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Attracting minors with entertainment: novel forms of brand communication on mobile phone

Atraer a los menores con entretenimiento: nuevas formas de comunicación de marca en el móvil

Abstract

Being entertained is a major aim among minors online, whether via their smartphone or otherwise. The digital environment responds to this by offering new formulas that combine entertainment with other interests, such as commercial ones, compared with what was traditionally delivered by the media. This hybrid advertising appears to find a good fit between online games and influencer-generated content, both of which are in big demand from minors online. Using a qualitative methodology, with interviews to twenty minors in the metropolitan area of Santiago de Chile, this study attempts to determine to what extent the questions posed by previous research on this topic can be validated. Among the results, it should be noted that advertising is, indeed, clearly present in the online entertainment experiences of children, who are particularly receptive to ads when they provide added value and children feel they can control their presence. The high level of familiarity achieved by influencers via personalisation amplifies the effect of minors feeling this kind of advertising as part of their daily life. This raises the question of whether the advertising literacy of this age group is up to the challenges posed by this scenario.

Resumen

Entretenerse es una de las prioridades que los menores buscan satisfacer en internet, también a través de sus teléfonos móviles. A esta necesidad que tradicionalmente han cubierto otros medios, responde el entorno digital con nuevas fórmulas que combinan entretenimiento con otros intereses, como los comerciales. Esta publicidad híbrida parece encontrar un buen acomodo entre los juegos online y los contenidos generados por influencers, destinos preferidos por los menores hoy en sus pautas de navegación. A través de una metodología cualitativa, con entrevistas a 20 menores del Área Metropolitana de Santiago de Chile, se busca comprobar en qué medida las preguntas planteadas por la investigación previa sobre este tema se validan. Entre los resultados destaca que, efectivamente, las comunicaciones de marca están presentes de manera clara en las experiencias de entretenimiento online de los más pequeños, que se muestran particularmente receptivos cuando aportan un valor añadido y sienten que las controlan. La familiaridad generada por los influencers con su audiencia también hace que los menores vean las comunicaciones comerciales de manera relajada. Esto plantea preguntas relevantes sobre si la alfabetización publicitaria de este grupo de edad está a la altura de los retos que plantea este escenario.

Keywords

Children; mobile phone; brand communication; entertainment; online games; influencers

Palabras clave

Menores; teléfono móvil; comunicaciones de marca; entretenimiento; juegos online; influencers

1. Introduction

Advertising strategies targeting different publics, especially younger audiences, have been transformed in the digital era. Advertising discourse aimed at younger publics endeavors to engage them through entertainment and games, empathizing with them at an emotional level (Del Moral, Villalustre-Martínez and Neira-Piñeiro, 2016), and leveraging the interactivity and connectivity afforded by the interrelationships among such users with their contacts on social media.

A very significant proportion of young people's digital consumption takes place on social media, so such platforms are very appealing spaces for brand activity. Social media have become a key source of information for consumers; they may also facilitate opportunities for dialogue between brands and their target publics, boosting sales and name recognition without necessarily saturating the market.

As a result, the advertising sector has been driven to seek out new strategies that enable engagement with this new profile of hyper-connected consumer, shaping "more emotional and experiential advertising, as well as value-added content that attracts consumers rather than having to look for and bombard them with commercial information" (Soengas, Vivar and Abuín, 2015: 123).

Given that they spend a lot of their time on social media, young users comprise a target public that may also be figured as powerful advertising agents (Núñez-Gómez, Sánchez-Herrera and Pintado-Blanco, 2020).

The emergence and widespread use of digital technologies and new modes of storytelling (Tur-Viñes and Segarra, 2014), as well as new entertainment formats, combine play, interactivity, reward systems, competition, cooperation, etc. Among the hybridized forms targeting younger users, the outcome of advertising strategy development aimed at younger publics, those related to online gaming – especially 'advergaming' – and the role of influencers are particularly significant.

Online games embedded in different social networks foster cooperative entertainment spaces capable of attracting users from all around the world, drawing on the extraordinary potential of viral communication (Del Moral and Guzmán, 2014). Advertising endeavors to monetize the advantages of this form of entertainment. The research findings published by Okazaki and Yagüe (2012) indicate that some games become direct drivers of perceived brand value. At the same time, given the prevalence of their presence on social media, young consumers may become advertising agents in the service of specific brands by sharing these games among their contacts, thus promoting particular brands (Terlutter and Capella, 2013).

The paradigm shift effected by the emergence of interactivity across communication media has prompted a boom in 'advergaming' in the advertising sector (Méndiz, 2010). The word "advertainment" has been coined to denote this new hybrid form of advertising and entertainment, where brands work to interest consumers in their products by entertaining them through gratifying interactive experiences (Ramos, 2006). 'Advergaming' goes a step further: advertising appropriates the dynamics of videogames to the brand's benefit, turning players into brand allies and building closer bonds between consumers and products. Games engage their players in emotional and affective ways, activate their cognitive skills and motivate them to perform certain tasks, leveraging their persuasive power to foster greater loyalty to the brand (Nelson and Waiguny, 2012).

A number of researchers have highlighted the influence an invitation to game-playing may have on a more favorable predisposition among young users towards a given product. According to Steffen, Mau and Schramm-Klein (2013), the experience of winning an 'advergame' predisposes players to greater receptivity and openness to the brand. Furthermore, entertainment has been identified as the key to successful market penetration for advertising messages addressed to younger users who are addicted to videogames (Feijoo, Fernández-Gómez and Sádaba, 2021).

At the same time, influence marketing, led by the rise of social media influencers, has also become a focus of attention and activity for brand managers and researchers. Lou and Yuan (2019) define a social media influencer as "a content generator: one who has a status of expertise in a specific area, who has cultivated a sizable number of captive followers … by regularly producing valuable content" (2019: 59). A key feature of influencers is the credibility they enjoy among their followers, with whom they create a kind of family atmosphere (Weiss, 2014). Once this close bond has been forged, influencers prove able to persuade their audience to adopt particular attitudes and opinions, and even to have an impact on their behavior in relation to a given phenomenon, product or service (San Miguel, 2020).

A number of research projects have explored the reasons that may contribute to why influencers have the power to generate credibility among their followers. Xiao, Wang and Chan-Olmsted (2018) identified trustworthiness, social influence, the quality of their arguments and the use of key information as significant factors in this regard. Other research findings show that in some cases social media influencing may yield

more effective promotion of particular products than traditional celebrity endorsement (Trivedi and Sama, 2020). Whatever the case may be, however, the credibility and admiration status of influencers is reflected in positive engagement among their followers, irrespective of the product or service they mention or promote (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019; Lou, Tan and Chen, 2019). As expert users of social media, young people are familiar with this phenomenon (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2021) because they also engage with the content created by influencers, in which commercial interests play an important role (Elorriaga and Monge, 2018).

To a significant extent, these trends reflect the attitude among young users towards commercial messages in digital environments. Whereas in online advertising (Andersen, Tufte, Rasmussen and Chan, 2008; Sandberg, 2011) users may find being targeted annoying, especially when such advertisements pop up on their personal devices (Martínez, Jarlbro and Sandberg, 2013), such reactions are mitigated when the content is perceived as being more useful and/or entertaining (Martí, Sanz-Blas, Ruz-Mafe and Aldán-Manzano, 2013).

Some researchers have pointed out that this coupling of young users with hybrid contents prompts a number of potential risks. These new non-traditional advertising formats appear to reduce the cognitive processing effort required of young consumers (Rifon, Taylor-Quilliam, Paek, Weatherspoon, Kim and Smreker, 2014). Moreover, the positive feeling generated by user experience may be transferred to the brand involved, as is the case with 'advergaming' (Mallinckrodt and Mizerski, 2007; Vanwesenbeeck, Walrave and Ponnet, 2017; Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2012). Finally, the fact that the advertising messages in these new formats are more closely aligned with personal preferences and interests may foster a more positive attitude and response among young people (Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, Smink, Van Noort and Buijzen, 2017).

It is crucial that young users be aware of the commercial intent underlying these new formats (An, Jin and Park, 2014); and it is clear that greater experience and maturity are likely to contribute to such awareness (Rozendaal, van Reijmersdal and Buijzen, 2013; Hudders, De Pauw, Cauberghe, Panic, Zarouali and Rozendaal, 2017; Chu, Blades and Herbert, 2013). When smartphone access is added to the mix of young users and hybrid contents, questions arise regarding mobile screen consumption, which is predominantly individual and difficult to monitor directly via parental control (Oates, Newman and Tziortzi, 2014).

A number of research studies have focused on cellphone use among young people (Mascheroni and Ólafsson, 2014) given how prevalent mobile telephone use is in this age cohort. In relation to commercial content consumption via mobile devices, research findings cite the lack of regulatory mechanisms as a factor in the confusion surrounding the categorization and differentiation of advertising messages (An and Kang, 2014; Chen, Zhu, Xu and Zhou, 2013; Terlutter and Capella, 2013). An exploratory study on this topic (Feijoo, Sádaba and Bugueño, 2020) showed that younger users spend a significant amount of their time on platforms where they are exposed to higher levels of advertising as compared with other media such as television.

1.1. The case of Chile

According to Emarketer (2015) almost 18% of all advertising in Chile in 2017 was digital; for 2020, this figure Is likely to have reached over 21%. Spending on digital advertising in 2017 was practically double the equivalent expenditure over the preceding six years, a clear indication of the exponential growth of such advertising in Chile. This trend is paralleled by the increased penetration of internet connectivity throughout the country (102 network links per 100 inhabitants) and by continuous growth in social media use.

Chile also presents an interesting case for study because of the high rate of mobile device internet access and use there (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2020). At 85% internet penetration across the population, a figure that mirrors the rates in OECD countries (Subtel, 2020), most internet access – 84.2% – takes place via a mobile device, in particular, via smartphones, which comprise 80% of all everyday network access events in Chile (Subtel, 2020).

This pattern is repeated and amplified among younger users, whose internet access via smartphone is much higher than access via other devices such as computers or tablets (Cabello, Claro, Rojas and Trucco, 2020; Subtel, 2020; Feijoo and García, 2019). As is the case in other Western countries (Kabali, Irigoyen, Nunez-Davis, Budacki, Mohanty, Leister and Bonner, 2015), and although there may be significant differences in access to technology due to socioeconomic factors and/or the urban-rural divide (Cabello, Claro, Lazcano and Antezana, 2018), smartphone access is the most socially available form of screen access.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this research project is to explore the brand communication resources deployed to attract young people's attention via mobile telephones. The following research questions were formulated in the context of this overall goal:

1. What predispositions do young people acknowledge in relation to brand communication messages received on their mobile telephones?

2. What aspects of brand communication do young people say they find appealing and unappealing?

3. What do young people think about the presence of commercial messages in their experience of mobile-based online gaming?

4. What are young people's views regarding the role of influencers as intermediaries for brand communication?

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 10 to 14-year-old consumers in 20 households. The focus of the interview was user experience, which not only enabled the development of issues established in advance but also the disclosure of unexpected topics, greater scope in addressing private concerns and, in this case, matters relating to private home life (Rosenblum, 1987). The main drawback to this research approach is that it depends on respondents self-reporting their actions, which is conditioned in turn by their capacity for interpretation and recall (Berger, 1998). In order to mitigate this limitation, the young people were encouraged to take particular decisions in response to video content provided, so as to better understand the attitudes and reactions evinced, and to choose from among a rage of persuasive communication messages shared to their mobile devices.

The semi-structured interview is an apt tool to assess the advertising literacy of preadolescents and adolescents because young people in that age bracket display the competences required for effective verbal interaction (Zarouali, De Pauw, Ponnet, Walrave, Poels, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2019). At the same time, the interview is a communication space that enables young people to express themselves openly and to share their thoughts on commercial messaging.

The interview structure – outlined in Table 1 below – was designed in line with the research questions:

Block 1. Predisposition towards brand communication: the opening questions addressed what young people understood by commercial messages and their views of them.

Block 2. Attitude towards commercial messages communicated via mobile telephone: this section aimed to see how young people assess and process commercial messages by exploring in greater depth how they feel when they receive such messaging on their mobile telephone, whether they find it appealing or unappealing, if they are open to seeing it, and if they regard such communication as credible.

Block 3. Respondents were shown a video comprising a selection of mobile ads: a 2-minute reel made up of 17 digital formats, a mixture of social media commercial messages (Facebook, Instagram and YouTube), e-mails, SMS, videogame display ads, and influencer brand endorsements or posts. The young participants were asked to identify the commercial contents they recognized in this phase of the interview.

The methodological approach aims to meet the need for further qualitative research capable of providing a more comprehensive account of digital competences, including those related to critical thinking (Van Deursen, Helsper and Eynon, 2016).

Table 1. Mapping the research questions onto the interview structure

Research questions	Interview questions
Predisposition towards brand communication	Block 1. - What is advertising to you? What do you think about it? Why do you have that opinion about advertising? - What features do you associate with advertising? - What media do you think shows most advertising?

	Block 2.
Appealing / unappealing aspects of Brand communication	- How do you feel when you see advertising on your mobile telephone? Do you find it appealing or unappealing? Why? - Do you watch it or try to avoid it? Why? - Do you pay attention to what is said in advertising? Do you believe what you see? - Do you think the advertising you receive on your cellphone is useful? Why? - Would you prefer not to receive advertising? Why? - When would you like to receive advertising on your mobile telephone? - What would you change about the advertising you receive on your mobile telephone to make to more appealing?
Presence of commercial messages in online games	Block 3. Video content containing sample ads in standard formats, from persuasive messages to entertainment actions (for instance, influencers as brand ambassadors).
Influencers as brand-based content communicators	- Did you notice advertising in the video? When? What do you think about the advertising you saw? Why do you think that? - Do you think that all the adverts are designed to target you? - [If no advertising is noticed] Why did you not refer to this as advertising? Why do you not regard it as advertising?

The qualitative data were analyzed by subject using nVivo data analytics (Boyatzis, 1995). The codification categories were framed in relation to the research questions and the topics included in the interview script. Given the long-term involvement of both authors in the area, both participated in the codification process so as to enhance the interpretative potential of the data collected.

2.1. Description of the sample

20 households were visited between June and August 2019, all located in the metropolitan area of Santiago de Chile. The sample was composed of the following: 12 of the participants were girls, and 8 boys; 10 were between 10 and 12 years old, and 10 between 13 and 14 years old; 11 participants had their own cellphone, while the others (9) used their parents' mobile telephones. As regards family socioeconomic status: 10 belong to C1 (upper), 6 to C2-C3 (middle), and 4 to D (lower) level.

The sample was drawn from an earlier phase in the research project of which this specific study is part, in which a survey was administered to young people and their parents in 501 households, based on a probabilistic design by areas approach. 20 households who were willing to continue their participation in the project were selected to meet the filter variables such as age, sex and cellphone ownership defined for the qualitative phase of the project.

For the purposes of data collection and so as to safeguard the integrity of both study participants and researchers, signed authorization of an informed consent statement was required of both the legal guardians and the young participants themselves, research ethics documentation that had previously been reviewed and validated by the Ethics Committee of the Universidad de los Andes (Chile) where the research project is registered.

3. Results

3.1. Young people's predisposition towards brand communication on mobile devices

This qualitative study has shown that the attitude of young people towards brand communication is generally neutral and may become receptive when such communication is seen to offer added value: "A tutorial would be ideal because most [adverts] only show what to do but they don't say what steps to follow" (E5-girl, 13-14 years old, own cellphone).

Young people are especially open to commercial messages when they are linked to some form of entertainment; the ideal advertising for young users would involve some kind of videogaming: "I'd like games, pure games. If the game had ads it'd be entertaining" (E7-boy, 10-12 years old, own cellphone). In line with this idea, brand communication is associated with promotion strategies such as gifts, discount codes, and incentives or rewards to view commercial content: "When you first download [a game] it's free, but after than you have to pay for certain things. The first day it's free, after that you have to pay (E2-boy, 10-12 years old, uses parents' cellphone).

It is noteworthy that young users tend to highlight the information function of the formats they consume: young people see commercial communication as "presenting, showing, publishing, offering, displaying new things". The older interview respondents used terms such as "promote", "draw attention" or "buy" to describe advertising practices. At the same time, however, it should also be noted that the term "advertising" does not feature often in the language used by the young people interviewed for the purposes of this research (between 10 and 14 years old). Indeed, some of the younger participants did not understand what they were being asked about until other words such as "adverts" or "messages" were used.

Despite the continuing prominence of television as regards advertising investment, for younger users advertising is a digital phenomenon that is primarily experienced via mobile telephones. In fact, when asked about the platforms where they see commercial messages, young users referred unprompted to smartphones, whereas TV and outdoor advertising were cited only when mentioned by the interviewer, and neither radio nor print advertising featured at all in the interviews: "advertising is a way of giving information through images and short things when you're looking for something or it shows up on any application" (E3-boy, 13-14 years old, own cellphone).

For users in this age bracket, the preference is for digital brand communication, and they are receptive to such messages so long as they see that they are rewarded or receive something in exchange for the time and attention they invest in them.

3.2. Appealing / unappealing aspects of brand communication

In an ideal world, young people accept brand communication as long as it aligns with their interests as consumers and is entertaining – that is, when it facilitates an immersive experience: "An ad will suddenly let you try out a game, and that's what I like. Or a 360° view pops up, where you turn your telephone around and you can see everything around you, that's really striking" (E1-girl, 10-12 years old, uses parents' cellphone). In videogames, users are also open to ads that allow them to gain lives or win points.

The young people interviewed said that the kinds of messages that most drew their attention are those relating to technology brands, fashionable toys or entertainment products (primarily music). Segmentation by digital advertising access patterns means that this phenomenon was called into question by young people who use their parents' cellphones because they are more likely to be exposed to a wider range of commercial messages that are less directly attuned to their interests as consumers. "Ideal advertising for me would be for toys or that kind of thing, or chocolate, but not ads for cars or wine or beer, nothing like that" (E14-girl, 10-12 years old, uses parents' cellphone).

As noted above, while not opposed to commercial messaging, and in addition to such aspects as entertainment and responding to their interests, the young users interviewed also require that such communication not interrupt their online surfing experience. "Sometimes when I'm watching videos on YouTube an advert pops up, and that annoys me, because there are a lot of ads in the video and it annoys me that they're disrupting the video" (E3, boy, 13-14 years old, own cellphone). Young people tend to associate mobile advertising with the disruption of their online activity, during videogames or while they are watching videos on YouTube, two key digital habits among younger users. They feel that this kind of 'interruption' makes them miss other inputs that are more interesting to them: "I feel like giving up because I think I'm going to lose [the videogame] and I have to wait and it's, like, 30 seconds" (E20-girl, 13-14 years old, own cellphone).

Thus, one of the key factors for young user receptivity towards commercial messages of this kind is that they have a sense of control over them – that is, they can decide when to watch them without having them suddenly interrupt what they are seeing or doing. "If I was able to decide when I get adverts on my cellphone, I'd say before a video starts or when you're looking for a video, that it appear as a box containing the ad, but not in the middle" (E8-boy, 13-14 years old, own cellphone).

It is interesting to note that young users see television as a more "organized" medium than digital platforms; in the former, blocks of advertising are explicitly signaled, whereas the appearance of advertising online is not so predictable. "Ads are necessary because people have to find out about things, but that's what television is for, where they put adverts to separate one program from another, and that's OK because in the end everyone watches TV and that's how they can separate the programs better" (E1-girl, 10-12 years old, uses parents' cellphone).

The young people interviewed were not very tolerant of repetition: "always the same thing. For example, you're watching a video and a week later the same ad shows up, and then you get sick of some of them because you've seen them so many times. That's boring" (E14-girl, 10-12 years old, own cellphone). By contrast, young users also want their curiosity satisfied so that they do not get bored

during downtime, and that is why they prove so receptive to messages that include surprises, gifts or promotions: "Sometimes, for example, when I'm bored, I'm playing games just to be doing something and something new pops up and I say to myself: OK, let's try it" (E15-boy, 13-14 years old, own cellphone).

It should be noted that the degree of trust expressed by young users depends to a certain extent on their previous experience as consumer, a factor that correlates directly with age. "I don't believe an ad when it shows a spectacular image when in person, in real life, it's not like that. I don't know, for example, the other day I saw a tracksuit which looked really nice, but the fabric of the one I bought later wasn't the same as in the ad" (E6-girl, 13-14 years old, own cellphone).

3.3. Commercial messages in online games

Almost all of the young people interviewed referred to games as one of their normal screen-use and interaction activities on mobile devices. As a result, perhaps, they seem quite well informed on some of the advertising strategies used specifically in such contents. On the one hand, they acknowledge that brand communication messages may provide them with useful information: "On my brother's cellphone we have some games that we found through ads and we really love" (E7-boy, 10-12 years old, own cellphone). This feature enabling the discovery of new options lowers resistance to commercial contents: "Some games are ads for new games, so it's interesting that way" (E13-girl, 13-14 years old, uses parents' cellphone).

As soon they see a commercial message advertising a new game, some users are quick to download it, demonstrating a high level of digital knowledge and skill: "I just install one game. The first thing I do is see if it interests me, then I look at the image in Play Store, and then I install it. I spend 10 or 15 minutes trying it out. Sometimes I've spent only a minute or so on games and then I delete them because they were just one ad after another, it's not a game, it's an ad, it's like a virus" (E10-boy, 13-14 years old, own cellphone).

Young users are also aware of the high number of commercial messages, a frequency that annoys them above all when it gets in the way of their game-playing experience: "Playing, halfway through a game, and sometimes an ad appears. You have to wait a few seconds and I could do without it" (E10-boy, 10-12 years old, own cellphone). "Interruption, that's what it's about, once or a few times, before going back to playing the game" (E10-boy, 13-14 years old, own cellphone). "It's annoying because you might be very involved in the game and you want to keep playing. Yes. And some ads run for, like, two minutes" (E11-girl, 13-14 years old, own cellphone). Interruption of game-playing is repeatedly cited as a main drawback of advertising; and while young users understand the logic of the practice, they remain annoyed and tired of it.

Besides such interruption, excessive repetition of commercial messages during mobile videogames is likewise seem as especially annoying. "I play games a lot. I installed a game that was really poor quality, but I tried it out, and when I was being shot at advertisements like "Recharge by watching this ad", "Short of lives? Watch this ad" and "Kill everyone with this video" would appear. Games have the power to entertain, not bore people" (E10-boy, 13-14 years old, own cellphone).

Thus, while the information role of advertising is widely recognized, young people also demand that their main purpose as users be respected: to play, to enjoy themselves. Given this framework, they are predisposed to accepting and incorporating commercial messages into their day-to-day consumption of digital contents.

3.4. Influencers as intermediaries in brand communication

Whereas testimonial endorsement was the advertising strategy most closely associated with a famous face on television, the standard intermediary between brand and consumer in digital spaces is the influencer, who is a normal part of young users' online experience. Those who recognize the persuasive intent of this mediating relationship (older users with independent access to a mobile device) regard this approach as natural, helping them to get to know the brand and/or product in a "more entertaining way". "I like the way that Mis Pastelitos [a YouTuber] tells me what flour she uses, for instance, or icing bag number 6, and you can go and buy icing bag number 6 and make the famous cake. Perfect. So they're things that match my interests" (E13-girl, 13-14 years old, uses parents' cellphone).

The main role attributed to influencers in the advertising ecosystem is the provision of information; unboxing videos are interesting, for example, because they show new products and brands that are to users' tastes: "There's a YouTuber I used to watch called *Los Juguetes de Titi*. And she was always making videos, unboxing videos about new toys. I loved watching those videos. And when I went out, I'd see all those toys in the toyshop and because they were so cheap I'd buy them all" (E14-girl, 10-12 years old, uses parents' cellphone). If an influencer shares their personal tastes, users tend to accept and trust their opinions and advice, because they assume that someone they follow "wouldn't publicize

something if it was bad advertising" (E17-boy, 10-12 years old, own cellphone). "I like what that YouTuber [Miss Pastelitos] does because maybe she's giving advice so that things work out better for you" (E11-girl, 13-14 years old, own cellphone).

It should be noted that the young people interviewed are more likely to see brand ambassador influencers on YouTube: they see a close relationship between brands and YouTubers. In contrast, the same link is not so evident among Instagrammers or TikTokers. "YouTubers often say things like 'This video is sponsored by whoever' and they wear whoever's clothes to advertise them. […] On Instagram, maybe the influencer works for Nike and she wears Nike clothes, nothing else. Maybe she posts the photo just because" (E13-girl, 13-14 years old, uses parents' cellphone).

In short, Table 2 summarizes the main findings from the responses of young users who participated in the semi-structured interviews in relation to the research questions.

Table 2. Main findings categorized by research questions

Research questions	Main findings
Predisposition towards brand communication	- No negative connotations associated with advertising. In favor of advertising, provided that it adds value (preferably in the form of entertainment). - Cellphone adverts, the main mode of advertising. - Informative function.
Appealing / unappealing aspects of Brand communication	- Appealing aspects: in line with personal tastes; entertaining; fast; striking; gifts; promotions; satisfy curiosity; can be controlled. - Unappealing aspects: interruption; repetition.
Presence of commercial messages in online games	- Useful, if and when it does not disrupt the rhythm of the game. - Annoying, when it disrupts the gaming experience (interruption, repetition).
Influencers as brand-based content communicators	- Relative understanding of the persuasive intent of brand placement. - 'Normal' relationship between brands and influencers, especially on YouTube. - High levels of credibility.

4. Discussion

The young people who participated in these interviews acknowledged that commercial messages on digital platforms are a phenomenon that is familiar to them and said that they only found them annoying when they could not control them or there were too many of them, as both Andersen et al. (2008) and Sandberg (2011) had already concluded. These findings mirror those reached in other research studies, in which commercial brands were found to prefer spaces in which interactivity, personalization and entertainment proved key to reaching younger publics (Del Moral, Villalustre-Martínez and Neira-Piñerio, 2016; Soengas, Vivar and Abuín, 2015; Tur-Viñes and Segarra, 2014). Companies have spent quite some time trying out new hybrid formats that better meet users consumption habits: social networks, online games and influencer-generated content are relevant examples in this regard (Elorriaga and Monge, 2018; Feijoo and Sádaba, 2021).

Of the abovementioned strategies, entertainment-based approaches seem to be most appealing to young consumers, albeit only when they meet a particular set of requirements, such as added value in the gaming or leisure experience and the sense of control underlying the enjoyment of interactive content (Martí et al., 2013). Therefore, in ideal circumstances, young people are not opposed to the presence of commercial messages online; rather, their preference is for such communication to be placed in ways that does not disrupt the routine or rhythm of their experience as users, and that it not distract them from more interesting contents.

Moreover, should these conditions be met such advertising content is not merely tolerated: the experience of commercial messages can even lead to the projection of positive feeling (Mallinckrodt and Mizerski, 2007; Steffen, Mau and Schramm-Klein, 2013; Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2012; Vanweeksbeck, Walrave and Ponnet, 2017) from the entertainment events to the commercial messages that features in them. Young people say that they have downloaded gaming apps based on

advertising commercial recommendations they have seen or taken an interest in a particular product because an influencer has shown or mentioned it.

Both online games and influencer-generated content meet the conditions of entertainment; furthermore, influencers may also respond to interests that are specific and personal to users, yielding a more immersive and personalized experience. The young people's comments regarding the online contents they consume evince many of the features of the kind of relationship an influencer is capable of creating with their audience: credibility, familiarity and recommendation power (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Xiao, Wang and Chan-Olmsted, 2018). Thus, commercial brands often work with online games and influencers across the increasingly blurred lines between persuasive communication and entertainment.

5. Conclusions

An especially striking finding is that young people regard the presence of commercial messages in their entertainment experiences as unremarkable. Likewise, young users have developed their own rationale for accepting this phenomenon: that such advertising be informative and useful, adapted to their interests, entertaining and amenable to their control. Awareness of these factors may be important for commercial brands that aim to target this public, and which work to create content that appeal to such an audience.

Nevertheless, the results presented here may also be read in a different way, given the extensive (conventional and hybrid) commercial content to which young users are exposed: Are adequate advertising literacy strategies being designed and implemented to meet the demands of the situation outlined in this study? Research has already shown that young people avail of fewer cognitive processing resources in response to content of this kind (Chu, Blades and Herbert, 2014; Hudders et al., 2017; Rozendaal et al., 2013), which begs the question as to whether they are really capable of practicing critical thinking in relation to commercial messages.

This latter concern is particularly acute given the fact that most internet access happens via mobile devices – owned, for the most part, by the individual respondents – limiting the potential for adult mediation.

The limitations on this study pertain, above all, to the methodology used: the results it affords cannot be read as universal conclusions. At the same time, however, the use of the interview as a research tool meets the need for new methodological approaches, especially for qualitative purposes, and enables the development of new perspectives in a field that has become increasingly significant in recent years (Van Deursen, Helsper and Eynon, 2016). Moreover, the findings presented here are congruent with previous research results in the area. Further development of this type of study approach would be worthwhile, as well as its replication in other sociocultural contexts.

6. Specific contribution of each author

Contributions	Authors
Research paper design and development	Charo Sádaba, Beatriz Feijoo
Documentary research	Charo Sádaba
Data collection	Beatriz Feijoo
Critical analysis and interpretation of data	Charo Sádaba, Beatriz Feijoo
Writing, formatting, revision, editing and version approval	Charo Sádaba, Beatriz Feijoo

7. Acknowledgement

Translator: **Ángela Gearhart**.

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