the influence of SMIs on their attitude, behaviour, personality, and identity. Those platforms are changing our culture and society itself. Due to a consistent imminent presence of social media networks within the lives of their users, social systems have a determinedly solid social effect mainly among vulnerable adolescents. A study using 256 ($N=256$) adults and adolescents found that adolescents are more susceptible to being negatively influenced on the internet than adults (Kraut *et al.*, 1998). The overuse of internet by adolescents for interpersonal communication was associated with larger reduction in communication with family members and friends. Also, it shows large rises of depression and loneliness amongst the adolescent group (Kraut *et al.*, 1998). Face-to-face contact with family and friends performs an important role in fostering interpersonal and social skills in adolescents (Saidel, 2017; Turkle, 2015).

The relationship of content created by SMIs could generate a parasocial interaction, a kind of intimate relationship between the influenced and the spokesperson. According to Gleason, Theran and Newberg (2017), as cited in Van *et al.* (2019) a parasocial relationship is associated with the construction of adolescents' identity (Gleason *et al.*, 2017).

Therefore, there are possibilities to associate SMIs as catalysts in interfering in adolescent's personality and identity formation as well as a potential to open discussion on how we can understand the degree of influence by SMIs.

Psychologists have been warning about the negative impact of social media on adolescents, mainly related to instant fame from a SMIs' point of view as well as the undue influence from SMIs on adolescents. Through social media networks, adolescents have become obsessed with their own image. As they are undergoing a process of physical and biological transformation, they can be confused or feel blinded by all the fame. If they are aware of it or not, SMIs are continually fighting to be seen and battling that threat of invisibility (Greenspan, 2021; Mahon, 2020). Specialists say this new wave of influencers are more likely to develop emotional issues than past eras of child stars (such as Hollywood stars), as their lives are always broadcast, and watched by thousands or millions around the world (Jumana, 2019).

In a world connected by social networks, it is common to notice a high number of users who show symptoms of depression and anxiety (Saidel, 2017; Turkle, 2015). This is compounded by the fact that there is often misinformation online as to the causes and the most effective means of tackling such issues, and the addictive potential of using social networks can lead the user to a situation of psychological vulnerability.

Released in November 2018, a study carried out by scientists from the Department of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania (USA), with 143 students ($N=143$), found that decreasing the time spent using social networks leads to considerable reductions in depression and loneliness (Hunt, Marx and Lipson, 2018). The research mentions that most publications suggest an intense comparison between the lives of others and the user's own experience (Hunt, Marx and Lipson, 2018). It leads people towards making comparisons between how their lives are and the lives of influencers in social media channels, or the perceived perfect reality they tend to show on social media. Thus, young people are not seeing _real life_ they are seeing a false and manipulated version of life.

Illustrating another scenario but complementing the above, a study from 2018 made by York College in Canada with 143 female ($N=143$) undergraduate students (initial sample) registered in an Introduction to Psychology course found that female adolescents who were inquired to associate with a post from somebody whom they perceive as more attractive had noticeably decreased levels of self-worth a short time later (Hogue & Mills, 2018). This happens because users trust in a seemingly perfect reality portrayed by SMIs, in addition to the imposition of unrealistic and often unattainable societal standards with respect to body image.

The 120 (90% sample) undergraduate female participants in the study were either instructed to discover on Facebook and Instagram a peer who they felt was more alluring, or a family member who they did not feel was more appealing and leave a comment (Hogue & Mills, 2018). Specifically —they felt worse about their own appearances only in the first condition, with peers, but not family. These young women felt dissatisfied with their bodies as well as —felt worse about their own appearance after looking at social media pages of someone that they perceived to be more attractive than them (Hogue & Mills, 2018). Hogue and Mills (2018) suggest that we should constrain our time on social networks significantly, and that reconnecting with companions and family in genuine life, is vital. Turkle (2015) discusses the above in multiple scenarios and highlights that there is an empathy gap among young people who have grown up emotionally disconnected while constantly connected to phones, games, and social media. Margaux (2016) concurs, arguing that adolescents can be affected by a lack of empathy and may even lose interest in having a personal contact.

Recent research focused on adolescents and young adults, found that social media influencers are promoting content related to alcohol and drinking, both by sponsoring particular brands and as the promotion of a lifestyle choice (Curtis *et al.*, 2018). The study assessed the interactions between young adults/adolescents' alcohol-related social media engagement and their drinking behaviour and issues (Curtis *et al.*, 2018). Engagement measures such as likes, comments, social shares, saved items, click-throughs, reposts or retweets in a specific platform were assessed. It aids assessing how content material is perceived via a specific target audience primarily based on the time they spend focusing on such material and reactions to what they share. In summary, the research shows —a statistically significant relationship and moderate effect sizes between alcohol-related social media engagement and alcohol consumption as well as —a greater alcohol-related social media engagement was correlated with both greater self-reported drinking and alcohol-related problems (Curtis *et al.*, 2018).

A recent study investigated alcohol posts from influencers on Instagram, as it is one of the most used social networks among SMIs. The first study among students (18-25 years) found most influencers (63.5 percent) had recently posted alcohol-related content (Hendriks *et al.*, 2020). Also, these alcohol posts were often shared by influencers related to this lifestyle cohort (Hendriks *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, while a reasonable number of alcohol posts (19.5 percent) clearly indicated an alcohol brand by SMIs in their most recent 100 posts, and a vast majority (63.5 percent) of influencers had at least one alcohol post (Hendriks *et al.*, 2020).

Considering, that those influencers have thousands and millions of followers, the outcome is a massive number of young people exposed to alcohol related posts, thus being susceptible to being negatively influenced, in this case to drink alcohol. As most of the influencers are lifestyle influencers, we can consider that they are promoting alcohol as part of their lifestyle, therefore popularising alcohol drinking behaviour, mainly among youths. This type of negative influence spread by SMIs is only one among many kinds.

With respect to food and diet, obesity is one of the most common issues related to global health and wellbeing. There is clear evidence that the exposure of children to the marketing of high-fat, sugar and/or salt (HFSS) foods and beverages leads to rising levels of obesity mainly being promoted in social media networks such as YouTube, Twitter and Instagram where children became a target audience for the food industry (World Health Organization,

2018). There is a huge concern as to how those social media networks are influencing children and adolescents' dietary behaviour. A recent study using YouTube videos towards children, revealed that at least one food or beverage cue was used in nearly all videos analysed in the research and less healthy food was more frequently displayed than healthy food (Coates *et al.*, 2019).

The principle of social learning states that the more children like a character the more likely they are to imitate their behaviour, for example, a social media influencer (Bandura, 2001). Exposure to an esteemed media figure, such as an influencer, promoting a food commodity or advertising a given diet will then foster these habits in children. A study investigating the effect on children's ad libitum snack intake of social media marketing of snack foods via influencer Instagram profiles, found that influencer marketing of unhealthy foods led to the immediate food consumption of these foods by adolescents and children, while there was no such effect on influencers promoting healthy foods (E. Coates *et al.*, 2019). One of the main reasons for that is the higher volume of advertising emphasising unhealthy food and poor nutritional quality food as well as the specific of targeting teens and adolescents. In the USA the food industry spends more than \$1.6 billion a year on this specific target audience (L. Harris J. K. Graff & L. Harris S., 2012).

However, it is important to state that we naturally crave fat, sugar, and salt as these were extremely difficult to find in the stone age, when we evolved into our current form. We needed to be very strongly motivated to eat such foods and to feel intense pleasure by doing so because there was massive risk involved in hunting for the foods that were richer in calories at that time. Now, such foods are plentiful, but we still have our basic stone age biological programming, making it easier to market such foods too because we are already primed to want them. It usually takes less persuasion to convince someone to eat unhealthily, engage in sexualised behaviour or in certain circumstances, even to engage aggressively, as these are all-natural inclinations that we all already have. That said, increased exposure to junk food for vulnerable young people does easily arouse interest in junk food in their minds driving them to ask their parents to buy it or sometimes purchasing it by themselves.

Therefore, there is a need to monitor how vulnerable young people may be exposed to unhealthy foods on social media channels as well as advertisements promoted by social media influencers (SMIs). We can argue that SMIs can change children's dietary behaviour or create an unhealthy food behaviour towards this vulnerable population. Most countries have not established policies in this regard and children have the right to health protection according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child established by the United Nations Human Rights signed by 194 countries (Bäckström, 1989). Article 24 of this convention states that children must have the highest attainable standard of health which means that countries who have signed this convention must —inform, educate, and support society in child health knowledge (Bäckström, 1989; NCD Child, 2020). According to Coates *et al.* (2019) food-marketing restrictions should be applied to new forms of digital marketing, particularly social media, on which vulnerable young people spend a lot of their online time. An efficient recommendation for this issue is stated in the study —*What Do Adolescents See on Social Media? A Diary Study of Food Marketing Images on Social Media* Qutteina *et al.*, (2019), as follows:

We highlight the spread of food norms on social media that encourage the overconsumption of non-core foods. Branded non-core foods are promoted via earned, paid and owned media marketing strategies by peers, influencers and marketers alike. Thus we call for reinforced food marketing regulations on social media. This is especially important in the case of paid marketing via influencers, who inconsistently disclose the paid marketing nature of the food messages they share. There is a need for stricter regulations to govern how influencers disclose food endorsements, including a consistent disclosure of every food message posted on social media. Disclosure also must be as clear and obvious to adolescents consumers as the food message portrayed (including for images

that show on a minor's timeline). Furthermore, disclosure could be coupled with advertising literacy to ensure that adolescents truly grasp the monetary motivations of paid influencers (p. 10).

Although researchers are increasingly highlighting the negative consequences of social media influencers, there has been a limited response from governments and regulatory bodies. This section explored the negative impact of SMIs on young people, such as depression, anxiety, excess visibility, susceptibility to undue influence regarding unhealthy dietary behaviour and alcohol. However, it is not possible to cover all harmful topics and the aim was to demonstrate that there exists a real possibility to be susceptible to undue influence and therefore to influence adolescents on their attitudes, behaviour, and personality development. Further research is recommended to identify and list potential harmful content promoted by influencers as well as the benefits.

2.3 Consumer Behaviour in a Digital Era Gen Z in Perspective

The buyer decision-making process could be defined as stages of consumer experiences before making the final purchasing decision. Marketers have developed a model used to define and analyse the buyer decisionmaking process and by following the model, marketers are able to develop activities aimed to consumers in all decision stages, such as evaluating and understanding phenomena generated by the internal and external influences that affected the final decision making (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012).

The decision-making process entails five stages, 1) problem recognition, 2) information search 3) evaluation of alternatives, 4) purchase decision – product choice 5) post-purchase behaviour (Lawson, 2010). However, these steps represent a cognitive decision-making process, which does not mean that all consumers will pass through this standardised process. Depending on the purchase decisions, some stages can be more important than others, could be more habitual or more affective or other situational factors can alter the process such as the time at which a decision is being made. In a general context, purchase final decisions are made automatically without obtaining much information, and other times they can resemble an around the clock job (Solomon, 2020).

According to Leo, Bennett and Hartel (2005), consumer features in decision-making can be measured and evaluated through an examination of consumer styles. There are eight different decision-making styles, as proposed by Sproles and Kendall (1986): quality-conscious, brand-conscious, innovative/fashion-conscious, recreation conscious, price-conscious, impulsive, confused by over choice and brand-loyal (Leo *et al.*, 2005; Sproles & Kendall, 1986). Therefore, an individual tends to choose the product or brand that somehow meets his/her self-image. Therefore, brands are often a way for consumers to express their identity, in addition to being a way for people to reflect what they want to be for others. In other words, the choice of a brand can be made based on what individuals want to project and represent in their social environment (Solomon, 2020).

Brands are on social media channels to influence and affect users' decision-making process. It is not different when we speak about Generation Z and all the digital influence behind their purchase. This group of individuals, born between 1995 and 2010, is shaking the world in an online and offline sphere (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Consumer behaviour regarding Generation Z is moving at a quick speed and changing mindsets, even though it is a challenging spectrum for marketers as they change as fast as technology trends'. They are now cultural leaders and digital influencers, capable of influencing purchase decision making as well as having the power to buy, they are target audiences, mainly because they represent 32% - 2.47 billion of the world's population (influenced and influencers) (Spitznagel, 2020). However, reaching those adolescents is not easy, even though strategies have been made to get their attention, mainly based on their similarities, such as social media influencers focusing on a specific topic and being representative for their young followers. For example, lifestyle is an important influencing factor. In this way, if a consumer's lifestyle is known, marketers can develop appropriate communication strategies and position their product to capture a specific target audience. Thus, conformity

between products, strategies and consumer knowledge allows marketers to influence consumer behaviours and attitudes by directing individuals' interest towards their brands (Deniz *et al.*, 2011).

Individuals consume products and brands to take advantage of symbolic properties as well as functional benefits (Hyatt, 1992). The consumer chooses products and brands to cultivate and preserve their identity or related to their personality traits, and some goods are capable of serving the consumer in this sense, as they have a symbolic value. Customers use products and brands as a way of communicating with others (Hyatt, 1992). This consumption is directly related to the use of goods in the development of self-identity. In other words, there is evidence that individuals use brands as a means of encoding what they intend to be and as a means of decoding other people's consumption practices (Solomon, 2020).

In the case of adolescents, this process can be more intense, as their personality and identity formation are in transformation. For example, adolescents may be searching for similarities, ideologies, and related identity in order to understand their place in the world, to make social comparisons and simply to satisfy a need to fit in and feel 'normal'. At the same time, adolescents do of course exercise independence and often this is in fact a central aspect of personality and identity formation in adolescence.

Young consumers will to a greater or lesser extent exercise personal choice and gravitate towards online stores where they learn about new styles from around the world via social media channels and young people will in turn spread their own content in social media channels (Ryan, 2014; Solomon, 2020). The ultimate goal is to have the personality of the consumer fully aligned to the brand's personality and much study and effort is often made to develop this linkage in order to enhance brands' performance. Brands personality is defined as the set of traits people attribute to a product as if it was a person (Solomon, 2020). Thus, the brand's personality is an important tool for brand management and marketing as a whole, because it is the job of marketers to develop traits that are long-lasting and, above all, distinct. It should be noted that brand personality is one of the most relevant components that influences and reinforces the consumer-brand relationship.

These adolescents have different roles when it comes to consumption: they are influenced by their purchases, but they are also influencers. They are influenced by social media influencers, by what they say on social networks or by celebrities who perform an SMI role. They also have a great power to influence, especially, their families, have a great ability to dictate trends and influence their purchases.

According to the study carried out by Nielsen (2015) - *Global Generational Report, How We Live, Eat, Play, Work and Save for Our Futures* - this generation has the following aims in life, and those aspects are very relevant to our consumer market and have attracted the attention of marketers:

- 1- make money (37%);
- 2- achieve a rewarding career (31%);
- 3- have a healthy life (29%);
- 4- spend more time with their families (20%);

In their free time, these children and young people spend most of their time connected to technological devices, mainly smartphones, and their preferred activities are: listening to music, playing online or accessing social networks (Nielsen, 2015).

Nielsen Global Survey on Generation Attitudes was conducted with more than 30,000 consumers ($N = 30,000$), they were interviewed in 60 countries in Asia Pacific, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and North America (Nielsen, 2015). Considering the number of people using the internet in each country and the age and sex of the sample, this sample is considered to be representative of online consumers. It has a margin of $\pm 0.6\%$ error. This Nielsen survey was based only on the behaviour of respondents with online access. Internet penetration

rates vary from country to country. Nielsen uses a minimum 60% Internet penetration or an online population of 10 million for inclusion in research (Nielsen, 2015).

First, it is necessary to cite that the consumer socialisation process influences consumer behaviour as well. It is through socialisation that individuals adopt norms and values that help their adaptation to social life (Solomon, 2020). Concerning consumption, it is from this process that individuals assimilate some skills, knowledge and attitudes associated with the purchase decision-making process that influence their behaviours as consumers. In other words, consumers learn how people behave and what principles are used at the time of purchase. Several agents influence the attitudes, behaviours and motivation of adolescents, specifically, active agents who intervene directly in their lives from an early age. During the primary socialisation process, which corresponds to the childhood period, the main players are: peer groups (e.g. friends and SMIs), the family and the media (e.g. SMIs, YouTube videos etc.) (Solomon, 2020). Therefore, consumer socialisation is almost exclusively carried out under the control of others' impact (Hota & McGuiggan, 2006). Agents of customer socialisation, such as parents, mass media and peers, are external forces that initiate children and teens, by assisting them in their positions as customers, guiding them to their first consumer experience and showing them attitudes towards their role in the marketplace as customers (Hota & McGuiggan, 2006).

Much of the information we receive every minute is related to offline and online advertising. Gen Z-ers have a certain type of barrier to getting advertising messages even though they have always been online. It is a generation who can easily detect whether advertising is important to them or not (Acoba *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, it is a generation that can be easily influenced by social media influencers and opinion leaders, who are present in their same reference group (Wielki, 2020).

In order to show how difficult, it is for advertisers to keep their message in front of them, a new Canadian analysis using data from Nielsen Digital Ad Ratings assessed Gen Z Canadians aged 13 to 17. More than 90 percent of impressions are missed while targeting Gen Z-ers (Acoba *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, less than one-in-10 impressions had an impact on Canadians' Gen Z-ers through those promotions (Acoba *et al.*, 2018). Advertisers must concentrate on two main goals: including Gen Z in their community efficiently and delivering relevant addressable content. That is where the social media influencers come in and their role in the market as influencers, promoters and content creators. Their main goal is to target Gen Z.

Nielsen's research recommends that brands, agencies and media companies are able to leverage their own first-party data assets and merge them with third-party data to create custom target segments (Acoba *et al.*, 2018). Brands and marketers can use these segments to find the right audience and convey their messages in the most appropriate context based on an audience's interests, purchase history, and prior engagement (Acoba *et al.*, 2018). Even though it has been challenging and difficult for brands to deliver their advertisement message to adolescents, it is still a field in development. For example, Facebook makes about 98% of its revenues in advertising, thus it daily keeps its eyes on consumers and recently it has been developing more private modes of communications than sharable modes. In contrast to other groups, the actions of generation Z reflects a major shift in the field of marketing (Wilson, 2020). This young population are consumers, advocates and entrepreneurs, and this group, while made up of very young people, should not be overlooked. These adolescents are more interested in digital content, more involved and conscious of the issues affecting them, offering their views on every topic naturally. The attributes that this generation expects from its benchmarks are time, choice and creativity. This does not imply that these characteristics are necessary to build a bond with the company (Commerce, 2019; Schlagwein & Prasarnphanich, 2014; Wilson, 2020). These individuals expect the minimum promised by brands to be certain features.

Although there are both positive and negative influences that SMIs can spread, perhaps one of the issues that can skew towards negative influences is that being an influencer is a new job, within a consumption market and society that expects influencers to work for their sponsor brands. Thus, as the main aim of many companies is to be profitable, many influencers may be pressured to promote unrealistic goals or represent themselves in an unrealistic fashion to promote a given brand and profit from doing so.

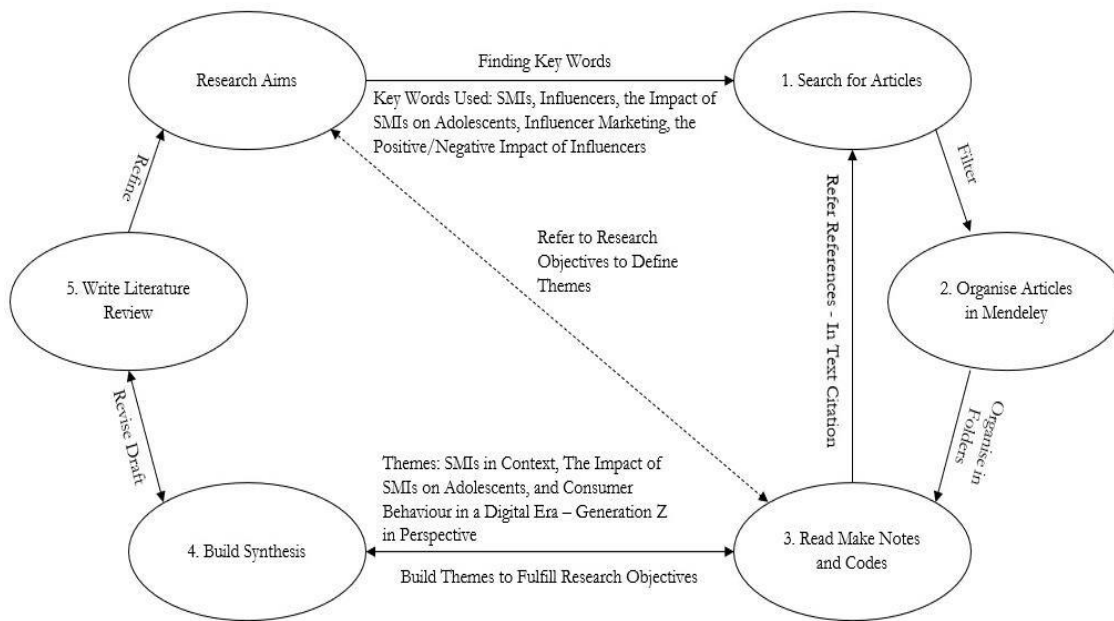
3.0 METHODOLOGY

This article relies on the literature review as a research method aiming to create a foundation for advancing knowledge, contrasting concepts, outlining insights, fundamentally reviewing the topics, and producing insights about the main themes (Webster & Watson, 2002). Also, this paper is sustained by the collection of secondary data through surveys, reports and reliable research projects.

The literature review comprised a regular search using electronic journal databases such as: ScienceDirect, Elsevier, JSTOR, Emerald, Springer, Sage, Research Gate, Google Scholar and Pubmed. Articles were chosen according to the following criteria: 1. Must be peer-reviewed; 2. The number of citations; 3. Relationship of the keywords and abstract with the topic covered in this paper; 4. The reliability and validation of research methods. Books were used to sustain the chronological events covered in the text and the definition of central concepts. Blogs and websites were used to complement these because topics related to social media are frequently published in these sources, mainly reports to collect secondary data. Additionally, blogs were carefully selected according to: 1. If the website provides security by an SSL certificate; 2. Clear privacy policy available; 3. Contact information available; 4. The trust Seal was verified through words like —secure and verified; 5. The quality of content provided; 6. If the content was fully referenced; 7. Based on the quality of reviews available online.

Sources collected were sorted through Mendeley (Mendeley, 2022). This software was useful for listing all the articles and books, classifying them by title, authors, journal, publisher, year, location and source site. Excel was used to list all sources according to their descriptions, abstract, location, objectives, the methodology used, sample size, measurement methods, results, and the main conclusions of each study. Also, all the papers were stored in a folder as a data bank, and sub stored according to the themes depicted in the figure 1 below. The method used here was essential to demonstrate, explain, and evaluate current, existing literature and mainly synthesise the evidence as a whole. Furthermore, through this review analysis, previous research in this area was compared and contrasted. Figure 1 below shows how the literature review was processed, the keywords and themes analysed and the number of sources examined and cited.

Figure 1 - The Literature Review Process. Elaborated by the Author (2022).



Sources	Number	Extracted	Total of Sources
Reports Cited	12		
Journal Articles Analysed	74	(23)	
Journal Articles Selected	51		63

Finally, this study has the potential to enable marketers, researchers and other interested parties to develop a greater understanding of the impact of social media influencers on adolescents' lives, where the insights discussed and outlined here can be used to enrich research projects and be a guide to explore aspects of the main topics. Therefore, this article makes a unique contribution to the field of social media. Also, the insights outlined in this paper offer the reader an easy and efficient possibility to be informed about the themes explored throughout the paper.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The internet and especially social media have changed how consumers and marketers communicate, allowing users to connect with peers by adding them to networks of friends, facilitating communication, particularly among peer groups. Further, studies such as that conducted by Wang, Chunling and Yujie (2012) have confirmed the importance and influence of peer communication through social media in purchase decisions and online behaviour. More recently, Sherman, Payton and Hernandez (2016) found through fMRI (Functional magnetic resonance imaging) scanning that adolescents were more likely to favourably respond to, or like, photos on Instagram depicted with many likes than photos with few likes, thus showing the influence of virtual peer endorsement.

In sum, psychologists and researchers have been concerned and warning about the negative impact of social media influencers on adolescents (Frontiers in Psychology, 2020). The main concerns specified in this literature review and most stated in research are related to depression and anxiety correlated to instant fame, and the reduction in depression and loneliness is linked to the decreasing amount of time spent in social media networks. However, the contrary does not have the same effect. In addition, young people who grow up with an excess of exposure to

social media channels, the internet, and games may have an empathy gap (Turkle, 2015). Another finding is that social media influencers can cause a dissatisfied feeling related in particular to body image from a female perspective increasingly, unrealistic and unhealthy male body images are now also being portrayed. As the perfect body exposed to social media and promoted by SMIs can cause identity conflict. Research has shown a statistically meaningful association between alcohol consumption related social media interaction within the younger population (Curtis *et al.*, 2018; Hendriks *et al.*, 2020). Also, it shows a greater presence with social media related to alcohol was associated with both greater self-reported consumption and alcohol-related issues.

Another major concern is regarding the exposure of young people mainly children to the marketing of high-fat, sugar and/or salt food and beverages promoted by advertisements in social media channels, and the research cited confirms that these ads can raise the level of obesity in children and adolescents mainly being promoted in social media channels. Additionally, less healthy food had more frequent exposure than healthy food in those social media channels. Therefore, a possible explanation might be related to social learning theory, whereby children and adolescents exposed to an esteemed media figure such as an influencer promoting unhealthy food could foster unhealthy habits leading to obesity.

Due to many elements causing a negative influence on adolescents by SMIs, researchers find that more should be done to protect the rights of children and adolescents. Governments should regulate and create policies to supervise how those undue influences have been generated and how it may be possible to avoid them. Therefore, more should be done to prevent young people from being negatively influenced by social media and social media influencers. It could result in positive outcomes, such as reducing levels of depression and anxiety, reducing obesity and alcohol issues as well as promoting acceptance and inclusiveness.

A gap in the literature shows that research is needed to unravel the impact of SMIs on adolescents that may have both desirable and undesirable consequences. While some previous studies have investigated the tendency of some people, especially students, to become SMIs, none to date have focused on the susceptibility of young people to undue influence by SMIs.

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Note: This article was presented in the XVIII SIM Conference organised by the Società Italiana Marketing (Italian Marketing Society) at the session Technology & Innovation Marketing - 14th-15th October 2021 in the Marche Polytechnic University, Ancona, Italy.

Acknowledgement: The research conducted in this paper was funded by the Irish Research Council under award number GOIPG/2021/360.