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New mobile advertising formats targeting young audiences: an analysis of advertainment and influencers' role in perception and understanding

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Over the past twenty years, brand communication strategies have evolved, particularly for younger audiences, with formats that blend advertising and entertainment content, often featuring influencers. This style of advertising presents challenges, notably the difficulty minors face in recognizing the commercial intent of messages. This article explores minors' awareness and understanding of these advertising techniques, along with their moral and evaluative responses. We conducted 35 in-depth online interviews with minors aged 10–14 years in Spain. The findings reveal that recognition and understanding of such advertising increase with age. Although minors are accustomed to these practices, their primary reaction is indifference. The study emphasizes the importance of enhancing minors' critical capacities to better navigate hybrid messages on social networks.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, brand communication strategies targeting younger audiences have evolved significantly. New formats that blend advertising with entertainment content, often referred to as “advertainment” and feature influencers, have become particularly popular among this demographic. This content is predominantly consumed via mobile phones, which have become ubiquitous among young people in developed nations (Gómez-Miguel and Calderón-Gómez, 2022). In Spain, for example, the average age for first mobile phone use is ~11 years (Andrade et al. 2021).

However, this trend presents a challenge for consumer protection, as it increasingly blurs the line between content and commercial messaging, making it harder for minors to discern advertising intent (Martínez-Pastor et al. 2022). The personal nature of mobile devices and their ability to target specific audiences present significant commercial opportunities, yet ethical concerns regarding their impact on young audiences have emerged (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022).

Minors tend to have a favorable view of influencer-associated advertising, which enhances its attractiveness to brands (Martínez Pastor, 2019). However, several risks accompany this popularity: young audiences may struggle to recognize the commercial nature of such content, regulatory measures requiring clear advertising disclosures remain insufficient, and minors often place undue trust in the narratives of digital content creators (Tur-Viñes et al. 2018).

Given these challenges, it is crucial for parents and educators to help young people develop a critical understanding of these hybrid advertising messages. The rise of new advertising formats across digital screens has made advertising literacy programs more urgent than ever. Such programs are key to enhancing minors’ understanding of the persuasive intent and mechanisms behind advertising (Hudders et al. 2017; Daems et al. 2017; Arbaiza et al. 2024). Advertising literacy, a core component of media literacy, fosters the development of critical consumer habits (Arbaiza et al. 2024). While many academic studies focus on issues like mobile device management or identifying fake news on social media, research on how children process advertising remains in its infancy, with Belgium and the Netherlands being key contributors to this field (Fernández-Gómez et al. 2023, Arbaiza et al. 2024).

De Jans et al. (2017) highlighted the lack of academic focus on new formats, such as native or mobile advertising, with most research still concentrating on television. Moreover, few studies have examined the tactics or influencing factors in advertisements targeting minors or their social impact (Fernández-Gómez et al. 2023).

As previous research suggests, empowering minors to critically engage with these new persuasive strategies remains a significant challenge (De Veirman et al. 2019). Boerman and van Reijmersdal (2020) explored how disclosing sponsorships in influencer videos affects children’s advertising literacy. Their study found that when children accurately recall disclosure, they are better able to recognize the persuasive intent behind the content. Interestingly, children with strong parasocial relationships (PSR) with influencers tend to maintain positive attitudes toward the brand, even after recognizing the commercial intent. For these children, their emotional connection with influencers mitigates critical responses to sponsored content.

Similarly, Chan (2021) found that some children aged 10 to 12 did not recognize product-centric YouTube videos as advertisements due to their limited definition of advertising. This highlights the need for education to familiarize children with modern persuasive messaging embedded in media. Furthermore, the study noted that parents rarely intervene to help their children develop

the consumer skills necessary to identify persuasive content, leaving them vulnerable to such messages.

This research addresses a gap in the literature by examining how to enhance advertising literacy among minors in relation to mobile advertainment and influencer-driven content—advertising strategies that remain understudied in Spain. As over half of Generation Z expresses interest in becoming content creators, and Generation Alpha continues to develop social media habits, these trends are likely to establish new norms for industry engagement with younger generations (Morning Consult Pro, 2024). The growth of influencer marketing in Spain, where investments increased by 23.9% in 2023, further underscores the relevance of this topic (Infoadex, 2024).

This study has two objectives:

1. To explore minors’ understanding and awareness of persuasive messaging within influencer-driven hybrid content.
2. To examine minors’ moral and evaluative responses to hybrid advertising and assess its potential impact on brand and influencer perception.

Literature review

Mobile advertising, entertainment, and influencers among younger audiences. Advertising has evolved significantly in the early years of the twenty-first century, shifting from a direct persuasive model embedded in traditional media to an indirect model seamlessly integrated into the digital entertainment culture. This transformation has increased advertising effectiveness by employing techniques that mask the commercial intent and activate consumer participation, thereby leaving a stronger psychological impact that encourages consumption (Bermejo-Berros, 2023).

When it comes to younger audiences, such as Generation Alpha, they tend to adopt a more critical stance toward digital advertising formats compared to previous generations. This creates a significant dilemma, as this same audience demands formats that blend advertising, entertainment, and information, leading to increasingly blurred boundaries between these elements (Feijoo Fernández and Fernández-Gómez, 2021).

Additionally, cell phones are common possessions among children, and even the youngest can access their relatives’ phones, often using them for relational or entertainment purposes (Andrade et al. 2021; Feijoo et al. 2023).

Attitudes toward mobile advertising are influenced by three key message characteristics: informativeness, entertainment, and irritation (Ducoffe, 1995, 1996). These serve as significant predictors of advertising value. Ducoffe’s web advertising model (1995) further suggests that perceived advertising value impacts attitudes toward it. His findings confirmed that consumers who perceived high value in web advertising were more likely to develop positive attitudes toward it (Ducoffe, 1996). Brackett and Carr (2001) expanded Ducoffe’s model by adding two elements: credibility and consumer demographic profiles. Many researchers have adapted the Brackett and Carr (BC) model, modifying variables or combining it with other models. For instance, Tsang et al. (2004) incorporated permission and incentive variables into the BC model to predict attitudes, intentions, and behaviors related to SMS ads. Other studies, such as Xu (2006), integrated personalization into their models. According to Küster et al. (2017), personalization and entertainment are key drivers of mobile advertising effectiveness.

A meta-analysis by Maseeh et al. (2021), which examined 20 years of mobile advertising research, revealed that attitudes

toward receiving mobile advertisements are significantly and positively linked to customers' intentions to engage with them. Personalization, entertainment, and credibility were found to positively influence customer attitudes, while irritation had a negative impact. Their analysis showed that entertainment and credibility have the strongest positive effects on customer attitudes, with personalization having a minimal impact. For older users, factors such as personalization, credibility, informativeness, and irritation play a more significant role, whereas younger users are primarily concerned with entertainment.

Traditional advertising formats, such as YouTube ads, web banners, or promoted posts on social media, are readily recognized as commercial communications. In contrast, newer formats like web series, video games, or podcasts entertain and add value while subtly integrating persuasive messages (Fernández-Gómez et al. 2024). This hybridization of content is especially evident in influencer-driven advertising, where content creation often merges entertainment with persuasion, making the commercial intent less apparent. Consequently, social media is evolving towards a hybridization of content, employing formats and techniques that obscure the commercial essence (Feijoo Fernández and Fernández-Gómez, 2021).

In Spain, the advertising industry has advocated for stringent regulations to clearly distinguish commercial content (IAB Spain, 2023). The Royal Decree 444/2024 defines the criteria to identify "users of special relevance" under the new Law 13/2022, the General Audiovisual Communication Law, effective July 7. In addition to the challenge of recognizing advertising content, the regulatory framework, often reliant on self-regulation or incomplete regulations, fails to address the complexities of persuasive messaging, as observed in Spain (Serrano-Maillo, 2022). Moreover, disclosures of product placements and promotions in influencer marketing are frequently inadequate (Núñez-Cansado et al. 2021). A major concern is the indistinguishable branded content endorsed by minors on their channels without clear advertising disclosures (Tur-Viñes et al. 2019; Feijoo and Pavez, 2019).

Demonstrating a contractual relationship between brands and minors often proves difficult (Núñez-Cansado et al. 2021), and minors' recognition of commercial intent remains dubious (Fernández-Gómez et al. 2021). Social media posts by influencers significantly shape user decisions (De-Jans et al. 2021; Coates et al. 2019; Tiggeman and Anderberg, 2020; Lowe-Calverley and Grieve, 2021). Teenagers are receptive to brand placements and sponsorships in influencer content, provided there is a balance between entertainment and commercial elements (Van-Dam and Van-Reijmersdal, 2019).

Children and preadolescents view YouTubers as central figures in their digital youth culture (Aran-Ramspott et al. 2018) and tend to respond positively to products and brands when they are endorsed by influencers (Nandagiri and Philip, 2018; Liu and Zheng, 2024). Influencers are often perceived as "close friends" (Meyers, 2017), reinforcing the belief, especially among children, that anyone can achieve similar popularity (Silva and Costa, 2021). As a result, their audience is more likely to trust their recommendations and find the products and brands they endorse appealing (Lim et al. 2017).

This is why PSR has become crucial in explaining the bond between influencers and their followers. PSR refers to an ongoing relationship that involves more than just a single interaction or exposure. Through continuous engagement with social influencers, they become a part of followers' daily lives, fostering a sense of intimacy, similarity, and closeness (Boerman and van Reijmersdal, 2020).

In Spain, for instance, the Annual Social Media Study by IAB Spain y Elogia (2023) has expanded its focus from adults over 18

to include Generation Alpha—minors aged 12–17. This group predominantly follows influencers (82%), primarily on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Moreover, 52% of them seek information on social networks before making a purchase, and 43% acknowledge that social media influences their purchasing decisions. The five most frequented platforms by this demographic are WhatsApp (94%), Instagram (84%), TikTok (79%), YouTube (65%), and Spotify (57%), with Twitch ranking tenth (18%).

As media literacy studies have shown, interventions for teaching digital media literacy in schools have "increased understanding of media content, greater awareness of media influence, a more critical approach to media, increases in feelings of competency and empowerment with regard to media use, increases in digital media content production skills, and reductions in excessive or risky media use" (Eyal and Te'eni-Harari, 2023). In this advertising landscape, where persuasive messaging blends with entertainment, developing advertising literacy is crucial for this young audience (Fernández-Gómez et al. 2023).

Advertising literacy and minors. Recent academic attention has focused on advertising literacy among minors, a relatively new field of study in the digital context (De Jans et al. 2017; Fernández-Gómez et al. 2023; Arbaiza et al. 2024). Notably, 2020 saw the highest number of publications in this area (Fernández-Gómez et al. 2023). Boush, Friestad, and Rose (1994) provide a foundational definition of advertising literacy as the range of skills and abilities individuals possess to effectively engage with traditional advertising.

Rozendaal et al. (2013) expand this definition by introducing the concept of persuasive knowledge, which comprises two dimensions of advertising literacy. The conceptual dimension includes the recognition of advertising, comprehension of its commercial sources, intent, persuasive techniques, and the biases it introduces in depicting reality. The attitudinal dimension relates to the development of critical perspectives towards advertising.

A more recent and less explored aspect of advertising literacy is the moral dimension, which concerns the ethical considerations of advertising. Typically, children and adolescents do not critically assess the moral appropriateness of the advertisements they encounter or consider how exaggeration, filters, or personal data are used to tailor these messages. Although this age group understands the rules of the commercial game and integrates them into their digital behavior, they appear less aware of the ethical implications of the resources used (Sweeney et al. 2022).

Hudders et al. (2017) emphasize that the ability to morally evaluate advertising has become increasingly important, as advertising formats exposed to minors in digital contexts are progressively merging with entertainment. Numerous studies on modern digital advertising formats show that merely understanding the persuasive intent of advertising is not enough for minors to effectively process messages in digital environments (Rozendaal et al. 2011; An et al. 2014; Rozendaal et al. 2013; Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2017; Van Reijmersdal et al. 2017). However, research on how children process advertising in digital contexts is still in its early stages (Feijoo et al. 2023; De-Jans et al. 2021).

Historically, television and its programming for children and youth—particularly regarding food brand advertising—have been the main focus of academic research (Moreno Delgado et al. 2020). Advertising literacy among minors, however, has largely been studied through the lens of television and traditional digital formats. As the advertising landscape evolves, it is essential to

consider new formats and tools that resonate with younger audiences (Feijoo et al. 2023; Bermejo-Berros, 2023).

School advertising literacy programs are designed to enhance minors' understanding of advertising's purposes and processes (Hudders et al. 2017). Increasing their awareness of advertising is thought to foster critical thinking and equip them with skills and strategies to manage it effectively (Nelson and Kehr, 2016). Research by Stanley and Lawson (2020) shows that educational interventions have improved minors' ability to evaluate and formulate compelling arguments. Similar to media literacy, higher levels of advertising literacy can mitigate negative effects, helping to reduce biases and enhance critical thinking (Besharat-Mann, 2024).

This educational approach should also involve parents, as their involvement is crucial in assisting minors with this task (Loose et al. 2022). Parents can strengthen their children's defenses against advertising by encouraging them to reflect on the nature of the advertising messages and to adopt a more critical stance (Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023).

In light of these considerations, this study poses two research questions:

1. Are children aware of the variety of commercial messages they receive through their mobile phones?
2. What are the ethical and evaluative implications of hybrid advertising for minors?

This research examines how children identify and interpret entertainment-based advertising, including influencer marketing. This analysis will allow us to understand how young audiences engage with these advertising messages and ultimately help develop strategies for enhancing advertising literacy, particularly from an ethical standpoint.

Methodology

A qualitative study was conducted using 35 semi-structured interviews with minors aged 10 to 14 years residing in Spain. The rationale for this methodological choice stems from its ability to facilitate the expression of young people's perspectives, experiences, and opinions (Mayan, 2023, p. 4). This approach addresses the need for new qualitative research that explores digital competencies, particularly those enhancing minors' critical capacity (Van Deursen et al. 2016). Moreover, interviews provide a richer complement to data collected via questionnaires, offering a platform for children to openly articulate and refine their thoughts on advertising. This method has yielded detailed and nuanced insights from interviewees regarding advertising embedded in entertainment content.

The data presented in this analysis are from the first phase of a broader research project titled "XXX," funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Government of Spain.

Interview participants were specifically selected from the broader sample of the project's first phase, based on criteria such as age, sex, type of school, technological equipment, and level of advertising literacy. In the first phase, a total of 1070 individuals were recruited through a two-stage stratified sampling procedure with proportional allocation. This procedure utilized four ad hoc aggregated geographic zones as the first stratum (in accordance with the NUTS zone classification used by the EU), with a second layer of stratification based on family socioeconomic levels (low, medium, and high). This sampling ensured representation across key demographic variables.

Research suggests that children within the selected age range have developed the necessary competencies for effective verbal communication (Zarouali et al. 2019). Furthermore, crucial developmental changes occur between the ages of 9 and 12,

Table 1 Distribution of interviews by age and gender of participants.

| Interviews | Gender | Age | | | | | Total |
|------------|--------|-----|----|----|----|----|-------|
| | | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | |
| Girl | | 0 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 15 |
| Boy | | 4 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 3 | 20 |
| Total | | 4 | 7 | 7 | 9 | 8 | 35 |

Data compiled by the author

allowing children to engage more deeply with their roles as advertising recipients (John, 1999). This age group also experiences an exponential increase in personal mobile phone ownership (INE, 2023), making them particularly relevant to the study.

To conduct the interviews, parental consent was secured via signed informed consent forms, which had been previously validated by the Ethics Committee of the International University of La Rioja. This committee also reviewed and approved the project's methodological design.

The sample size ($n = 35$) is comparable to previous studies, such as Besharat-Mann (2024) ($n = 37$), Nelson et al. (2017) ($n = 29$), and Feijoo & Sádaba (2022), among others Table 1.

Thirty-five students participated in the research, comprising 20 boys and 15 girls, with ages distributed as follows: four were 10 years old, seven were 11 years old, seven were 12 years old, nine were 13 years old, and eight were 14 years old. The interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams from September to December 2023. Parental or legal guardian consent was obtained through signed forms, which included explicit permission to record the sessions for scientific purposes.

A semi-structured interview guide ensured a consistent approach. Each session began by explaining that there were no right or wrong answers, emphasizing the value of all contributions and fostering a comfortable environment for the minors. The interviews explored two primary themes: (1) participants' understanding of promotional content on social networks, particularly content that blends advertising with entertainment, and (2) their emotional and ethical evaluations of these examples.

To assess advertising literacy, participants first discussed their perception of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), which was compared to their ability to identify promotional content. Questions explored their understanding of the objectives and strategies behind the content, as well as the trustworthiness of the promotions, following Rozendaal et al. (2013) persuasion knowledge framework. Additionally, factors influencing attitudes toward mobile advertising, such as entertainment, credibility, personalization, and irritation (Maseeh et al. 2021), were referenced, as these elements are key to determining advertising value. Attitude plays a crucial role in the critical dimension of advertising literacy. Finally, participants were asked to suggest how these promotions could be made more appealing to them.

The second thematic axis focused on participants' emotional responses and ethical evaluations once it was clarified that the examples had commercial intent. Participants reflected on the need for restrictions or clearer brand disclosures, as well as how their opinions of the influencers and brands involved had changed as a result of recognizing the content's commercial purpose. The full interview protocol is available in the appendix of this manuscript.

In analyzing advertising literacy, we adopted a situational perspective (Hudders et al. 2017), focusing on how minors processed specific examples of advertising embedded in their everyday mobile phone activities. Five examples were selected

Table 2 Overview of advertising examples used for measuring minors' advertising literacy, including platform, format, ad signaling, and products advertised.

| Ex. | Platform | Format | Ad signaling | Product advertised |
|-----|---------------------------|--|---|--|
| 1 | App | Brand app with a face filter feature | No | Snack brand (Cheetos) |
| 2 | Social Network: Instagram | Influencer marketing: A kid influencer promotes a product using a carousel of photos on her IG profile | Use of hashtag #ad in the description, mention of the brand, and reference to a discount code | Table with integrated bike for exercising while doing homework (Flexispot) |
| 3 | Social Network: Instagram | Influencer marketing: Two kid influencer brothers promote a product via a reel on their IG profile | Use of hashtag #ad in the description, mention of the brand | Video game (Metazells) |
| 4 | Game App | In-game advertising (banner) displayed at the bottom of the screen | No | Car rental app (Voltio by Mutua) |
| 5 | Social Network: TikTok | Influencer marketing: Singer promotes a product with a video on her profile | No | Soda (Coke) |

Data compiled by the author

(described in Table 2), drawn from familiar mobile games and social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram (Fernández- Gómez et al. 2024). The use of stimulus materials ensured that participants remained engaged and provided concrete, relevant responses.

The analysis followed the steps outlined by Seid (2016). Phase 1 involved the literal transcription of each interview recording. Phase 2 focused on reviewing the transcriptions to identify response patterns for each question. Phase 3 consisted of coding, during which each response category was assigned a number. Phase 4 entailed a detailed analysis of the responses to each question, leading to Phase 5, where conclusions were drawn.

All interviews were audio- and video-recorded for transcription. The transcripts were then analyzed using a grounded theory approach, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1997). This iterative method of data collection and analysis enabled the identification of emerging patterns and allowed for the continual refinement of categories and concepts to achieve a deeper understanding of the participants' discourse and perceptions.

Manual coding was carried out using the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA. Two primary categories were defined, aligned with the main thematic areas of the interview script: (1) recognition and understanding of the persuasive intent behind content that blends advertising and entertainment; and (2) minors' moral perceptions of this type of hybrid advertising. This categorization was initially derived through deductive analysis of the interview transcripts, followed by an inductive process that organized emergent concepts from transcribed phrases or paragraphs (Strauss and Corbin, 1997).

Knowledge and understanding of the presence of persuasive messages in hybrid content.

About half of the interviewees, evenly distributed across all age groups and genders, reported that they could always or almost always accurately identify advertising. One 13-year-old boy from a high socioeconomic status (SES) stated, 'Advertising is trying to sell you a product or make you interested in them' (I33). Conversely, the remainder were split between those who had significant doubts and those who admitted they could not reliably differentiate advertising, as illustrated by a 14-year-old boy from a high SES: 'To be honest, I don't think so. It's often very similar, sometimes it is advertising, sometimes it isn't. I can only tell when it's very clear, but I'm not an expert or anything' (I13).

The minors identified an average of 3.25 promotional items from the five presented. Nine respondents noted that all the content was promotional, stating, 'in one way or another they all promoted a product or a game' (I7, girl, 14 years old, medium SES). Comparing the number of detections with their self-

assessed ability revealed little variance in the average detection rates among those who considered their identification skills as good, poor, or challenging (3.23; 3.37; 3.37). Additionally, while age differences were not significant, there was a noticeable gradual increase in ad recognition with age from an average age of 11.88 years for identifying 1 to 2 ads, to 12.25 for 3 to 4, and 12.66 for all five

In general, interviewees believed that the posts aimed to make products appealing and encourage purchases. As one boy expressed: 'Yes, they want us to become more interested in this product and buy it' (I33, 13 years old, high SES). Approximately ten interviewees, primarily boys, emphasized the economic motives of companies: 'so that companies make more money' (I1, girl, 11 years old, medium SES). Many voiced skepticism about the authenticity of the products in promotional content, suggesting they often exaggerate or mislead about actual product characteristics: 'No, many probably lie, because not everything you see is the same in real life' (I11, boy, 12 years old, high SES). Others noted that products are sometimes presented exaggeratedly. None believed the promotional content depicted the products truthfully. Only 16 participants addressed whether they found this content credible; half of them viewed it as credible, which contrasted starkly with their views on product representation. For instance, one girl stated, 'Yes, I don't see any deception there, but yes, I see it as normal,' yet she did not think the products were represented faithfully (I12, 12 years old, medium SES).

There is considerable diversity of opinion regarding the entertainment value of promotional posts. About half of the interviewees found them entertaining in general or found specific posts appealing: 'Yes, the videos were entertaining' (I29, boy, 12 years old, low SES). Conversely, a significant number, particularly ten boys, did not find them entertaining due to lack of interest in the product or the influencer involved: 'I didn't find them very entertaining' (I3, girl, 11 years old, high SES). Those who described what they found entertaining in the content highlighted elements such as personal interest in the product, humor, or the presence of celebrities or influencers: 'Some yes, but others no. I guess the Rosalia one, because she is famous and everyone likes her, so that might be fun. And some aren't, like that game one, because it's boring' (I28, girl, 14 years old, high SES).

Half of the young interviewees, predominantly boys, attributed the presence of products on influencer channels to the influencers' pursuit of income: 'Because they get a contract that pays them a lot of money if they do it' (I30, boy, 10 years old, high SES). Others suggested that products featured on these channels due to the advantages they offered brands, such as access to a broad audience and the creation of favorable attitudes toward

their products through influencers' reach: 'I think they turn to them because so many people know them and maybe they could believe them since they are famous' (I3, girl, 11 years old, high SES).

Many interviewees asserted that influencers lacked specialized knowledge about the products they endorsed: 'No, I think none are experts. They are just doing it to sponsor it or to show it off and make money' (I12, girl, 12 years old, medium SES). However, two respondents noted that influencers are adept at promotions: 'Yes, I think they have experience in that. They know their audience well, often their own age group, and promote products they believe will appeal to similar-aged kids' (I5, girl, 14 years old, medium SES). Regarding credibility, while most did not find such promotions credible, a significant number held some trust in them: 'Yes, I don't think it's a lie, because if they sell you something, it has to be real; they can't make up the product' (I7, girl, 14 years old, medium SES).

Nearly half of the interviewees viewed influencers who incorporate these practices into their content favorably from a moral perspective: 'I think it's fine because they are influential people, so they earn money, it's their job. And I don't know, I think it's fine, that's what they do' (I7, girl, 14 years old, medium SES). However, several expressed reservations, attributing them to perceived economic motivations: 'No, because brands buy them' (I6, boy, 13 years old, medium SES).

When asked if they appreciated brands and commercial products integrated within content, about half of the participants disliked it: 'It's attractive but not good. It could deceive people if they think it works' (I3, girl, 11 years old, high SES). The others either enjoyed or were indifferent to such content, finding it entertaining or noting that its appeal depended on the product's subtlety within the content: 'It makes it more entertaining, right? It catches our eye more' (I14, girl, 13 years old, low SES); 'It takes the spotlight because it's the most visible thing' (I32, girl, 12 years old, high SES). Some found it misleading: 'Yes, but it's more misleading' (I6, boy, 13 years old, medium SES). To enhance their enjoyment of ads, many suggested aligning them with personal interests: 'If they mixed what they promote with things I like, I would keep watching' (I4, girl, 13 years old, low SES), or making them less intrusive and more honest or fun: 'If it wasn't so intrusive... if the ads were more entertaining or realistic' (I20, boy, 11 years old, medium SES); 'If it were more fun and didn't just show the product' (I23, boy, 10 years old, high SES); 'Make it less repetitive' (I15, girl, 14 years old, high SES).

Moral and evaluative perceptions of minors on this type of hybrid advertising and its implications for brand and influencer valuation. During the interview, minors were informed that all viewed content had a promotional purpose. They then discussed their emotions upon realizing the intent to promote products or services. Responses varied: the most common were indifference—'I don't really care. I usually skip it or don't watch it' (I10, boy, 13 years old, low SES)—and satisfaction—'I like it because it seems they try to resonate more with the individual, adapting to their tastes' (I15, girl, 14 years old, high SES). A minority expressed anger: 'I'm upset because I thought it was just a regular video, but it was just to make money' (I20, boy, 11 years old, medium SES). Other emotions mentioned included surprise and entertainment, which were associated with temporary escape, as well as boredom, curiosity, happiness, and fun.

Participants also provided an ethical evaluation of content featuring integrated products and brands, with the majority viewing it positively. Some explained their approval by noting that this form of commercial communication is more engaging than traditional advertising: 'It's well done because it attracts

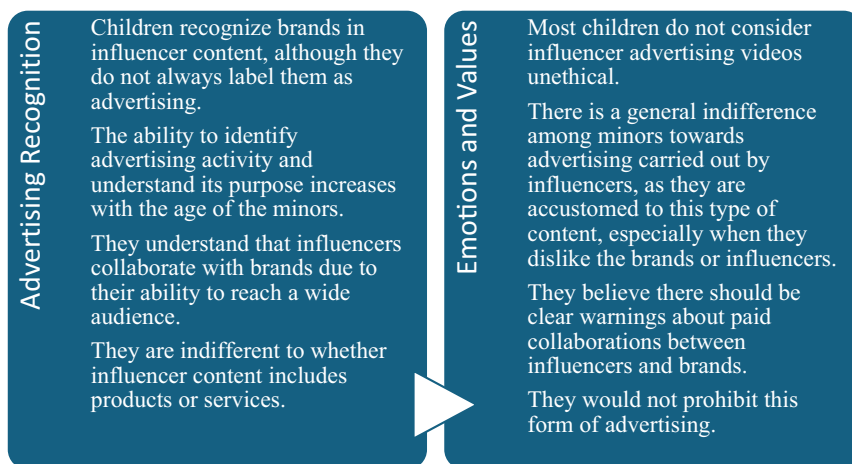
more people, making it more likely they will buy the promoted product' (I14, girl, 13 years old, low SES). Others accepted it as a necessary part of the economic system, acknowledging that it sometimes requires consumers to tolerate certain inconveniences: 'It helps them sell more. It's beneficial for them though it does make consumers spend more, which can be good if it's something you were looking for' (I5, girl, 14 years old, medium SES). A smaller group viewed it negatively: 'I don't think it's good because I don't understand it, and they're advertising to me when I don't understand' (I32, girl, 12 years old, high SES). Interestingly, those opposed often described the content as 'not good' rather than 'bad', while those ambivalent used 'bad' to describe their neutral stance: 'I don't think it's good or bad, just normal' (I9, girl, 12 years old, medium SES).

When asked about banning promotional communications, respondents' views mirrored their ethical evaluations, with most opposing a ban. They acknowledged the necessity for companies to market their products, and expressed empathy toward content creators, seeing brand integration as part of their professionalization strategy: 'No, I wouldn't ban any. It's their job, whether it bothers me or not' (I21, girl, 13 years old, high SES). Those favoring a ban cited boredom or ethical concerns about promoting unsuitable products: 'Yes, because it's boring' (I30, boy, 10 years old, high SES), 'Yes, because it's problematic to endorse potentially harmful products just because someone is famous' (I4, boy, 13 years old, high SES); and 'Yes, even though I like it, it's deceptive' (I6, boy, 13 years old, medium SES).

Further inquiries explored whether the promotional nature of the content altered their views of the influencers and brands involved. Most maintained their perception, valuing entertainment over promotional intent: 'I enjoy it because it entertains me, aside from any advertising' (I7, girl, 14 years old, medium SES). Some stated their views would remain positive only if the products were of high quality: 'It's acceptable as part of their job, provided they are truthful about what they promote' (I15, girl, 14 years old, high SES). Others said they would reassess their views based on the transparency of the advertisements: 'My opinion might change if the advertising seems deceptive' (I3, girl, 11 years old, high SES). A few were indifferent, while others analyzed the economic implications of influencer marketing without expressing clear approval or disapproval: 'Influencers earn from advertising, which relies on their followers' engagement and purchases' (I5, girl, 14 years old, medium SES).

A smaller subset of interviewees offered detailed opinions on changing their views about the brands involved. Some argued against changing their stance, viewing collaborations as support for influencers and evidence of the brands' ingenuity, which might even prevent financial 'ruin': 'It's good because, without this, they could have gone bankrupt' (I23, boy, 10 years old, high SES). Conversely, a few felt such collaborations were deceptive and exploitative of influencers: 'I would probably dislike it because it involves lying about the products; if the brand is part of that lie, I would also blame them and might stop supporting them' (I3, girl, 11 years old, high SES). Another group, without changing their views, discussed the use of influencers as a common marketing strategy aimed at increasing revenue, noting variations in effectiveness among brands: 'Some brands excel in advertising, while others do not' (I11, boy, 12 years old, high SES).

In the final question of the session, participants assessed the need for clear identification of promotional content. There was a general consensus on the need for clearer labels. Some advocated for explicit labels such as "advertising" at the outset of the content to prevent confusion: 'It should be clear in the video description or mentioned directly in the content' (I7, girl, 14 years old, medium SES). Others favored a more subtle approach, suggesting



Source: Data compiled by the author

Fig. 1 Main findings on minors' recognition of advertising and attitudes toward influencer content. Data compiled by the author.

that promotions should blend naturally but not be hidden: 'It should feel like part of the normal content but still disclose that it's sponsored' (I20, boy, 11 years old, medium SES). However, a significant number felt the current approach was adequate, preferring discreet advertising to avoid disrupting viewer engagement: 'It's fine as it is; overt advertising prompts me to skip it' (I15, girl, 14 years old, high SES). Some remained indifferent or undecided on this issue Fig. 1.

Discussion

The evolving landscape of social networks and the rise of more creative, less recognizable advertising formats highlight the increasing need to promote advertising literacy among minors. As Arbaiza et al. (2024) emphasize, advertising literacy is crucial because it shapes individuals' attitudes and behaviors, promoting cultural values, lifestyles, and consumption patterns in daily life.

Our research indicates that while younger audiences are aware of brands and influencers in commercial content, they often struggle to recognize these collaborations as advertising. This aligns with Chan's (2021) findings, which highlight the difficulty of labeling modern content as advertisements. As a result, minors often remain indifferent to product placements unless the products directly interest them, perceiving that advertisers primarily use influencers for their reach.

Therefore, fostering advertising literacy is essential not only to help minors identify advertisements but also to empower them to make informed consumption decisions, as argued by Arbaiza et al. (2024). Our analysis reveals that minors' awareness of brand integration in influencer content and their understanding of the underlying advertising intent increase with age. Consistent with previous research, minors frequently encounter promotional content from influencers on social media. However, the engaging nature of this content often obscures its commercial intent (Feijoo et al. 2023).

Ethically, many minors are largely indifferent to entertainment-based advertising by influencers, being accustomed to the strategies employed by digital content creators. Only a small group perceives such content as unethical. While most agree that paid collaborations should be disclosed clearly, they do not advocate for banning these advertising practices.

An important finding is that for minors who have strong PSRs with influencers, sponsorship disclosure does not significantly affect their attitudes toward the brands, as seen in studies by Boerman and Van Reijmersdal (2020) and Chan (2021). This

highlights the need for young audiences to critically evaluate the content they consume, identifying promotional content and assessing its relevance and appropriateness for their needs.

The potential for growth in the field of advertising literacy remains significant, deserving more attention from educational and media industries (Arbaiza et al. 2024). From an educational perspective, research has explored various ways to teach advertising literacy in schools and communities, incorporating analysis, creation, and discussion of advertisements (Hoek et al. 2020; Hwang et al. 2018). Integrating advertising literacy into school curricula is vital for fostering critical consumer thinking, especially in the context of influencer marketing.

Parental mediation in digital contexts remains a challenge due to the personal nature of devices used by minors and generally lower digital literacy among parents, making oversight difficult (Daneels and Vanwynsberghe, 2017; Lozano-Blasco et al. 2023; Feijoo et al. 2023). Therefore, schools and other educational stakeholders must play a crucial role in equipping minors with the skills needed to critically navigate the digital world.

From an industry perspective, studies such as Gu and Duan (2024) suggest that the accuracy of advertising information is crucial for improving advertising results. Ensuring transparency and honesty in advertising messages can enhance the effectiveness of targeted advertising, which is a key factor in the success of influencer marketing strategies.

Data availability

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Author contributions

EFG: conceptualization, data curation, validation, writing—original draft, review & editing. PN: formal analysis, validation, writing—review & editing. BFF: conceptualization, data curation, methodology, formal analysis, software, validation.

Ethical approval

The interview process and methodology for this study were approved by the Ethics Committee of the International University of La Rioja, Spain (code PI:002/2021).

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from the legal guardians of all minor participants prior to their involvement in the research. Before the interviews, the legal guardians were provided with a consent document by the social studies company that assisted with sample recruitment. The document, which had to be signed and returned, explained the purpose of the research project, the benefits of participation, and the sociodemographic data that would be collected. It also emphasized that participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time. The information gathered would only be used for the study's purposes, and minors were allowed to skip any questions they did not wish to answer.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

Supplementary information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-04003-3>.

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