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# Viral challenges as a digital entertainment phenomenon among children. Perceptions, motivations and critical skills of minors

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**Abstract:** This research aims to gain insight on the perception that minors have of viral challenges as an entertainment format and the motivations behind their participation in this digital entertainment phenomenon. A qualitative study was performed by way of twelve focus groups with sixty-two minors aged between eleven and seventeen years from Spain. For minors, viral challenges represent a form of entertainment in an interactive context, perceived as innocuous, ephemeral content from which nothing more is required than for the user to have a good time. This appears to lead the minors interviewed to ignore the meaning and origin of the viral challenges they visualise and share, neither do they regard this to be necessary. It is also important to underline the relativisation of risk and danger in favour of spectacularisation and virality.

**Keywords:** challenge, new forms of entertainment, teenagers, critical thinking, risk

## 1 Introduction

In 2014, Pete Frates, suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), wanted to draw attention to the need for more research into the disease. His efforts took the form of an idea that went viral, the Ice Bucket Challenge, a challenge in which millions of people participated globally and which raised a huge amount of money for research through donations from celebrities, individuals, and companies. Although not the first of this kind, this particular challenge can be credited with having revealed the power of social networks to spread content quickly and

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virally, and to get people really involved (Astorri et al., 2022; Ortega-Barón et al., 2022).

In this particular context, a challenge is understood as being a goal or endeavour that is difficult to achieve, which becomes a stimulus for the person who faces it. These challenges are proliferating in the digital world (Raimundi et al., 2014) creating phygital experiences and it is possible to comprehend the capacity of these phenomena to resonate with and persuade an adolescent audience eager to test their own abilities or limits, as well as to conduct it in a social and digital environment.

Since the Ice Bucket Challenge, numerous challenges have gone viral and, according to Mahadevaiah and Nayak (2018), they can be classified either as “harmless” or “dangerous” (Astorri et al., 2022). Other classifications, such as the one provided by Juárez-Escribano (2019) show a greater diversity by presenting four types by reference to the objective they pursue: social, solidarity, uncivil or dangerous. This paper attempts to cover in those challenges that are viral both with a general audience and, in particular with adolescents: This virality adds a social dimension to the phenomenon as those replicating the challenge could feel as though they were engaging an ongoing conversation with other users.

In recent years some relevant contributions have focused on identifying the motivations that prompt users to participate in these challenges. According to Shroff et al. (2020), for example, the need to belong to a group, the lack of instantaneity in obtaining the reward and the possibility of displaying a certain personal strength, explain to a large extent why internet users carry out and share these challenges on their social networks. The need to belong, which emerges as relevant in other studies (Burgess et al., 2018; Ferreira-Deslandes et al., 2020), has been identified by Ortega-Barón et al. (2022) in a first empirical study on these motivations, as being the most relevant for adolescents. Other possible reasons, such as entertainment, have scarcely been explored, hence the focus of this paper. The qualitative nature of this article’s methodological approach affords a unique view on young people’s perceptions and beliefs about the phenomenon by seeking to understand how this fits into their consumption and entertainment routines.

## 2 Minors and digital entertainment

Entertainment, understood as encompassing free time, is one way to satisfy the human need for leisure and is a key aspect for the self-realisation of the individual, a fundamental value for social, educational and psychological development (Simón, 2020). Leisure, and particularly entertainment, has traditionally been one

of the motives associated with media use (Martí Parreño et al., 2013; Sádaba and Feijoo, 2022); and with the arrival and generalisation of digital media, along with other social changes that point to the need to disconnect as something inherent in contemporary humanity, the options of services and content that satisfy this need for entertainment have grown significantly (Prensky, 2001).

Moreover, these new options for entertainment are interactive, on-demand and highly personalised (Feijoo et al., 2021; Moyeenudin et al., 2022), to which the widespread use of mobile devices as a primary means of accessing the Internet has contributed substantially (McNally and Harrington, 2017).

Furthermore, in tandem with other applications and services, particularly social networks, the consumption of this content satisfies not only the need for entertainment (Lichy et al., 2022; Wu and Srite, 2021), but also other needs, such as social or integration needs (O'Hara et al., 2007; Sherry et al., 2006; Tosuntaş et al., 2020). Thus, *online* video consumption (Khan, 2017) has increased, not only on specialised websites such as YouTube, but also through social networks, as the growth of platforms as TikTok has made clear (Cervi, 2021).

It is therefore possible to highlight a markedly pronounced mediatisation of entertainment among the very young. In the case of Spain, this age group's preferred *online* routines include watching videos or films (94 %), music (92 %), digital television channels (91 %), or content on platforms such as YouTube (87 %). This is followed by other activities such as visiting bars (80 %), shopping (78 %), travelling (73.6 %), playing sports (73 %), attending live shows (70 %), going to nightclubs (68 %), reading books (68 %) or being with a partner (67 %) (Castelló-Martínez and Tur-Viñes, 2020; González-Anleo and López-Ruiz, 2017).

Taking into account that teenagers tend to rate more positively the benefits derived from their actions than the risks that they perceive (Parsons et al., 1997), researchers have paid particular attention to the potential consequences of this activity of using digital technology (Lareki et al., 2017) that offers instant gratification. For example, youngsters exposed to hybrid content, combining entertainment and commercial intentions, are able to recall the brands entailed less than if exposed to the same in a television commercial (Hudders et al., 2017) or, as Rozendaal et al. (2011) and Feijoo et al. (2021) found that teenagers tend to accept the commercial content present in those digital formats in a less critical manner, particularly if it is entertaining. This diminished critical attitude and the social pressure entailed in participating in a viral challenge that, by definition, is short-lived (Burgess et al., 2018), could lead to teenagers being exposed to potential risks, both physical and affective. This digital option for entertainment has particular characteristics (Simón, 2020), among which immediacy, the enjoyment of small moments, "bubbles of interactive, selective and mobile leisure" (Simón, 2020, p. 164), short-lived and micro-segmented (Igarza, 2009) figure prominently. However, it is at the

same time omnipresent, as the user can be permanently connected, exposed to this type of social enjoyment and all of this in an accelerated manner. All of these characteristics define the challenge phenomenon and attract the interest of teenagers in these challenges, which thereby become a regular part of their *online* content consumption (Choi et al., 2018). Beyond the efforts of the social networks themselves to promote this type of content, for example, with the inclusion of hashtags<sup>1</sup> to increase the time and interaction of users with and on the platform, the challenges contain elements which make them attractive. These include the involvement of famous people (celebrities or influencers) (Pressgrove et al., 2017), or the innovative and changing nature of the format itself (Jacquier, 2019).

All this takes place in a context where entertainment, in the specific case of challenges, derives from both consumption and production, making them a perfect example of prosumption culture as defined by Toffler (1980). Bruns (2008) calls prosumers pro-users to refer to those active subjects who create new content and share it on digital networks (Fonseca et al., 2021; Scolari et al., 2020). In fact, according to Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010), it is web 2.0 and some of its subsequent developments such as social networks that have facilitated the rise in the number of prosumers. Teenagers are exceptional candidates to participate in this trend and, as Duncum (2011) points out, creating and sharing parodying and socially transgressive videos has become a popular practice among teenagers. However, although the use of videos is intensive, the adolescents' creativity appears to be limited as they figure more as functional prosumers than as critical, imitating or remixing previous content (Chen et al., 2011): They tend to replicate trends rather than produce original content. In some ways, this accords with the nature of participation in challenges and may serve to aid understanding of their success among this age group.

This leads us to consider to what extent the possibility of these challenges as a means of concrete entertainment may also be one of the motivations for adolescents to consume and participate in these challenges. This formulates the first research question posed by this article:

RQ1: What are minors' perceptions of the challenge phenomenon? What kinds of entertainment are among the motivations driving them to consume and perform challenges?

Motivations refer to internal gratifications, i. e., emotions, fun and socialization with other users while consuming content (Martí-Parreño et al., 2013). Fun seems

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<sup>1</sup> Keywords that are employed to highlight the main topics of the shared content in social networks. Each hashtag works as a hyperlink that directs the people's search

to be the most consistent gratification identified in recent research conducted with adolescents (Castells et al., 2006). One could assume that, when entertainment is identified as a motivation to consume or perform a challenge, it contributes to lowering the existing social concern about this phenomenon; that issue is outside of the scope of the present text. It seems relevant to point out that simply resorting to the consumption of this content for entertainment purposes in fact indicates a less critical attitude. Moreover, this has already been studied in the case of the content that convenes entertainment or information and commercial purposes (Tur-Viñes et al., 2019; Feijoo and Pavez, 2019). This research has shown that adolescents accept this mixed content (which preferably mixes entertainment and advertising) as long as they find it funny, entertaining or useful. Hudders et al. (2017) have shown that minors exposed to hybrid formulas remember the advertised brand less than those who watch the conventional *spot*. Those who are unaware of the advertising intent of the content have more positive attitudes towards brands. Waiguny et al. (2012) have worked on the effects on minors of perceiving the presence of brands in games posed as challenges, highlighting that, although they are aware of the tactics used, these can have negative effects.

As far as challenges are concerned which, outside of their commercial content, may include other risks, such as actions which endanger the integrity of the minor, it is more than ever relevant to enquire into the critical skills of the minor when it comes to consuming this content.

This is also an essential part of a minor's media literacy (Smahel et al., 2020) and advertising literacy (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Feijoo et al., 2021). The attitudinal dimension in advertising literacy aims at exercising a healthy level of scepticism and being able to reflect on the content that is heard or seen in the light of biases and persuasive intentions (Waiguny et al., 2014) which stem from the knowledge that brands gather on consumers regarding what content can trigger like/dislike responses when exposed to commercial content. Ideally, as a result of this critical analysis, the final response to advertising exposure would be a greater level of awareness. In recent years, a third dimension has been added to advertising literacy: ethics (Adams et al., 2017; Hudders et al., 2017).

This capacity, which is acquired cumulatively with age, and which may be linked to socio-cultural factors (Livingstone et al., 2018), is the key to ensuring safe consumption.

This prompts the second research question of this article:

RQ2: What capacity do minors have to critically consume and create challenging content?

Today, critical competence emerges as one of the seven fundamental digital skills deemed essential for engaging with 21st-century online content and developing reflective reasoning given minors' continual participation and immersion in the global online environment. Reflective reasoning is at the core of the ability to endorse or refute digital information, to identify its underlying intention and, subsequently, to allow members of the global online environment to make informed judgments and decisions regarding the content to which all members are exposed (Amabile and Pillemer, 2012; van Laar, 2019).

## 3 Methodology

### Objectives

This research sought to elucidate minors' perception of *challenges* as an entertainment format and the motivations behind their participation in this digital entertainment phenomenon. The aim is to reflect on minors' ability to deal with this viral content and to ascertain their critical exercise in order to investigate and take part in these narratives that are presented up as fun, but with varied underlying intentions.

To this end, two research questions (RQ1 and RQ2) were formulated to be posed throughout the state of the issue; these are intended to be addressed by way of a qualitative methodology. By means of these research questions we seek to analyse the perceptions and motivations of minors when facing viral challenges, in order to finally deepen their ability to responsibly manage this type of interactive content, which is not only consumed but also shared and produced.

### Research design

To this end, an exploratory qualitative study was performed using *focus groups* consisting of minors between 11 and 17 years of age living in Spain. A qualitative approach was adopted because one of its great advantages is that participants have a voice and are guided towards an understanding of what and how, providing information on decisions, backgrounds and degrees of participation in the digital world. In other words, a qualitative perspective is the best way gain immersion in the day-to-day life of the participants, achieving an inclusive approach that allows us to understand, in this case, the imaginary world that minors create around the figure of the *influencer*.

Focus groups are an information-gathering tool that seeks to convene participants, in this case pre-adolescents and adolescents, to interact in a relaxed or informal environment to discuss a particular issue and generate consensual group knowledge. The minors were guided by the researchers who make up this working group, specialised in the topic of discussion and trained in moderation skills, as it was vital to create a relaxed atmosphere in order to promote interaction between participants and to ensure that the discussion focused on the issue of interest.

In order to overcome the possible disproportion that they might encounter when being guided by an adult and virtually, the selection of participants who knew each other beforehand was accepted. This is a measure that, in principle, contravenes the conditions for forming focus groups. However, it is uncommon to see this condition fulfilled in research performed within the school context (Horner, 2000).

The focus groups were designed according to a semi-structured questions guide with the aim of addressing the same issues in all the groups whilst allowing for some flexibility. Because of the age of the minors and the difference in age between them and the moderator, who was seen more as a teacher than a friend, it was emphasised that the focus groups were not to be regarded as exams. Accordingly, there were no right or wrong answers, no judgements or evaluations, as everything they said would be helpful to the researchers. Because of the pandemic, the focus groups were held virtually (in Microsoft Teams and Zoom rooms), and the participants' permission was always asked to record the session (with the signed consent of their parents or legal guardians), explaining that the recordings were exclusively for scientific use, in order to transcribe what was discussed in detail. This first part, although it did not provide any content information, was essential to gain the minors' trust and to make them feel comfortable to talk about their routines and preferences on social networks.

After this introductory part, between five and ten minutes of conversation were devoted to discovering their general perception of social networks by making a first approach to their relationship with these platforms: which ones they use, how much time they spend on them, what opinion they have of them, etc. Once this first thematic approach was completed, the *core part* of the research began to establish what perceptions, motivations and critical skills minors have when faced with recurrent content in their digital routines, such as the relationship with *influencers*, challenges and access to possible hoaxes and *fake news*. With regard to the challenges, the subject of the current research, the topic of discussion in the *focus groups* was introduced through a 1'-17" video showing a selection of seven world-famous challenges of differing natures, as detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Summary of RQ, structure of questionnaire and description of challenges shown in the focus groups.

| RQ  | Question guide for <i>focus groups</i> (FG)                            | Selection of challenges displayed during the FG |  |
|---|--|---|--|
| Perceptions of and motivations for the challenge phenomenon | – What do you think about this video; have you seen similar acts?      | <i>Ice bucket challenge</i>                     | Illness awareness (throwing a bucket of cold water and ice over oneself)   |
|   | – Have you done these challenges and why?                              | <i>Water bottle flip challenge</i>              | Skill (getting the bottle to land on its feet)   |
|   | – What motivates you to do this act?                                   | <i>Mannequin challenge</i>                      | Skill and socialisation (standing still while a moving camera is filming)  |
|   | – Have you shared challenges on your social networks?                  |   |  |
| Critical skills facing challenges                           | – Do you identify with all the challenges; do you see any differences? | <i>Swish Swish challenge</i>                    | Dance  |
|   | – Have you heard of these challenges, and do you know what they mean?  | <i>Balconing</i>                                | Risk (jumping into a swimming pool from a balcony)   |
|   | – Do you think these challenges are dangerous?                         | <i>In my feelings challenge</i>                 | Risk (dancing next to a moving car)  |
|   | – Do you think that, because they do them, you would do them too?      | <i>Bird Box Challenge</i>                       | Risk (inspired by a Netflix film, <i>Bird Box</i> (Susanne Bier, 2018), in which he moves, and walks blindfolded). |

The *focus groups* terminated by thanking them for their participation and offering the possibility to ask questions, both at that moment and via email. Each meeting lasted approximately 50 minutes, which is roughly equivalent to the duration of school classes. This fieldwork was performed between April and June 2021.

## Procedure

The information analysis process is presented below:

**Phase 1: Literal transcription.** The recordings of each focus group were transcribed verbatim.

**Phase 2: Identification of dimensions.** A panel of education and communication researchers specialising in the use of social networks read the transcripts and reached a consensus on identifying the number of dimensions following the scientific literature (use of social networks, influencer marketing, challenges, information consumption).

**Phase 3: Second reading of the dimensions.** The dimensions were partially modified in a second reading of the transcripts by the panel of experts and we decided to work with one of them: challenges.



**Phase 4: Categorisation process.** The transcripts were read again to identify the categories that made up the selected dimension. Transcript content analysis was conducted using the NVivo 12 Plus programme.

**Table 2:** Categories identified in the selected dimension.

| Dimension         | Category   | Example   |
|-------------------|--|---|
| <i>Challenges</i> | Opinion and perception of challenges                 | “During the lockdown [...] with my sisters, practically, we’ve performed almost all of them and then, the push-up and broom challenges, too. Things like that, especially during lockdown, when we had more free time” (FG6, girl, Baccaulaureate, high socio-economic group).  |
|                   | Participation in challenges (create, consume, share) | “I usually perform them if they involve more people, for example, when I meet with some friends and so on and it’s a way of having fun with your friends” (FG12, girl, Baccaulaureate, middle socio-economic group).  |
|                   | <i>Dangerous challenges</i>                          | “At my grandmother’s house, which has a swimming pool, and my cousin and I decided to jump from the second floor, because, of course, we saw a video of a famous person trying to jump and we said ‘hey’, so we saw it was cool, let’s go jump. No one was hurt, but I don’t recommend it because I had a very bad time” (FG2, girl, 1st cycle ESO, high socio-economic group). |
|                   | <i>Reflections and questions about challenges</i>    | “But if nobody sees you, who’s going to believe you, right? Let’s see, if you do something with a bottle, OK, but if you do something, imagine, very difficult, if no one sees you ... Maybe nobody believes you” (FG7, girl, 1st cycle ESO, middle socio-economic group).  |

## Sample

Despite being a qualitative study, the sample was non-probabilistic. Thus, 12 focus groups were carried out with the participation of a total of 62 students from different parts of Spain (5–6 members per group).

The sample was selected with the help of the schools. Two filter criteria were defined to form the focus groups: the age of the minor – establishing four categories according to the academic year: 6th grade primary, 1st cycle of *ESO* (Compulsory Secondary Education), 2nd cycle of *ESO* and *Bachillerato* (Baccaulaureate) – and the socioeconomic profile of the school, determined by its type – private, semi-private or public – and its geographical location, which serves as a prior indicator of the socioeconomic level of the households from which the minors come. According

to this segmentation criterion, a distinction was made between high (+ € 30,000 income), medium (€ 11,450 – € 30,350) and low (–€ 11,450) schools, according to INE data (Andrino et al., 2021). This dual segmentation was established because the age of the minor and the socio-economic status of the family context were considered to influence the minor's level of critical digital competence (Smahel et al., 2020). An attempt was also made to maintain, as far as possible, a proportion of males and females in the composition of the working groups.

Thus, first of all, schools distributed throughout Spain were contacted with the three profiles (private/semi-private/public) and according to their geographical location in order to meet the filter variables indicated. The project was explained to the schools' headteachers and/or those responsible for the courses, who served as mediators to gain access to the minors' families, who ultimately authorised, or otherwise, participation in the research. This two-step approach slowed down the sample selection process, but this mediation was deemed necessary in order to segment the student profile and to avoid the cold-call technique, which is not very effective in research with children.

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

**Table 3:** Total number of focus groups carried out.

| Focus group   |               | Socio-economic profile of the centre |        |       |       |
|---------------|---------------|--------------------------------------|--------|-------|-------|
|               |               | High                                 | Medium | Under | Total |
| Academic year | 6th grade     | 1                                    | 1      | 1     | 3     |
|               | 1st cycle ESO | 1                                    | 1      | 1     | 3     |
|               | 2nd cycle ESO | 1                                    | 1      | 1     | 3     |
|               | Baccalaureate | 1                                    | 1      | 1     | 3     |
|               | Total         | 4                                    | 4      | 4     | 12    |

Ultimately, we had the collaboration of 17 schools, eight private/semi-private: nine public; six of high socio-economic level, eight of medium level, three of low level; and located in different parts of Spain, representing the entirety of the national geography (North, South, Central, East and Islands). The centres facilitated access to 62 male and female students who made up the sample that finally participated in the focus groups, distributed as follows: according to the number of students: 25 were boys, 37 girls; according to the year, 16 minors were in Year 7 (11–12 years); 13 in Years 8 and 9 (12–14 years); 18 in Years 10 and 11 (14–16 years) and 15 students from Years 12 and 13 (16–18 years); according to the socio-economic level of the school's catchment area, 20 minors belonged to the high level, 22 to the medium level and 20 to the low level.

The nature of this project poses a series of ethical considerations, particularly due to the participation of minors in the fieldwork. For this reason, express parental authorisation was always obtained, supervised by the Ethics Committee of the university funding this research, which also supervised and approved the report of this research project.

## 4 Results

### The minor as prosumer facing the challenges

Without exception, all interviewees instantly recognised the variety of challenges presented during the focus groups, which confirms their level of familiarity with this digital format combining the most recurrent acts of this audience on the Internet, being entertainment and socialising.

I know them all. I know the *Water Flip Challenge* ... The *Swing Swing*, the dance that a girl did, I didn't see it much, but I probably know it, well, the one about the girl running, (...) let's see, the one about throwing the bucket over the head I've also seen ... the one about the man throwing himself off the balcony, I've also seen that. (FG1, girl, 6th grade primary, high socio-economic group)

Indeed, this is the content that accords with what minors are looking for in the digital context, not only from the point of view of consumption but also from the perspective of production, as it involves prompt and simple use, accessible from the mobile phone.

The predominant characteristic that the interviewees associate with the challenges is entertainment, a brief content that captures their attention and incorporates it into their leisure time. Most of them relate the irruption of this phenomenon in their lives with the lockdown imposed to stop the advance of COVID-19. They describe it as an entertaining activity that can be carried out at home, and which has become a great resource against boredom.

Let's see, I think everyone has done the *Bottle Flip Challenge* and, as soon as we have a bottle, we keep on doing it. In my case, for example, during the lockdown, although I don't have TikTok either, but on Instagram, with my sisters, practically, we've performed almost all of them and then, the push-up and broom challenges, too. Things like that, especially during lockdown, when we had more free time. (FG6, girl, Baccalaureate, high socio-economic group)

Whether they are spectators or creators, minors conceive the challenge as a game that is carried out in a group and whose social dimension involves the whole phe-

nomenon: On the one hand, the challenge is a viral content, which brings together an audience, of which a team version is made and disseminated.

In that sense, I usually perform them if they involve more people, for example, when I meet with some friends and so on and it's a way of having fun with your friends [...] We use them [the challenges] more when we are with friends and so on, so that, to do an activity to be together rather than for the purpose of uploading the content. (FG12, girl, Baccalaureate, middle socio-economic group)

Similarly, as minors recognise, participation in the challenges sometimes entails a certain social pressure of having to perform it in order “not to be excluded” and to be part of the trend of the moment; for example, the trend of people nominating each other to perform the challenge intensifies the feeling of belonging to a group, but also the need for external validation.

The truth is that I wasn't used to performing it. For example, I used not to perform the *Mannequin Challenge*, [...] but once we were in class and a classmate shouted: *Mannequin Challenge* and because I didn't want to go against them and just to have a good time, I stood there paralysed and looked like a robot without batteries. (FG2, girl, 1st cycle ESO, high socio-economic group)

Another of the elements that minors associate with the challenge, and which consolidates their role as *prosumers*, is the number of followers or views they can achieve with their challenge, something they associate directly with the level of approval from their peers and success. “Well, in the future, when you have a lot of followers, you will be able to get paid to perform that and you can spend your life making videos and things like that” (FG8, boy, 6th primary, middle socio-economic group).

It was interesting to see the criteria which minors use as a reference in choosing the challenges they take part in: on the one hand, how entertaining they find the challenge, on the other hand, according to their skills and competences to perform it. However, the excessive interest in the content gaining acceptance among their peers impels minors to devise alternative versions of the original challenges by raising the “scale of difficulty”. It is perceived that they make a direct association between level of complexity and the number of views registered, and they understand the level of complexity by adding an ingredient of danger, which makes their content original, eye-catching and shocking. In conversations with minors, it became clear that they naturally link the performance of challenges with a certain degree of danger, a price to be paid for gaining followers and views. “I'm telling you that they do it for having views, because with the views, just by watching the video, with the reproductions they already earn money” (FG11, 6th grade primary, low socio-economic group).

The spectacularisation is an integral characteristic of the definition of the challenges. It should not be forgotten that this is entertainment content, and it is essential for them to be current; hence, among the selection of challenges shared, the majority commented that “they were no longer fashionable”; the lack of relevance of this type of content is highlighted. “It’s that *Challenge* is like very 2016, I don’t know ...”. (FG7, boy, 1st cycle *ESO*, middle socio-economic group). Moreover, in the context of this type of content, they differentiate another format with a different aspect to challenges, “*trends*”, which are even more ephemeral, very short videos, between 5 and 20 seconds, in which viral situations are imitated, in which humour prevails and the challenge not so much, and which are characteristic of “more party” social networks and with more frenetic consumption, such as TikTok:

It’s that now they have changed, I mean, now they are not so many challenges, now they are called trends in TikTok, and they are like a type of video that has a different theme and some of them can be a dance, others can be ... I don’t know, you tell ... there was one where you told a joke you had done and everyone applauded you and you moved on to the next one and so on and so on, and that, now they are no longer challenges as such, but trends that change ... Let’s say, like a kind of fashion. (FG12, boy, Baccalaureate, medium socio-economic group)

## Minors’ ability to consume and create challenges

As stated in the methodology, a variety of challenges were presented in the focus groups to encourage discussion and to ascertain whether the minors would allude to the different meanings of the proposals. However, the interviewees, especially the younger ones, did not appreciate any significant differences in the *challenges*: They only valued them for one aspect, whether or not they were entertaining. They tended to be unaware of the whole context of the content: what, who, how, why, where, when ... For example, only four groups (2nd cycle *ESO* and Baccalaureate) recognised the charitable origin of the *Ice Bucket Challenge*, although they all knew about the challenge; nor did they mention that the *Bird Box Challenge* was inspired by a Netflix film (*Bird Box*). It is important to note that they also did not express any concern or need for this background information. “I ... in my case I would perform all the challenges, to be honest, I mean, the balcony thing ... if it was a bit dangerous, but ... I don’t care, it’s not dangerous for me” (FG1, boy, 6th grade primary, high socio-economic group). Minors believe that, when facing a challenge, what is important is that this content reaches them through their peers, that it attracts their attention and that it provides them with a good time, either by watching it or by replicating it.

In the *challenges* selected for the focus groups, several challenges with different levels of danger were included in order to examine the significance of this topic

in minors' discourse. It was found that primary school pupils did not allude to the risk variable in the case of challenges that were life-threatening, such as the case of *balconing*; indeed, some of those interviewed confessed to having performed it:

I had once thrown myself off a 15-metre bridge into the water on a challenge and I didn't think it was dangerous because two of my friends had already done it and they taught me how to throw myself properly. (FG8, boy, 6th grade primary school, middle socio-economic group)

At my grandmother's house, which has a swimming pool, and my cousin and I decided to jump from the second floor, because, of course, we saw a video of a famous person trying to jump and we said "hey", so we saw it was cool, let's go jump. No one was hurt, but I don't recommend it because I had a very bad time. (FG2, girl, 1st cycle ESO, high socio-economic group)

It was interesting to see how, in the general discourse of minors, danger is conceived as a necessary and justified element to make the content spectacular and exclusive, which translates into a greater number of views and followers.

They continue with the idea of gaining more ... For example, there is a lake in Coruña that is toxic, but it is very beautiful, and a lot of people go there to take pictures, and in the end, they come out with skin problems and things like that. (FG12, girl, Baccaulaureate, medium socio-economic group)

This implies that they associate the dangerous with something that is showy and shocking. In addition, it also gives minors the bonus of overcoming, of proposing and innovating by devising more daring ideas that encourage ever greater participation.

For example, the *Mannequin Challenge*, it was to see who could perform it the coolest, who was the most original, who could perform it on a roof or under a swimming pool, and in the end, it was the winner. Whoever does it the coolest and the craziest, the more viral it goes and the more followers they gain. So, there are those two options, "I perform it out of curiosity and try it and that's it", or the option of "let's see who wins". (FG6, girl, Baccaulaureate, high socio-economic group)

On the other hand, another issue reflected in this study is the reasoning that minors employ to share the challenges they end up recording online, observing certain differences depending on their age. The youngest profiles (primary and 1st cycle of ESO) showed a greater concern for the reach and dissemination of their videos, linking their level of satisfaction not only to recording entertaining content, but also to the number of views achieved with their creations. "But if nobody sees you, who's going to believe you, right? Let's see, if you do something with a bottle, OK, but if you do something, imagine, very difficult, if no one sees you ... Maybe nobody believes you" (FG7, girl, 1st cycle ESO, middle socio-economic group). On the other

hand, the older ones (2nd cycle of *ESO* and Baccalaureate) allocated more significance to the social and unifying value of the challenge, conceiving it more as a moment of fun in a group, leaving the variable of sharing and viralising its content in the background; they opt for a more intimate dissemination of their challenges, spreading them around their most closed circles; they consider that in this way their recordings “remain private” and that they have greater control over their dissemination. “I did the toilet paper challenge [another challenge] for the laughs, but I didn’t publish it, it stayed for the laughs between us” (FG3, boy, 2nd cycle *ESO*, low socio-economic group).

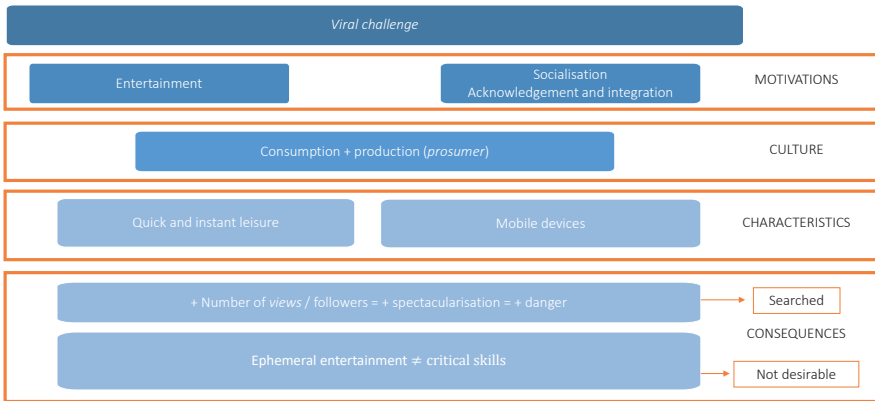


Figure 1: Summary of main findings.

## 5 Discussion

The value of this research lies in accessing the collective imagination of minors about the phenomenon of *challenges*. While previous research has focused on analysing possible motivations (Ortega-Barón et al., 2022), entertainment was not considered to be one of them. For the Spanish minors who participated in this research, entertainment emerges as the main reason for consuming or performing and sharing *challenges*, although this motivation, as with other activities such as video games, for example, is combined with others such as integration or social acceptance (O’Hara et al., 2007; Sherry et al., 2006; Tosuntaş et al., 2020).

Along with this, it is also confirmed that *challenges* consolidate the *prosumer* culture (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Scolari et al., 2020) which, in the case of young people, is associated with video-sharing (Duncum, 2011) and which, in most cases,

reveals that we are dealing with functional rather than critical *prosumers* (Chen et al., 2011). Mobile phones have facilitated this by rendering both the consumption and the production of this content accessible.

Minors consume or produce a *challenge* to entertain themselves but the origin or purpose of this challenge is quite different: Two of the examples proposed, for example, had a promotional purpose, in one case to raise awareness about a disease (Ortega-Barón et al., 2022), in another case inspired by a Netflix film. The majority of the interviewees did not recognise any other purpose in this content, which raises the question of minors' ability to question this content, which can be used as misinforming narratives and can endanger their integrity Juárez-Escribano (2019). This proposal could be adopted as a future line of research to further investigate the level of the critical questioning of minors encountering these new formats, especially when minors use them for entertainment. While there is an age classification system for certain content formats (*streaming* platforms, video games), this does not exist for the freely available content on social networks, such as *challenges*, both in the role of consumer and creator.

Consequently, it is also important to highlight the relativisation of risk and danger in favour of spectacularisation and virality (Shroff et al., 2020). The presentation of the results also shows that the minors interviewed particularly value ephemeral culture, in this case in the entertainment market. For some of them, the *challenge* format is already obsolete, and they refer to *trends* as the new viral fashion to be imitated. Brevity and fugacity clothed with amusement are the ingredients that a digital narrative must contain to capture the interest of the new generations. In addition, there is a need to consume new and brief content, as Simón (2020) notes when he defines the essence of digital leisure for young Spaniards.

The user's critical skills are key to being able to deal with this type of digital narrative in the right conditions. One of the elements that favours critical reasoning is knowing the context of the content consumed, information that takes second place on platforms such as TikTok, in which the consumption of brief entertainment, which is characteristic of digital leisure, takes precedence (Simón, 2020). Minors are confronted with decontextualised narratives conceived as ephemeral content of which nothing more is expected than to have a good time. This appears to mean that the minors interviewed tend to be unaware of the meaning and origin of the challenges they view and share, but they do not consider it necessary either, as it is the entertainment that provides the value for them.

A further complementary but relevant issue in terms of critical competence is the concept of privacy that minors handle when they decide to share their recordings on social networks. While the youngest students associate success and social validation with coverage, exposure and number of views, the Baccalaureate students prefer to circulate their creations in more closed groups, considering that



in this way the content remains in more private environments. A topic for further exploration might investigate whether minors assume that the practice of sharing information in more intimate circles is considered a safe and private practice, and whether they believe they have full control over what is published.

## 6 Limitations

This research raises some thought and work lines that do not presume to be conclusive, given the limitations entailed by the qualitative method and the approach employed. Although our samples were designed to obtain diversity of narratives, we were unable to avoid including two biases: firstly, a greater presence of females than males in the focus groups and, secondly, an unequal number of participants in the groups. As stated in the methodology, as a result of Covid-19 the meetings had to be virtually, which made it impossible to guarantee attendance of the collaborators right up to the moment of the meeting. Likewise, reminders and the link to the virtual room were sent to parents' e-mails, who sometimes forgot about the meeting, and some children had problems connecting to the virtual room and ultimately ended their participation.

On the other hand, the analysis focused on a specific format. Hence, it would be necessary to further explore whether this relativisation of questioning by minors is a phenomenon that affects only challenges or whether it can be transferred to other digital entertainment narratives that may have varied intentions.

In brief, it is a question of continuing to demonstrate that training in critical competence is a necessary cultural investment so that future citizens may be aware, committed and active.

## 7 Conclusions

Digital entertainment, with its own inherent characteristics (Simón, 2020) has become part of the daily life of minors throughout and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The so-called challenges meet all the requirements to be considered to be a leisure activity (Choi et al., 2018; Olivares and Méndez, 2020): immediacy (Igarza, 2009), easy exposure and creation, and a characteristic showiness. Challenges are also an example of the vicarious manifestation of functional prosumers or users who imitate and replicate content generated by others (Chen et al., 2011), a trend that has increased by the widespread access to mobile internet (McNally and Harrington, 2017).

This setting points to the need to consider entertainment as one of the factors that motivate minors to expose themselves and become involved in the digital world. Digital leisure implies exposure to screens, as well as to content-creation and production. Given that minors' greatest expectation is to be entertained (Hudders et al., 2017), they expose themselves devoid of any other concern. While interacting with challenges, adolescents do not question themselves as bearing any kind of responsibility as they merely consider watching challenges as part of "having a good time" and extend this vision to creating and sharing online their own content. It appears that there is no reflection on the consequences and possible commitment involved in participating in a viral challenge. Going further, the new generations disregard the importance of questioning the origin, meaning, or implications of carrying out a challenge, given that their motivation is their urge to participate and to be part of an ephemeral and short-term entertainment; in other words, the need to be part of the phenomenon (Ortega-Barón et al., 2022). Likewise, how minors relativise the risk and danger of some challenges when they feel the need to create spectacular content must be highlighted: Minors take on greater risks as it is accepted that this will gain them more audience attention. There is a need to make minors, and society in general, aware of this fact.

How recognition or social integration operate (O'Hara et al., 2007; Sherry et al., 2006; Tosuntaş et al., 2020) can also weaken the personal exercise of questioning and self-criticism of minors, a relevant issue to be noted when studying this type of entertainment and its motivations.

These evident and practical implications lead to considering the need for encouraging minors to question the content to which they expose themselves through social networks; moreover, to be critical when they exercise their role as content-creators. Given that minors appear to prioritise immediacy over responsibility, there is a clear need to enhance the critical competence of adolescents as they expose themselves to content that apparently meets their entertainment or leisure needs. One way of approaching this situation is by fostering the formation of critical prosumers (Chen et al., 2011), capable of questioning their own content-production.

Additionally, intelligent content authors need to bear responsibility for themselves, in both the physical and the digital worlds. Consequently, a moral obligation pertains to take into account the ethical dimension of the use made of new technologies. Accordingly, the educational context within which minors develop should consider the need to educate future citizens in the light of digital intelligence and to develop education plans that meet the expectations needed for the digital times in which we live.

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