

ADOLESCENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON INFLUENCERS – EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract. This paper presents the findings of a study that focuses on adolescents' perceptions of social media influencers and their content. The study was conducted with the objective of addressing the following research questions: do adolescents regularly consume content presented by influencers; do the beliefs and behaviors of opinion leaders influence adolescents; how do adolescents perceive the idea of integrating influencer posts into the educational process. The main tasks carried out in the research include conducting semi-structured interviews with adolescents aged 12 – 18; processing and analyzing the data; and systematizing and presenting the results. The research method employed was interviewing. The study sample consisted of 17 teenagers from Bulgaria.

Keywords: publications by influencers; educational opportunities; formational interactions; teenagers' perceptions; adolescents' attitudes

Introduction

The term “influencers” is currently used to describe individuals who disseminate a variety of content on social networks. These individuals often leverage their platforms and celebrity status to gain material benefits, primarily through the promotion of products and services. In order to be defined as an influencer, it is necessary for an individual to have accumulated a significant number of followers who regularly consume their posts and actively participate in the process, for example by commenting, joining discussions, sharing, and responding to the posts. The rationale behind the regular production of content is to attract a large volume of attention from a substantial number of people. Some influencers generate content on a daily basis, while others do so several times a day. They do this with the objective of capturing the attention and interest of the audience and ensuring their visibility amidst the vast array of information on the internet.

Influencers also referred to as “opinion leaders” and “content creators”, can be conventionally divided into several categories. The initial category comprises individuals who exhibit the aforementioned characteristics and are designated as

“social media influencers.” They cultivate a network of followers and become distinguished experts (in the broad sense of the term) in a specific field, such as fashion, music, gaming, and relationships. The second category is that of persons, such as singers, artists, athletes, and politicians. They do not expend additional effort to amass a substantial audience, as they have already attained a considerable degree of prominence within their respective fields. The third category is related to the “micro-influencers,” who have a relatively modest following but also exert considerable influence on public attitudes (Díaz, 2017). In recent times, the phenomenon of the “virtual influencer” has also emerged, whereby the content in question is generated through the use of artificial intelligence (Koles et al., 2024).

Additionally, a categorization of opinion leaders could be constructed based on the particulars of the content they disseminate and its focal point. Some influencers utilize the concept of “live broadcasting,” or streaming to share their content. This approach involves recording themselves in real-time while engaging in activities such as playing computer games, commenting on current events, and participating in various situations. Others place greater emphasis on interviews with celebrities or randomly selected individuals from various sectors of society. Some influencers have a penchant for topics pertaining to travel, with a particular focus on the description of their journeys within a given country. Many opinion leaders concentrate on their personal experiences and create original videos, texts, and images, such as skits, humorous anecdotes, storytelling, participation in challenges, and so forth.

There are also influencers who create content with an educational component. In some instances, the content is intended for educational professionals and/or parents, to distribute useful resources, tips, and good practices. In other cases, the content is designed for children themselves, with the purpose of presenting information, materials, guidelines, and ideas (Gil-Quintana & Vida de León, 2021). However, those publishing content aimed specifically at a child (and teenage) audience do not always seek to engage with the educational process, nor to facilitate learning and education. This type of influencers typically addresses topics that are perceived as enjoyable, presenting them appealingly and engagingly. Their content is often oriented towards utilizing leisure time in a “relaxing” manner, rather than focusing on educational activities.

Due to the increasing presence of influencers in social networks, and consequently, the growing opportunities for them to influence public perspectives and attitudes on a plethora of issues, a range of scholars have directed their research specifically toward examining this phenomenon (Goodyear, 2023; Albadri, 2023; Pfender & Bleakley, 2024, and so forth). The authors explore a multitude of aspects pertaining to opinion leaders’ activities, including the influences and interactions they engage in with children and adolescents. Firstly, there is a considerable number of influencers who create content for a child audience. Secondly, teenagers also engage with content that is not intended for their age group. Therefore, the possible

opportunities to influence children and adolescents, as well as the potential positives and challenges in this regard, are progressively increasing.

In this context, a growing body of research in the field of education is also examining the issues in question (Shelton, Schroeder & Curcio, 2020; Marcelo, Marcelo, 2021; Taddeo, 2023). The potential consequences, both positive and negative, are discussed in relation to children's development across various domains, including their physical and mental health, cognitive abilities, socialization, and more. It is of paramount importance to gain insight into the opinions, understandings, and perspectives of children and adolescents regarding influencers and the content they disseminate. This endeavor is instrumental in enhancing existing data and fostering awareness about the current needs and interests of children.

Methodology

Considering the importance and relevance of the topic, this study focuses on adolescents' perceptions of influencers and their social media posts. The study was conducted with the objective of providing answers to the following research questions: Do adolescents regularly consume content presented by influencers? Do the beliefs and behaviors of opinion leaders influence adolescents? How do adolescents perceive the integration of influencer posts into the educational process? The primary research tasks entail conducting semi-structured interviews with adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18, processing and analyzing the data and then organizing and presenting the findings in a systematic manner. The research method employed was that of interviewing.

The interviews were conducted using a set of 17 questions, three of which were designed to elicit demographic information. In addition, a number of sub-questions were posed during the course of the interviewing process, with the aim of elucidating further details and/or expanding on the broader topic. All questions were posed in a manner that considered the age, psychological and individual characteristics, and capabilities of the respondents. The interviews were designed and performed in accordance with the ethical, moral, and legal standards that govern research involving human subjects. All activities were undertaken in compliance with the Code of Ethics for those working with children¹.

The study was conducted in four main stages: conceptualization; planning, organizing, and conducting 17 semi-structured interviews with adolescents from Bulgaria; data processing and analysis; and systematization and presentation of results.

The primary constraints associated with the study pertain to the sample. Firstly, the study includes a relatively large age group, with the specificities of 12 and 17/18-year-olds being pronounced and influencing the results accordingly. To address this challenge, the questions were structured in a manner that aligns with the developmental characteristics of adolescents across different age groups.

Additionally, the analysis of the results considered the potential influence of age variations on the responses. Secondly, the sample size was relatively small, comprising only 17 respondents.

The practical application of the study is that it can serve as a foundation for subsequent, more comprehensive studies, during which more detailed conclusions can be drawn.

Results

The data obtained from the 17 interviews were subjected to processing and subsequent analysis. The results indicate that the gender distribution of respondents is 13 girls and 4 boys. Table 1 illustrates the age distribution of the interviewees.

Table 1. Distribution by age group

Age group 12 – 14 years				Age group 15 – 18 years				
Age	12	13	14	Age	15	16	17	18
Number of interviewees	3	2	3	Number of interviewees	3	1	3	2

The results indicate that the lowest proportion of respondents is among individuals aged 16, with one person in this age group. Adolescents aged 12, 14, 15, and 17 comprise three respondents each. Two of the respondents are 13 years of age, while two others are 18 years of age. The largest number of interviewees indicated Sofia (Bulgaria) as their place of residence, with 13 individuals reporting this as their location. Two respondents each reside in Blagoevgrad and Samokov (Bulgaria).

The first of the main questions within the interviews is related to the habits of the interviewed individuals regarding the “tracking” of content by influencers. Fifteen of the teenagers indicated an interest in such social media posts. Two respondents stated that they do not engage with opinion leaders on social media. A follow-up question was posed to ascertain whether the term “influencers” was understood to refer to celebrities and/or individuals with a considerable number of followers on social networks. As a result of the additional clarification, one respondent indicated that while they encounter such content, they do not actively follow any specific influencers. The other respondent stated that they occasionally view posts from specific influencers, but their overall time spent online is constrained by parental restrictions. The two individuals in question are aged 17 and 12, respectively.

The second question seeks to elicit more detailed information regarding the frequency with which the interviewed persons consume publications from influencers. Eleven of the individuals asserted that they read or view such posts multiple times per day, four access social networks and similar content daily, one

consumes influencer posts when they are encountered and deemed intriguing, and another consumes them daily or every few days.

Additionally, respondents were requested to identify their preferred influencers. Fifteen of the interviewees listed multiple personalities, with the most frequently mentioned being Pavel Kolev and Itzaka, Linshu, Slavi Panayotov, Beta Squad, Stefie and Stan, Andy Studio, Muzzi, and Erika Dumbova. The two people who responded to a previous question that they do not “follow” influencers did not proffer any specific names of opinion leaders. A sub-question was also posed regarding adolescents' preferred social media content and whether any posts were viewed on multiple occasions. It can be inferred that eleven individuals regard specific posts as meriting regular attention.

The fourth question inquires whether the respondents derived any insights or acquired any knowledge from the influencers' posts. The question is posed in this precise manner, as the term “learning” is typically used in public discourse to denote a range of outcomes, including the acquisition of knowledge and the development of various skills, habits, attitudes, and behavioral patterns. However, within the scientific pedagogical literature, these latter components are considered integral to the formational process, i.e. they are formed, developed, built upon, and not “learned.” From the perspective of this study, which focuses on the educational (specifically formational) potential of influencer publications, the question is initially phrased in the aforementioned manner and subsequently augmented with a clarifying inquiry (“What did you learn?”) to facilitate the differentiation of its constituent elements.

Initially, eight of the participants reported that social media posts offer an avenue for acquiring a diverse array of facts and data across multiple domains. Two additional respondents indicated that they “constantly” acquire a variety of information through this method. In contrast, four individuals stated that content from influencers did not facilitate their acquisition of knowledge about a topic (answering “no” or “wouldn't say”). Three others were uncertain or unable to recall whether influencer posts had been beneficial in this regard. Following the posing of a clarifying question, adolescents proceeded to delineate the particular elements of the content presented by influencers that had left a lasting impression on them. These include, for example, certain facts about different countries around the world and their cultural specificities (four individuals); ideas and tips about fashion and cosmetics (three individuals); guidelines for games (two individuals); and information about friendships, relationships, etc. (four individuals). It is noteworthy that, following the presentation of a follow-up question, three of the respondents who had initially indicated that they did not find content from opinion leaders to be supportive of the process of gaining knowledge reconsidered their responses. They highlighted facts and advice that they had retained from influencer publications.

The following question aims to ascertain the respondents' perspectives on the viewpoints of influencers and the extent to which adolescents tend to align with them, even in instances where there is a discrepancy in opinion and belief. Three respondents affirmed that they had observed situations in which an influencer's published content had prompted a change in their own beliefs—regarding the influencer himself. In other words, if the influencer expressed opposition to a subject that the adolescents found appealing, if the ideas put forth were deemed illogical, or if the participants disagreed with a particular assertion, they would not alter their own beliefs but would adjust their perception of the opinion leader. Five individuals explicitly stated that they did not alter their personal views based on the opinions of influencers. However, another nine individuals indicated that the extent to which they changed their perspectives depended on various factors. For example, the veracity of the newly received information is a crucial factor, as is the extent to which the influencer's opinion on the given issue is deemed valid. Also, the degree of influence exerted by the opinion leader on the interviewees, as well as the perceived intelligence, truthfulness, and logical coherence of the information shared, are significant elements to consider.

In addition to being queried as to whether they had ever reconsidered their position after viewing an influencer publication, the respondents were also asked whether they generally believed that they would alter their viewpoints if their preferred opinion leader published a text or video with a different focus. The objective was to examine the consistency of the adolescents' statements, with the question being posed subsequent to two others. In response to this inquiry, seven of the interviewees posited that they would not alter their stance on the matter, while another seven claimed that it was a possibility, contingent on specific circumstances. Three individuals expressed uncertainty, indicating that they were unsure if they would change their opinion. Overall, the results for this question correlate with those for the previous one. The main differences are the "I don't know" responses and the higher number of people who deny that the situation posed in the question is likely to occur.

Also relevant is the example of influencers, which is represented not only through specific content but also through their overall pattern of behavior and actions, which reveal characterological features, views, and attitudes. In this context, interviewees were asked whether there was an element of the behavior of the opinion leaders whose publications they consumed most frequently that had impressed them in a positive way. Not every one of the adolescents gives a detailed answer here, with predominant mentions of Slavi Panayotov's actions (three people, mainly focusing on his skills in provoking interest and organizing a joint hike in the mountains); Andy Studio (three people, focusing on the positive relationship between the two influencer brothers); and Erika Doumbova (two people, who appreciated the positive messages, sincerity and openness of the influencer). The others describe

situations involving different opinion leaders, including those from abroad. An example is given with celebrities Lewis Hamilton and Sebastian Vettel (Formula 1 drivers), who impressed the respondents with their activism in social campaigns and calls for equality, and support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Another interviewee gave the example of Beta Squad and their tendency to display self-irony.

Nevertheless, the actions and attitudes of influencers are not always aligned with positive outcomes. In this regard, respondents were also requested to consider instances of negative behavior observed in the publications of opinion leaders. Once more, a proportion of the interviewees were unable to provide a detailed response, with six individuals struggling to cite a specific example. Four additional respondents expressed the view that influencers are willing to promote substandard products for financial gain, while simultaneously paying undue attention to their own “merchandise” (products bearing their names or brands). Three of the adolescents expressed disapproval of the practice of some opinion leaders “pretending to be interesting” and/or “talking a lot of nonsense,” while two commented on their tendency to “think they are very important” and “puff themselves up.” Two individuals identified a significant issue, namely the involvement of underage children of influencers in their videos. They expressed reservations about the appropriateness of this practice.

A question designed to explore adolescents' development of critical thinking and objectivity addressed a potential situation within which their favorite influencers were in a conflicted relationship. Five of the interviewees indicated that they would be willing to consume the content of both unless “someone did something frightening” or “something foolish.” In a similar context, six additional respondents indicated that they would continue to “follow” both opinion leaders. Four individuals indicated a willingness to identify the “right” side in an eventual conflict and would consequently cease reading or watching the posts of the influencer they identified as guilty. Two of the adolescents highlight the potential interest that such a situation could generate, suggesting that it might encourage more people (including themselves) to consume the publications.

A common element in influencers' publications is the presentation of challenges, which are often entertaining (though occasionally risky or unhealthy) experiments conducted on camera by influencers with children and adolescents frequently attempting to replicate the challenge. In light of the potential risks involved, interviewees were queried as to whether they would undertake such a challenge if it entailed elements that were frightening or dangerous, or if they did not approve of or agree with them. Seven individuals indicated that they would unequivocally decline participation, while six others stated that their decision would be contingent upon specific circumstances: “If I’m scared and it’s stupid, I won’t do it,” “If it’s fun, I might,” “if it’s not painful, I’ll do it,” “if I’m not embarrassed,” “if it’s

something like pouring a bucket of ice on my head, I might try it,” etc. Four of the teenagers asserted that they would attempt the challenge, citing the necessity of “fighting one’s fears” and “confronting” them. Those who responded in this manner were then asked an additional question: if the challenge in question was dangerous, prohibited, illegal, or otherwise morally reprehensible (an example given was “to offend or hurt oneself or another individual”), their response would remain unchanged. Three of the respondents claimed that they would not attempt the challenge in such a scenario. One individual stated that they would assess the level of risk and if it was deemed to be relatively low, would still consider participation.

The preceding question, in addition to the subsequent two, seeks to ascertain the degree to which opinion leaders exert an influence on adolescents’ views, attitudes, and behaviors. In light of this perspective, the following inquiry is also posed: Is there anything that you did not like, but you saw in an influencer’s post and decided that you now like? In response to this question, three of the participants reported that they had never experienced this phenomenon. Four individuals shared examples of dishes they had developed a taste for as a result of influencers. Three people each mentioned different music and countries around the world, respectively. Two others discussed games and makeup.

The content presented by influencers is not always reflective of reality, as it often focuses on unrealistically high standards of living and lifestyles. Such publications could have a deleterious effect on teenagers (and not only), emphasizing unhealthy appearance requirements and anxiety-inducing comparisons of socioeconomic status, social group popularity, and so forth. Given the importance of this issues, the subjects were asked if an influencer made fun of a character trait or physiological feature (explained with examples) that they possessed, also social status, would they feel uncomfortable, would they try to change themselves. Five respondents provided affirmative responses to both components of the inquiry, while four individuals offered negative responses. Four of the participants indicated that they would not experience discomfort with such language or actions but would nevertheless attempt to implement changes. Three of the interviewees reported feelings of sadness or shame but stated that they would only take concrete action if it involved a change that they could or should make about themselves. One of the adolescents disclosed that they would experience embarrassment when denying that they would make a change.

The final question pertains to adolescents’ perceptions about incorporating influencer publications into the educational process. In the initial responses, the participants associated influencer content exclusively with potential advantages related to the learning process. Six respondents indicated that integrating such publications would be enjoyable, while four others asserted that this was already occurring in some classes. Four adolescents also posited that integrating influencer content into the educational process would only be logical if they were “learning

something,” and three individuals expressed skepticism, stating that it “wouldn’t be interesting” and that teachers “don’t know how.” An additional inquiry was posed regarding formational interactions, specifically in the context of a video (or text) discussing relationships, friendship, and the provision of advice on various issues. Five of the adolescents concurred that the utilization of influencer posts in an academic setting was contingent upon the specific subject matter. Four of them perceived the discussion of such matters through influencer content as “weird,” while four others regarded it as “might be interesting.” The remaining four interviewees recognized potential opportunities in this context.

Discussion

The results described above, obtained and analyzed in the course of the study, prompt the drawing of key conclusions regarding the way adolescents perceive influencers on social networks and allow for the formulation of responses to the posed research questions.

It is of particular significance that the data demonstrates that each individual interviewed engages with content from influencers, whether intentionally or by encountering posts that pique their interest. The aforementioned factors, in combination with the multitude of opinion leaders accessible on each social network, posting on a diverse array of topics and issues, lead to the following conclusion: at some point, every adolescent will encounter a text or video posted by an influencer. Furthermore, the probability of this occurring on a regular basis is also contingent upon the amount of time adolescents spend in front of device screens. The results demonstrating that adolescents spend a considerable amount of time on social networks on a daily basis, including the act of “following” influencers, are consistent with data from a nationally representative survey². Children between the ages of 0 and 18 utilize a smartphone for an average of 2 hours and 45 minutes per day, with 92% of them preferring to watch videos. Among adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18, YouTube is the most frequently used platform, with 99% of them using it, followed by TikTok (97%), V-Box (91%), Facebook (87%), and Instagram (83%)².

Consequently, adolescents are frequently exposed to the influence of opinion leaders, as well as the impacts and interactions resulting from the content of influencer posts. The scope of this influence is considerable, as teenagers follow not only Bulgarian influencers but also those from other countries, predominantly using the English language. The majority of respondents indicated their favorite influencers and the posts they read or watched more than once, which suggests that such content may have a significant impact – it attracts their interest and holds their attention. Accordingly, this type of content presents opportunities for educational interactions, provided that it is integrated into the educational process in an appropriate manner. It should be noted that the availability of such opportunities

is contingent upon several additional factors, with the specific topic of the posts, the manner of information presentation, and the suitability of the publication for the intended age group being of particular importance. In light of the responses provided by the interviewees, it is possible to formulate a conclusion regarding the potential of the aforementioned publications to be incorporated into the sphere of educational interactions, particularly in the context of personal and social competence (friendships, relationships, social environment, and so forth), healthy lifestyle (fashion and cosmetics, cooking, activity), and intercultural and patriotic education (information about Bulgaria and other countries in the world).

It is imperative that adolescents develop critical thinking skills with regard to influencer posts (and online content in general), whether they are consuming such content on their own initiative or as part of an educational process. The fact that the majority of respondents expressed a reluctance to alter their opinion on a given topic, even in the event of a discrepancy between their own views and those expressed by their preferred influencer, suggests the presence of developed critical reasoning and position-formation skills. Additionally, the findings indicate that the impact of influencers is not absolute. They may prompt a reconsideration of perspectives and attitudes, and serve as a model for behavior and attitude, yet adolescents continually assess content through the lens of their prior experiences and beliefs.

Nevertheless, there are inherent risks associated with the consumption of publications by influencers among adolescents. The influence of opinion leaders is predicated on a complex interplay of unconscious impulses, motives, and ideas, which are subject to the specific characteristics and abilities of the individual in question. This makes it challenging to assess the extent to which adolescents are able to discern the nuances of opinion leadership and navigate the potential pitfalls associated with it. Among the most widely discussed issues regarding content created by influencers are the unrealistic and unhealthy standards set regarding appearance, behavior, and life priorities. In this regard, the role of influential individuals in setting examples through their actions and incorporating these into the content of their posts is of paramount importance. The analysis of the results related to these elements yields contradictory conclusions. On the one hand, respondents comprehend positive examples as such, ascribing value to them as beneficial behavioral manifestations and stigmatizing negative actions as unacceptable. Conversely, with regard to their own experiences, the interviewees do not always perceive influencer provocations as untrue, nor do they necessarily recognize them as potentially dangerous. The fact that a significant proportion of the participants indicated that they would modify aspects of their own identity (appearance, habits, character traits) based on the influence of opinion leaders suggests the potential for exerting a negative impact. In contrast, when it comes to so-called “challenges,” respondents are generally not willing to perform a dangerous, prohibited, or unacceptable action simply because an influencer has done so.

These points lead to the conclusion that further work should be conducted with adolescents on issues related to self-attitude, self-perception, self-evaluation, and so forth. This is particularly relevant in the context of the development of personal competence, which should be pursued in combination with other competencies³, especially during the teenage years. This period is considered sensitive in terms of developing perspectives, the formation of self-esteem, and the assessment of one's own abilities, characteristics, and potential (Seaman & Kenrick, 2002).

A key conclusion may also be formulated regarding the tendency of respondents to listen to statements made by influencers and, on occasion, alter their views on this basis (despite the previously stated impossibility of this occurring). A potential factor contributing to these observed differences is the degree of importance attributed to the given statements. For instance, if the opinions pertain to topics such as food, games, music, and so forth, adolescents may consider different views and potentially alter their own perspectives. It is also possible that the interviewees are not fully aware that they may change their opinions based on shared differing statements from their favorite influencers. In any case, the potential for forming beliefs or modifying existing ones represents a valuable opportunity for leveraging in the context of educational interactions, contingent on the content of the publication aligning with the requisite criteria, its positive orientation, and its integration with suitable activities within the educational process.

The interviewees themselves are not in unanimous agreement about the inclusion of such content in the lessons. However, as some of them have indicated, if it is incorporated in an adequate and intriguing manner, they would demonstrate interest.

Conclusion

Adolescents engage with content created by influencers. Whether this is due to a conscious choice and following of particular opinion leaders, or whether it is determined by the vast array of posts on each social network, it can be observed that children and teenagers regularly consume videos, text, and images featuring shared messages and experiences, examples of behavior (both positive and negative), reflections on a variety of topics and issues, and so forth. This fact also establishes the possibilities for influencing adolescents by opinion leaders, which could be intentional, for example, by so-called educational influencers (and those publishing content for children), or unintentional—realized through the perception of opinion leaders as role models.

In this sense, the integration of influencer publications in the educational process has the potential to facilitate a number of educational interactions. For example, it can be used to highlight positive examples, encourage the development of critical thinking, assertiveness, and self-assessment, facilitate the learning of information validation skills, provide explanations of complex situations and issues, and distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable actions, behaviors, and attitudes.

NOTES

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