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# What do social media teach? Influencers and followers in informal education in social media

## ¿Qué enseña el social media? Influencers y followers ante la educación informal en redes sociales

## Abstract
The educational potential of social networks, such as Instagram, YouTube or TikTok, marks the relationships between influencers and their followers. Both have a specific vision of what is taught and learned through the user experience. This perception depends on the objective of the content creator, their social or moral responsibility, and their vocation of public service. This study is part of a broader research project focusing on ethics in social media. First, it seeks to verify the correspondence between the teaching that influencers believe they transfer and the learning that their followers claim to obtain. Second, it seeks to identify the possible dysfunctions of this communicative exchange, the level of influence that these opinion leaders have on their audiences and the social and ethical responsibility they reflect in the dissemination of their content, as well as the knowledge both groups possess about media education and media literacy. To this end, a qualitative study was carried out based on in-depth interviews of 13 influencers and 24 followers, then processed using a thematic analysis with the Atlas.ti tool. The results reveal differences between influencers and content-creators, their scope and ethical responsibility. Followers also lack an adequate critical attitude, but they derive good lessons from the digital society. Media education and media literacy are revealed as a necessity for free, safe and critical interaction with social media.

## Keywords
Content creator; media literacy; ethics; influencer; social networks; followers

## Resumen
*Las potencialidades educativas de redes sociales como Instagram, YouTube o TikTok marcan las relaciones entre influencers (influyentes) y quienes les siguen (followers). Ambos grupos tienen una visión específica sobre lo que se enseña y se aprende a través de la experiencia de uso, y esta percepción depende también del objetivo de las personas creadoras de contenido, su responsabilidad social o ética y su vocación de servicio público. El objetivo de este trabajo, enmarcado en una amplia investigación centrada en la ética en los social media, es comprobar la correspondencia entre las enseñanzas que quienes son influencers creen trasladar y el aprendizaje que sus followers afirman obtener, identificando, además, las posibles disfunciones de este intercambio comunicativo, el nivel de influencia que estos procesos de opinión tienen en estos públicos y la responsabilidad social y ética que reflejan en la difusión de sus contenidos, así como los conocimientos que ambos grupos tienen sobre educomunicación. Para ello, se realiza un estudio cualitativo basado en entrevistas en profundidad a 13 influencers y a 24 followers, procesadas mediante análisis temático con la herramienta Atlas.ti. Los resultados revelan diferencias entre influencers y creadores/as de contenido, su alcance y la responsabilidad ética de cada grupo. Asimismo, las personas seguidoras adolecen de actitud crítica suficiente, pero extraen buenos aprendizajes de la sociedad digital. La educomunicación se revela como necesidad para una interacción libre, segura y crítica con los social media.*

## Palabras clave
*Creación de contenidos; educación mediática; ética; influyente; redes sociales; seguidores*

## 1. Introduction

The initial premise of this entire study is based on the assumption that there is a lack of importance attributed to the potential of social networks in informal education. This is despite the fact that new media representations influence the behaviour of citizens, not only in virtual spaces but also in the real lives of these people and, especially young adults and minors. This article offers evidence of the diagnoses made by young networkers and, in particular, draws conclusions from the good practices and discourses of the content creators online, with special emphasis on those who consider themselves as disseminators of knowledge in areas such as science, health and sport, or other educationally related contexts.

Studies on media consumption and the different information and communication systems continue to provide data on young people's progressive withdrawal from conventional media and the increase in consumption of other screens and devices (AIMC, 2022, 2nd wave). The Internet is the main source of information for 79% of Spanish citizens, television has been displaced to second place with 63% and social networks are now in third place, according to De Frutos et al. (2021), citing the Reuters Institute.

A study by the Carat media agency (2022) analyses internet penetration among the different generations, noting that the younger age groups have a very pronounced digital focus, and highlighting two main characteristics within these groups: the role of the *influencer* profile, as a source of information and opinion leader, and the widespread adoption of *eSports*.

Other studies (Vara et al., 2022: 10) note that young people consider mobile phones and social networks to be their favourite means of staying up to date, sharing news and participating in their own way in public debates; also that these social networks have become their main source of information and other content, despite being the media they trust the least (Pérez-Escoda et al., 2021).

Other studies denounce that the accessibility of content creation on the Internet has not resulted in a rupture of gender roles and stereotypes (Carrera et al., 2020) and that socialisation nowadays is already happening in and with the digital environment, which is full of gender stereotypes and sexist biases within the content it disseminates (De Andrés del Campo et al., 2020).

In recent decades, numerous research studies have proposed the need to take advantage of the possibilities of the various digital devices and social networks through media education (Aparici, 2010; Aparici and García-Marín, 2019; Aparici and Osuna-Acedo, 2013), also considering the importance of the emotional (Ferrés, 2014) and relational factor (Marta-Lazo and Gabelas, 2016) and assuming an organic vindication of our media habitat (De Andrés and Chaparro, 2022).

In Spain, media competence has been analysed since the second decade of the present century, in a line of research led by Professor Joan Ferrés (Ferrés et al., 2011, 2012), which concludes that the media competence of the Spanish population is low and that there is a need to educate citizens in the multiple fields of what would imply a comprehensive critical and ethical education involving different dimensions of the digital environment: languages, interaction processes, creation and dissemination processes, ideology and values, aesthetics, and also aspects related to the use of technologies involved in this digital audiovisual context, on the Internet and networks. Some research has addressed other specific aspects such as the impact of the alled fake news (Blanco-Alfonso, 2019), or the relevance of algorithms (Aparici and Martínez-Pérez, 2021), as well as the implications of monetisation of the content created on platforms such as YouTube (Gutiérrez-Martín et al., 2019). Among these demands is that those responsible for traditional media and social networks place the educational factor as a priority objective, instead of the commercial one (Picazo et al., 2020; Osuna-Acedo et al., 2018).

Another line that has had continuity led to the publication of collective works which include multiple experiences, especially in the Latin American context (Aguaded and Romero-Rodríguez, 2018; Aguaded and Pérez-Rodríguez, 2021) has also had the leading role of the ALFAMED Network. As well as initiatives that have included the state of research in this and other areas involving education (Gil-Quintana et al., 2021) and communication (Sádaba-Chálezquer et al., 2022).

At the same time, a growing number of cases have raised the need to study the digital diet of young people (Sampedro, 2018) and the creative possibilities and transmedia competencies of adolescents in their communicative performances (Scolari, 2018).

Hatch (2013) and Jenkins et al. (2015) were already pioneers in addressing transmedia culture matters. Other research has focused on the most creative and popular facets among young people, whether through the analysis of specific practices, such as selfies (San Pablo et al., 2018) or of the publications of adolescent *instagrammers* (Agulleiro-Prats et al., 2021). The need to include educational approaches that promote "digital making" (Blikstein, 2013) and "critical digital making" (Bordignon, 2017) and to provide elements for ethical reflection (De Andrés et al., 2018) is once again highlighted.

In a complementary approach to that followed in this investigation (García Jiménez et al., 2020), other proposals also investigate young people's perceptions in various aspects, including forms of access to content not provided by their schools (García-Matilla, 2021). It is of particular interest to further explore a line of analysis that also includes the perspective of content creators; this was studied years ago with communication professionals themselves (Buitrago et al., 2015) and is now being addressed by those disseminators who sometimes claim not to feel like *influencers* but who, nevertheless, are fully aware of their responsibilities as communication agents on social networks. This is one of the aims of the present study, especially in terms of exploring ways to develop trusting relationships with social networks (De Frutos and Pastor-Rodríguez, 2021), after observing that young people who are more engaged in content creation, as opposed to mere spectators, are also more willing to contrast information from social networks and actively denounce false news (Taddeo et al., 2022).

## 2. Methodology

As previously mentioned, this study corresponds to the research project in which it is framed, which aims to address ethical aspects of the behaviours of those who create content and to find out how this relates to their followers' actions and their perceptions about communication on social networks.

One of the starting hypotheses is that contradictions exist between the teachings these *influencers* believe they convey to their audience and the learnings that this audience receives. Such dissonance disappears when the profiles display social and ethical responsibility in the type of messages that they construct and disseminate. In this sense, differences are expected between the first group of *influencers* interviewed, with a public service vocation profile (mostly with an educational nature) and the second group, whose social media content is more focused on *lifestyle*, *fashion* or *entertainment*.

For this reason, the following research questions summarise the objectives of this analysis:

1. Which teachings do *influencers* believe they are transmitting to their mass audiences through the content they post on their social media profiles? Do these teachings correspond to the lessons and benefits that followers believe they are extracting from social media? Which contradictions are observed, and what is the significance of such conflict?

2. What network dysfunctions (conflicts, fake news, hate messages or other harmful effects of social interaction) do *influencers* identify in their content creation and sharing processes? Are these the same as those perceived by their followers?

3. What social and ethical responsibility do *influencers* exhibit in creating and disseminating their content? Are there differences based on the content category and type of profile? Is there any correlation between the number of followers and the ethical commitment of the influencer?

4. What critical capacity do followers and *influencers* have, and what are their demands when it comes to educommunication?

5. What meaning and impact do *influencers* have on female followers and do they replace their closest role models? What is the perception of the *influencers* themselves?

6. What is the relevance and influence of sexual content on the regular watching habits of followers?

7. Are there common patterns among *influencers* for the time spent on content creation and consumption? And among followers? What are the key similarities and differences between both groups?

8. What purpose do *influencers* and followers pursue with their social media activity? Do they have common goals?

9. What content is being published and consumed? Is freedom of speech perceived across all topics and areas? What self-imposed restrictions do content creators have? Which categories do they target? Do they agree with the followers in the study?

To answer these questions, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 *influencers* and 24 followers. The scripts of both interviews (supported by their corresponding theoretical foundations) correlate with each other but are adapted to each of these two groups, *influencers* and followers.

Six women and six men of Spanish nationality who create content on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, with a follower count of over 20,000 users, were contacted and personally interviewed. The influencer profiles are individual and self-identified, consisting of elite athletes, teachers, communicators and prescribers (both women and men) of fashion, entertainment or lifestyle and nutrition. Six of these profiles have a public service role.

The analysis was completed through 24 interviews conducted amongst 16 female and 8 male users of the Instagram, TikTok and YouTube social networks aged between 16 and 26 years and residing in Spain.

The data analysis collected through structured and in-depth interviews is performed using the Atlas.ti software (V. 22.1.0.), utilising a thematic analysis that allows to identify, organise, detect patterns and analyse the data set for a better understanding of the object of study.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Interviews with followers

The analysis results show a very high social network consumption. The people interviewed acknowledged that they spend more than 2 hours daily using social networks. They perceive that they spend less time on social networks than their peers and admit the difficulty of controlling their time spent online and a certain degree of addiction. *"...There is something addictive about it; it isolates you from reality. It takes your mind away from your problems and makes you live differently than you really do. So it creates an addiction that is very difficult to overcome"*. (23_M_17_1BACH).

On average, three social networks are used: Instagram first, followed by Tik Tok, WhatsApp, Twitter and YouTube. The main reason not to use more social networks is to avoid increasing the time spent on them.

The reasons for using different social networks are mainly to keep in touch with other people, check out their lives, pass the time, and have fun. They also want to disconnect from reality, forget about problems and escape. Issues such as "gossip", "posturing", *"projecting an image that is not the real one",* or *"...having a great time in front of a screen without the need to be surrounded by people"* are also stated. (17_M_23_SEC).

The contents followed vary from person to person, depending on their interests and hobbies. They include football, cooking, video games, fashion, photography, theatre, music, and travel. The type of usage is also different. Essentially, content is chosen based on affinity with their interests, rarely investigating the profile of those who create the content.

There is little perceived continuity in the following of profiles. Followers seek new content and are attracted by the content of other profiles. Despite being unaware of how the algorithm works in social networks, they appreciate content that aligns with their tastes and interests. They only perceive lucrative purposes for third parties when explicit advertising appears.

The term *"influencer"* is described as a young, famous public figure with a different character, a specialist in specific subjects and who influences other people's way of life, especially their personality. *"... Who influences as a person. A personality like El Xokas, whom you like, who influences you and who changes your personality"*. (2_H_18_1BACH). *"...Persona a la que sigues para de alguna forma ser como ella, hacer los mismos planes o que te dé ideas sobre cosas que ella ha utilizado y que tiene experiencia"* (10_M_17_2BACH).

Their popularity is not only due to the posting of engaging and entertaining content but also to their physique and charisma. However, an influencer's popularity is also determined by their number of followers. *"There are people who buy followers and therefore have more followers. The fact that a person has a lot of followers draws you to follow them"* (22_M_19_1U).

Despite acknowledging their huge influence, only 28% of the people interviewed admitted to having been influenced. Imitation in terms of physical appearance and in the way of thinking and acting is admitted. *"...I want to be like this person, or I want to be like that person, or I want to do what this person is doing"* (21_M_19_1U). Only 12% reported purchasing products recommended by these users on their social networks.

The main contribution of *influencers* is considered to be the entertainment and distraction they offer, the opportunity to witness different lifestyles and the motives for their success. However, some negative aspects include their great influential power, posturing, lies, gossip, hate messages, consumerism and the dissemination of misinformation.

97% of followers recognise the unreliability of the information published on social networks at first instance, but only 36% claim to verify the information, mainly through other digital channels. *"Well, I do trust... and a lot of it is a lie, and then I think, whoops, I trust it, and it's a lie, and I've been deceived. But normally I do trust, and you have to be aware that sometimes it's a lie"* (23_M_17_1BACH).

However, there is total trust in the impartiality and goodwill of the *influencers* they follow while ascribing the dissemination of self-serving information that lacks objectivity to those they do not follow. *"They are*

*real, they are people just like me, they may have different ideas, but they are real and trustworthy"* (1_M_20_N_C). *"...I think that those I follow, provide information that I like, they present it in a good way, I find it interesting, and I believe that they always do it sincerely"* (22_M_19_1U).

The presence of sexually loaded content on social media, especially around female bodies, is openly acknowledged but excused and tolerated arguing that this sexual imagery is present in other contexts, such as TV shows or advertising. However, this is considered to contribute towards the sexualisation of the female body and the proliferation of sexist attitudes. It also leads to an increased number of views. *"Surely... morbidity is what drives social networks. I'm going to see what this person has uploaded... he or she is shirtless... It's more appealing than a photo of your face"* (11_M_20_3U). *"Yes, influencers get more likes on photos uploaded in bikinis or showing other parts of their bodies than if they upload dressed-up pictures"* (10_M_17_2BACH). *"Yes, it's sad but true. When a woman is more sexualised in a photo, they get the most publicity, so to speak. When they get the most views"* (12_M_20_2U).

Pornography consumption on the Internet from a very early age (10-11 years old) is admitted, especially by boys; however, the role played by *influencers* and their content does not correlate distinctly with this use.

Opinions are divided on whether young people and adolescents have a critical attitude towards sexual content on social media, with 49% of respondents answering "no" and 51% saying "yes". However, 64% admit the dangers of receiving sex education online, but this is openly attributed to the lack of sex education provided by schools and families. *"When you grow up, you realise that the sexual reference that many people have is pornography. Certain attitudes say: you've seen this in porn, of course. Also, as we are not taught proper sex education at school, we go online, and that's where you see everything. I think sex education in high schools is insufficient, it's better than it was years ago, but it still has a lot of room for improvement"* (21_M_19_1U). *"...I think that information is being obtained from social networks but mainly from Google. I would also say that perhaps schools should take a step forward because, at least in my case, I have never been taught anything. We had some sort of lesson full of nonsense, but it is true that due to the lack of education in schools, information is obtained from other sources"* (2_H_18_1BACH).

On the other hand, findings reveal that three out of four respondents reported learning from social networks, emphasising the importance of this learning for their personal and professional development, as opposed to what they learnt through formal education. *"...Maybe at school they teach you more knowledge whereas influencers teach you more about life, about work, about making money, things like that, and I believe that includes many things..."* (2_H_18_1BACH). *"...They are there to help you, and there are many profiles, and I think you can educate yourself in many ways. You can always rely on those who are good at educating"* (15_M_29_MU).

Different criteria were detected in the concept of learning itself. *"...Basically, like real life aspects, things that you learn. I have learned a lot, although it sounds a bit strange, about family life. For example, some girls were talking about the problem they'd had with the dryer, very random things, but which you eventually learn. I have learnt a lot. For instance, I've learned a lot through YouTube"* (1_M_20_N_C). *"... You learn mainly from their ideals, about subjects you don't know much about"* (9_H_21_FP).

The role of social media in shaping their personalities and managing their emotions is also acknowledged. *"...It's watching people who have achieved success. Seeing different personalities and being able to form judgements... Small things about their personality and the success they have achieved and how they have achieved it help me see a way of how I have to be in the future as a person..."* (2_H_18_1BACH). *"...On the positive side, I think they bring me maturity, as they are usually adults and they can teach you a lot about how to interact with people and with society itself... I would say that, in this case, something that high school does not teach you is how to be more mature"* (24_H_16_Sec). *"...Quite a few things. For example, certain anxiety symptoms, and that's when you start browsing, and I got that understanding of anxiety from the social network, and then I can decide what I want to do with it..."* (20_M_17_1BACH).

### 3.2. Interviews with *influencers*

The significance of social networks can be synthesised by the fact that they are not only a means of communication and information but also a space for leisure, expression, evasion, global personal and professional relations, and the solution of disparate problems. It is also a showcase and a spectacle. *"A showcase, a place where people can get to know each other by searching for a solution to a problem that you can solve"* (10_MT_ED).

The term influencer primarily refers to the possible influence exerted on their followers. Nevertheless, there is a clear difference between those who identify their influence in fashion and lifestyle areas (*"An*

*influencer can be a role model with beautiful skin and an impeccable aesthetic, who goes on holiday or shows you a cocktail party on the beach. In other words, it's an idyllic life. A life to envy"* [1_CNLCS]) and those who prefer to use it as an educational effort (*"Yes, I aspire to be influential in different areas other than fashion and lifestyle. I would like to be influential in raising consciousness, in culture, in social development"*) [2_IMNLG]).

A distinction is made between *influencers,* who only give advice and essentially serve as advertising tools, and content creators, who have a more permanent and continuous activity as producers and disseminators of information.

The motivations of the people recognised as *influencers* who respond to a more generalist profile tend to share a common ambition, more focused on the projection of a personal image and their benefit on social networks. *"Around 2014/2015, there was a boom in the number of youtube channels as the idea that anyone could make a living by simply capturing their life on video, giving their opinion and generating content for people to react to began spreading, as people became rich at the time"* (1_CNLCS). *"I believe that an influencer, apart from monetising their networks, is a person who has the ability to influence on consumer behaviour"* (6_A_DV).

However, those who create and disseminate content do not embrace the term *influencer* because of its pejorative and biased connotations in terms of economic performance and types of content disseminated. *"...Who bases their content on personal perceptions, or on telling things without necessarily having a professional point of view, I consider myself more of a communicator... and a communicator does it from a professional or more rigorous standpoint in terms of construction. An influencer tells you about their experiences on a trip or makes this or that recommendation"* (5_AI_SAN).

The polarity between *influencers* and content creators regarding economic benefit is noteworthy. While the former sees it as a way of earning a living, the latter sees it as a hobby, interest or outreach. *"Then you discover that this is a business like any other. Then you realise that you have a source of income, I don't know if I should say it... From my experience, I earn more money than people my age and I earn it doing what I want to do, which is incredibly fulfilling emotionally"* (1_DNLCS). *"...It has become an activity, not the main one, but one of the main ones, with my daily tasks. It is not an income-generating activity, it is not an occupation"* (2_IMNLG).

The Sankey diagram (Figure 1) shows the frequency of co-occurrences between the codes in the analysis and the relationships observed between the *influencer* concept and other codes. Besides influence and economic profit, other negative aspects of social media, such as deception and hypocrisy (*"... duplicity of your persona and the personality you adopt on social media"*), are referred to in the analysis [1_DNLCS]) or the threats posed by being popular (*"On Facebook, I always had two profiles because not everyone knew how to differentiate the personal world from the professional world and I was a bit afraid that people who followed me professionally would have access to my personal information"*) [7_JES_VIZ_SE]). Also the social responsibility associated with the term. *"...Yes, I consider that I have a great responsibility because I have a large community and, regardless of its size, I do know that my opinion carries a lot of weight, so I have to be careful, cautious and rigorous to set a good example"* (5_AI_SAN). *"...But I believe that in the end, we all have a responsibility and the things we publish, say or do, have an influence..."* (12_P_G_R).

**Figure 1: Sankey diagram. Frequency of co-occurrences between the *influencer* concept and the other analysis codes**



Source: Own elaboration.

Both groups believe in the critical capacity of their audiences and also track their profile, providing accurate data. *"Most of them are critical. They more or less agree with what I think, but there are times when they question you about something... They give you their opinion, and if people have a different opinion, they are more than welcome. There are times when discussions are formed, and these are enriching, always in a respectful manner"* (8_J_BM).

They claim to spend an average of no more than two hours a day on networks, although the time spent on them significantly increases when it comes to producing content. *"I use social media all the time, from the time I get up to the time I go to bed, but because it is my job, my source of income, ..., more than 8 hours, for sure... It is my way of generating clients"* (7_JES_VIZ_SE). *"The time I'm not creating content for social networks, I'm consuming social networks, I easily spend between 6 and 7 hours a day on social media, and I don't know how it will affect me, but that's the reality. Combining creation with consumption"* (1_DNLCS).

The pressure of publishing is high. *"Before, I didn't, but now I have the feeling that people expect me to be publishing every day and that sometimes makes you post more insubstantial publications for the sake of being around rather than communicating something really interesting"* (2_IMNLG). However, within the group of content creators, they exceptionally have the help of a Community Manager, although they agree that help is needed to professionalise the work. They prioritise being honest in what they publish. More than the sense of commitment to those who follow them, it is a commitment to themselves. *"I have the commitment to be honest in what I do. So, I may do something wrong, but if I've done it, it was because I thought it was the right thing to do, and I don't mind if I have to apologise, I'll apologise"* (2_IMNLG).

Nevertheless, the group feels a certain degree of commitment to their followers. *"So my commitment to my followers is, quote-unquote, 'not selling out'"* (1_DNLCS). *"I have a commitment to these people, but not because I feel I owe it to them, not in the sense that I have achieved what I am because of my community, it's not that feeling; it's more the fact that because they follow me professionally, they deserve that I have respect for them and create content that they find interesting"* (5_AI_SAN). *"Yes, I answer as many messages as I can, which does not take up too much of my time, but whenever I can, I answer them. Especially if they consider it important, I answer them"* (6_A_DV).

Content creators are not bound by trends or by what works best for the effectiveness of their social media messages. They are not subjected to the marketing strategies used by so-called *influencers*. They do not tend to post daily, and their strategies for creating synergies and broadening their outreach are

diverse. Platforms tend to encourage greater specialisation among communicators, meaning those who have started on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube can then move on to Twitch or TIK TOK, to test how their followers respond to these networks. They provide ideas on how to improve the use of these networks and media, which are sometimes underused, and agree that networks require more immediacy than conventional media. *"If I suddenly have a good interview, in the media, on television, and I publish it seven days later, nothing happens (...) I think that what you publish on social networks is much more real than what you sometimes show on television"* (2_IMNLG).

The unreliability of social networks is emphasised, attributing it to profit-seeking and, somewhat paradoxically, to the freedom of expression they allow. *"The traditional media are more reliable because they contrast all the information, but it is true that social networks are more accessible, without any kind of censorship. What's more, whatever I think, I post, you can't just publish anything in the media, but you can on social networks"* (6_A_DV). *"Unfortunately, due to the influencers we were talking about, the same thing has happened in social media because they have turned social networks into their own teleshopping, and they don't care if they promote one thing or another because they are actors who, so to speak, will record or act with whatever you tell them if there is money involved"* (7_JES_VIZ_SE).

All the groups of people interviewed agreed on the need to contrast the information disseminated on social networks, although not all of them considered it equally important. *"It's an unresolved matter, I haven't had the time until now, but it's true that I'd like to do it because it makes you more mature and open-minded. I want to do it, but little by little"* (6_A_DV). *"I tend to follow independent journalists and media to become a patron of these sources, or I follow specialists. Rather than using generalist sources of information, I identify those I consider reliable and track them to keep up to date on the subject. I have invested time in assessing the credibility of certain media and journalists, and I rely on them to know what is going on"* (5_AI_SAN).

However, content creators or disseminators place greater importance on documenting their work before it is published, which gives them greater credibility and makes it easier and more profitable. They claim this work takes more time and effort than posting their intervention on a social network.

It is generally agreed that the conditioning of the algorithms used to determine what audiences want to hear contributes to the creation of an uncritical citizenry and leads to a loop of ratification based on what the least critical people want to hear at any given moment, resulting in a lack of flexibility and tolerance. According to the testimonies analysed, this results in the rejection of those creative people who distance themselves from the convictions of those who follow them instead of encouraging them to engage in dialectical thinking.

They agree that social networks serve to educate in values and that they are often a stimulus to promote their creativity. They also agree on the need to educate children and young people about the use and dangers of social networks, both in formal education and at home. *"I think that the first thing they have to do is to educate and inform about the dangers of social networks, of course not to ban them, because there are very good things about social media, but I see it in my sister, who is 14 years old. They need to set limits for younger people. I try to educate her, I try to explain it to her, but it's complicated for her to remove notifications on her own because she says, sure, but if they tag me with a photo that I don't like, then what, I'll be on it after four hours, and everyone will know about it. So yes, I think we should make it clear"* (3_PRGST).

The dysfunctions of social networks are known and listed. It is agreed upon that haters appear when the publications have certain ideological or religious content or represent views on feminism, non-speciesism, veganism, animal abuse, or different sexual identities, among others. However, the defence strategy basically consists of not allowing oneself to be affected by it. *"I must say that it varies a little bit from day to day. In general, I have tended to let the comments slide as much as possible, but there are days when they catch you a little lower and hurt you more. I have reported it sometimes"* (2_IMNLG). *"They affected at first, but now I don't care. I really mean it. Everyone can say whatever they want, and you have to learn to ignore what doesn't interest you and focus on what does"* (4_EST_M).

There is a general lack of awareness about the existence of codes of conduct, except for the measures implemented by certain platforms, which involve censorship decisions that are considered unfair and ill-advised. *"There is clear sexism and, for example, one thing that has been claimed many times is that on Instagram, you can't show a woman's breast, and instead, you can show a man with a naked torso and his nipples uncovered. This is incomprehensible. It is just pure and simple sexism"* (2_IMNLG). However, there does not appear to be a consensus on whether an ethical code is followed. *"Yes, my own"* (7_JES_VIZ_SE). *"No doubt. It is something I do very consciously and very actively. My role as a volunteer is very present here. I try to interpret what I publish in many ways. One of the values underlying my content was consumer protection. So I asked myself, how can this be understood, can this harm people?"* (5_AI_SAN). *"Yes, obviously, it's what we were saying before, I have to keep control over what*

*I upload and what I don't upload, try to bring a fairly positive mentality to people, and try to help rather than harm"* (6_A_A_DV).

## 4. Discussion and conclusions

The relation, information and communication technologies (Gabelas-Barroso & Marta-Lazo, 2020) generated by social media reveal new creation, broadcasting, consumption and reception capabilities, demands and supplies (Aparici & García-Marín, 2018) of all types of content. Given the influence that these new communicative orders and their algorithmic scenarios and patterns impose, educommunication encourages the audience to develop critical thinking and attitudes; it also fosters social and ethical responsibility when creating content, regardless of whether it has greater or lesser influence.

Although there are differences in criteria, most young people claim to learn and receive help from social networks that they do not find in formal education, especially in constructing their identity or managing their emotions. This means that the online medium is seen as a good environment for personal development, creativity and values education.

The results of the present study allow differentiating between two profiles: *influencers* and content creators. Although both profiles exert a significant influence over their audiences, the former is characterised by focusing on topics related to fashion and lifestyle and by the high presence of commercial brands in their messages, almost always derived from a lucrative purpose. The second profile disseminates contrasted informative or educational messages, displaying a greater ethical commitment to its audience and distancing themselves from the *influencer* profile in a critical manner.

*Influencers* are the group with the greatest reach and success, understood as the number of users that follow them and that they manage to attract. Their followers are familiar with the appealing, entertaining, successful and fashionable content they publish, but they interpret the so-called posturing, lies, hate messages and the incitement to consumerism as negative.

However, content creators also experience online dysfunction in the form of hate messages, especially in response to posts that could be portrayed as ideologically driven.

The opinions of the people interviewed highlighted the lack of education received, which reaffirms the need for media literacy. Young audiences admit that they do not contrast information and highlight the benefits of the content provided by the algorithm, but at the same time they claim to be unaware of the meaning and purpose of such algorithm. They trust the objectivity of their online idols, only understand as lucrative the content that refers to identifiable brands and selectively perceive the dissemination of self-serving information only by the group of *influencers* they do not follow. However, followers are not always loyal and alter their preferences according to new content, trends or profiles.

The other major educational issue revealed is that of affective sexuality. The people interviewed agree on the need to include more teaching about sexuality in basic education. Some recognise the sexual charge of messages published by *influencers* and report online consumption of pornographic content among males in their environment from the age of 10; however, the *influencer* profile does not seem to contribute to such consumption. According to the study, there is a degree of contradiction between the lesser importance that female *influencers* attribute to the sexual nature of their content and the greater perception female followers have of it: it is lower for female *influencers* and higher for female followers. Female followers also express the importance of superficiality, beauty and their bodies in attracting likes and accounts that follow them, and they are aware of the sexist consequences that this trend continues to nurture.

The diagnosis of the perception of both the creator collective (influential or not) and the audience raises the urgent need for real and effective educommunication from basic education in order to provide children and young people with a critical approach but also with an autonomous capacity to take advantage of the benefits and knowledge provided through the multiple media platforms (Taddeo et al., 2022). Future research could consider practical media education programming to work in classrooms (Grizzle et al., 2021) or further explore these programmes' effects on the critical attitude of adolescents and young people, raising their awareness of the need to adopt responsible media consumption. The lack of critical attitude facilitates masking strategies and contributes to the normalisation of consumption without any conscious filtering (Bermejo-Berros, 2022). The educommunication collective has been claiming that educational policies should assume a higher level of commitment in implementing a generalised media education at the different educational levels since the end of the last century.

## 5. Specific contributions from each author

| Contributions | Author |
|---|---|
| **Work concept and design** | Author 1, author 2, author 3, author 4 |
| **Documentary research** | Author 1, author 2, author 3, author 4 |
| **Data collection** | Author 1, author 2, author 3, author 4 |
| **Critical analysis and interpretation of data** | Author 1, author 2, author 3, author 4 |
| **Version review and approval** | Author 1, author 2, author 3, author 4 |

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The authors of this article have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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