

# The influence of YouTubers on children (8-12 years old): current issues and brands

## *La influencia de los youtubers en los niños (8-12 años): actualidad y marcas*



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**Abstract:**

YouTubers have become a worldwide popularity phenomenon, and the ever-more time spent at home helped further amplify its status and relevance, especially with children. The increasing access to broadband internet, the easy and intuitive way of using it, the full control over what they want to see, the proximity to the public and the capacity to surprise and innovate are some of the motifs that make YouTubers so attractive to the youngsters. Using a qualitative methodology carried out in two sequential data collection phases, first with children and then with Youtubers, the authors aimed to answer the following research question: "How influential are YouTubers in shaping the opinions of 8-12 year-olds on topical issues?" This investigation concluded that children have YouTubers as role models, consider their content a reliable source of information and admit to having changed the way they think because of them. Although Youtubers' influence diminishes as children grow, this study proved that they tend to adopt the views and perspectives shared by YouTubers. On the other hand, it is also an opportunity for children to learn and be aware of important topics from an early age in a more accessible and interesting way.

**Keywords:**

YouTube; digital influencers; children aged 8 to 12 years; influence marketing; current issues; brands.

**Resumen:**

*Los YouTubers se han convertido en un fenómeno de popularidad mundial, y el hecho de pasar cada vez más tiempo en casa ha contribuido a amplificar aún más su estatus y relevancia, especialmente entre los niños. El creciente acceso a Internet de banda ancha, la forma fácil e intuitiva de utilizarlo, el control total sobre lo que quieren ver, la cercanía al público y la capacidad de sorprender e innovar son algunos de los motivos que hacen que los YouTubers sean tan atractivos para los más jóvenes. A través de una metodología cualitativa llevada a cabo en dos fases secuenciales de recogida de datos, primero con niños y después con Youtubers, los autores pretendían responder a la siguiente pregunta de investigación: "¿Qué influencia tienen los YouTubers en la formación de las opiniones de los niños de 8 a 12 años sobre temas de actualidad?". Esta investigación concluyó que los niños tienen a los YouTubers como modelos a seguir, consideran sus contenidos como una fuente de información fiable y admiten haber cambiado su forma de pensar gracias a ellos. Aunque la influencia de los Youtubers disminuye a medida que los niños crecen, este estudio demostró que tienden a adoptar los puntos de vista y las perspectivas compartidas por los YouTubers. Por otro lado, también es una oportunidad para que los niños aprendan y conozcan temas importantes desde una edad temprana de una forma más accesible e interesante.*

**Palabras clave:**

*YouTube; prescriptores digitales; niños de 8 a 12 años; marketing de influencia; temas de actualidad; marcas.*

## 1. The role of YouTube in the lives of children

### 1.1. The digital practices of children

The rise of the internet and the massive consumption of audiovisual media allows anyone to choose specific content but also when and where they want to see it. Although following news is not a common habit for the youngest generations, recent research shows that social media, compared to other sources, gives them a greater sense of flexibility and control over the information, even if there is no clear indication of the perception of the news credibility (García Jiménez et al., 2018).

According to Tur-Viñes et al. (2018, p. 1212), YouTube has 1000 million users from 88 countries and is used by 95% of all internet users. The universal popularity among the youngest makes YouTube the leader in viewing habits among children between 6 and 12 years old in Europe and the United States, with 96% admitting to knowing about its existence and more than 80% assuming its daily use (Izci, 2019). In fact, to children, watching videos on YouTube is one of their main entertaining activities. Neumann and

Herodotou (2020) stated that 75% of children between 8 and 11 years old spend 10 hours a week watching YouTube videos, and 27% follow YouTubers.

Young people use digital technologies to express themselves, collaborate, show themselves, share their creations, meet new people, entertain, study and be aware of everything related to their own interests (Tur-Viñes et al., 2018). Acknowledging its impact on children, the platform, allegedly to guarantee their safety and protection from inappropriate content, gave parents the ability to control what their children see, and created a special categorization to identify exclusive videos for children, with the reference “Made for Kids”, and even a specific application called “YouTube Kids”. Nevertheless, as Elias and Sulkin (2017) reported, many prefer to access the regular channel without filters.

Children are attracted to YouTube for several reasons, such as entertainment, fun, information (in smaller numbers), feeling a connection with someone (often the YouTubers), exploring their own hobbies, and finding videos about their offline interests. However, many reported that they had already watched videos about things they would not do in real life (Ofcom, 2019).

### *1.2. Children, YouTube and YouTubers*

The interactive capacity of digital media allowed users to become also content producers, with the ability to reach a huge number of people, influencing their thoughts and behaviours. Due to its characteristics, YouTube has become one of the preferred places for some people to find fame (and sometimes fortune). Known as “YouTubers”, these creators produce and share videos able to influence the opinions and behaviours of other users, and it has become so popular that being a YouTuber is one of the 10 preferred professions for Spanish youngsters (Tur-Viñes et al., 2019). According to Arnold (2017), YouTubers establish a connection with their followers through deep bonds and by creating real communities. YouTube channels provide a more intimate relationship and an artistic and creative environment that allows a deeper connection between the creators and the followers (Chau, 2010). This way, a popular YouTuber can promote himself, his ideas, opinions, talents, services and products (Chatzopoulou et al., 2010). This activity has become professionalized, and its monetization is afforded by diverse strategies of influence marketing involving partnerships between influencers, digital platforms, and brands, many of which are particularly tailored to children and adolescents (Nuñez-Gómez et al., 2020). In fact, social media engagement and user-generated content consumption significantly increase brand preference and loyalty, with influence marketing playing a big role in this process (Nuñez-Gómez, Sánchez-Herrera & Pintado-Blanco, 2020).

This feeling of a close relationship with the YouTubers gives the followers a sensation of trust that is much stronger and more recognized than advertising (Westenberg, 2016). That is especially relevant in the case of children due to their underdeveloped advertising literacy and consequent vulnerability to these marketing practices, which often affects their attitudes and behaviours once these influencers are seen as credible and authentic, without any commercial interests (De Veirman et al., 2019).

Westenberg (2016) found that youngsters felt interested in different topics addressed by the YouTubers, and many times they seemed more interested in personal aspects of their lives rather than in the content itself. Also, children tend to see the YouTubers as a source of advice and guidance, as some talk about personal experiences and make suggestions about life behaviour to their followers (Ofcom, 2019).

Children learn from an early age, and in different ways, fundamental values for their education, such as civic and moral principles, with the observation and reproduction of model attitudes being one of the most efficient (Yarolu, 2020). Individuals tend mostly to adopt behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes of people they like or identify with (Bandura, 1988), so the probability of doing so with YouTubers is very high (Bentley et al., 2011).

In this process of identification with celebrities/idols/references, this influence may be positive (healthy life tips, sustainable behaviours, among others). However, it may also be negative (inappropriate language or behaviours, among others), and, in this way, children can take risks (Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal, 2019).

For this reason, YouTubers should pay special attention to how they respond and interact with children, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics, such as drug or alcohol use, religion, sexuality, or politics (Westenberg, 2016).

As we have seen, searching for content that allows them to acquire information and expand specific knowledge to form their own opinion is one reason children watch YouTube videos (Ofcom, 2019). Nevertheless, there is another type of unintentional learning called accidental learning. In this case, knowledge acquisition arises unplanned and often because of another activity (Watkins & Marsik, 2018). Youtube thus offers an environment conducive to accidental learning (Dyosi and Hattingh, 2018), so children are potential targets of its consequences, particularly on sensitive topics.

According to Hugger et al. (2019), the credibility children attribute to the content of these videos seems to be strongly related to their perception of the authenticity of the YouTubers who create them. Children indicate that they use television news, perceived as more objective and reliable, to assess the credibility and value of YouTube videos that address relevant issues to society (Zimmerman et al., 2020).

Another interesting point is that, although many children indicate that they are aware of the persuasive intent of the messages shared by YouTubers, they continue to highly value the information they disclose (Coates et al., 2019). This fact is perhaps due to the so-called “Third-Person Effect”, which argues that people believe that the media have a greater impact on others than on themselves (Banning and Sweetser, 2007) and whose perspective may have real consequences on the individual’s own behaviour (Brosius and Engel, 1996).

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1. Research questions*

The research aims to explore the influence YouTubers have in children’s opinion-forming process about the reality surrounding them, so the study focuses on social and political issues. Therefore, the following research question was formulated: “ How influential are YouTubers in shaping the opinions of 8-12 year-olds on topical issues?”

Some secondary questions were also defined to assist the development of the study:

Q1: Do children use YouTube to get information about the world around them?

Q2: Is the opinion of YouTubers important for children to consider a topic relevant?

Q3: Is the opinion of YouTubers important for children to form their own opinion on a current topic?

Q4: Do children think the information shared by YouTubers is credible?

Q5: Do children develop more abilities to understand influencer marketing as they grow?

Q6: Does YouTubers' influence diminish as children grow?

## *2.2. Research Design*

The investigation adopts a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research is especially important for studying behavioural sciences, where the aim is to discover the underlying motives of human behaviour. The central assumption of this approach is to analyze the various factors that motivate individuals to behave in a certain way or that make them like or dislike something (Kothari, 2004). This methodology allows for exploring various dimensions of the social world, including aspects of everyday life, knowledge, experiences, and beliefs of the participants, thus obtaining more complex data that can be explored in greater depth (Mason, 2017).

The study was carried out in two sequential data collection phases. In the first stage, data were collected from children and in the second stage, data were collected from YouTubers. The collection of data from two samples allows the triangulation of the data and a closer approximation to the phenomenon under study. Studies are independent. The results of the first were not used to define the second but were carried out in sequence due to the availability of researchers.

## *2.3. Sampling techniques*

In the first phase, a non-probabilistic convenience sample composed of 20 children who were YouTube users was used. The elements of the sample are female and male and fall into the age group between 8 and 12 because it is pertinent that they are at different stages of cognitive and social development, that they have different preferences as YouTube consumers and that they can already answer the questions. Furthermore, to ensure diversity among the group, the participants reside in different regions of Portugal and are of different socio-economic classes.

The first approached elements were selected through the researchers' network of contacts (Vehovar et al., 2016) and, subsequently, due to the need to obtain a larger number of data and to avoid the emergence of saturated data, snowball sampling was used, so after each interview, the parents were asked to indicate other possible participants (Taherdoost, 2016). Since the sample is composed of children, it was necessary to establish the first contact with their parents, initially by telephone. Afterwards, those who showed interest in allowing their children to participate were contacted via email, which contained the video call link, and the authorization to carry out the interview. Table 1 presents details about our sample of children.

**Table 1: Characterization of our sample of children**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Zone of residence</b> | <b>Socioeconomic Status</b> |
|--------------------|------------|---------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Child 1            | 12         | Female        | Lisboa                   | C2                          |
| Child 2            | 12         | Female        | Lisboa                   | C2                          |
| Child 3            | 12         | Male          | Lisboa                   | C1                          |
| Child 4            | 12         | Male          | Lisboa                   | C1                          |
| Child 5            | 11         | Female        | Lisboa                   | B                           |
| Child 6            | 11         | Female        | Mafra                    | C1                          |
| Child 7            | 11         | Male          | Lisboa                   | C1                          |
| Child 8            | 11         | Male          | Sesimbra                 | B                           |
| Child 9            | 10         | Female        | Lisboa                   | B                           |
| Child 10           | 10         | Female        | Cascais                  | A                           |
| Child 11           | 10         | Male          | Santarém                 | C1                          |
| Child 12           | 10         | Male          | Almada                   | B                           |
| Child 13           | 9          | Female        | Vila Franca de Xira      | C1                          |
| Child 14           | 9          | Female        | Oeiras                   | B                           |
| Child 15           | 9          | Male          | Vendas Novas             | C1                          |
| Child 16           | 9          | Male          | Grândola                 | B                           |
| Child 17           | 8          | Female        | Oeiras                   | C2                          |
| Child 18           | 8          | Female        | Belém                    | B                           |
| Child 19           | 8          | Male          | Oeiras                   | C1                          |
| Child 20           | 8          | Male          | Lisboa                   | A                           |

**Source: created by the authors**

Then, an intentional non-probabilistic sampling of 5 YouTubers was used to carry out the second stage. After analyzing the children's interviews, the YouTubers most mentioned in the responses were identified, so for first contact, YouTubers of Portuguese and Brazilian nationality were selected with channels of different dimensions and themes. However, only 2 showed availability, so the researchers selected the 3 more popular YouTubers among Portuguese children to know their perspectives on the topic and the feedback they receive daily on their channel from children. The contact to verify the interest and availability of YouTubers was made via email, sent to the person or the agency that represents them, or a message on social networks. Table 1 presents details about our sample of YouTubers.

**Table 2: Characterization of the sample of YouTubers**

| Name                         | YouTube Channel        | Age | Nationality | Subscribers  | Channel              |
|------------------------------|------------------------|-----|-------------|--------------|----------------------|
| Beatriz Freitas-Branco       | Beatriz Freitas-Branco | 23  | Portuguese  | 12.000       | Lifestyle            |
| Gabriel and Vinicius Scribel | Irmãos Scribel         | 18  | Brazilians  | 1.32 million | Vlogs and Challenges |
| Margarida Antunes            | Margarida Antunes      | 19  | Portuguese  | 46.300       | Lifestyle            |
| Ricardo Fazeres              | RicFazeres             | 42  | Portuguese  | 963.100      | Gaming               |
| Rita Serra                   | This is Ri             | 23  | Portuguese  | 533.100      | Fashion              |

Source: created by the authors

#### 2.4. Data collection techniques

Regarding the first phase, as a data collection technique, a semi-structured interview was chosen (Creswell, 2009), for which a script was prepared with basic questions, previously tested with 2 children. The researchers only guided the conversation towards the central topic whenever the interviewee moved away from it and asked questions about topics that the interviewee could not reach on their own, always doing so at the most appropriate time and in the most natural way possible (Quivy and Campenhoudt, 1992).

Before the interview, an authorization was sent, which explained to the parents the purpose of the investigation, what the children's participation would imply, which ensured their anonymity and that the data would be used only for scientific purposes. Before the interview, the project was explained to the children. They were also verbally asked for their consent and willingness to participate in the conversation. Considering the public health crisis caused by the new Coronavirus (COVID-19), the interviews took place via video call, lasted, on average, 18 minutes, and were recorded in audio format.

The interview process took place in 3 stages: (1) presentation of the investigation's purpose and request for verbal consent from the participant; (2) asking open questions about the use of YouTube and their relationship with YouTubers, (3) thanking the interviewee and their parents for their availability and referencing another child who could answer the questions. The interview script included three main topics: 1) YouTube use and their relationship with YouTubers; 2) satisfaction of cognitive needs with YouTube; and 3) influencer marketing and advertising literacy.

In the case of the interview carried out with the YouTubers, since most of the answers were sent via email, in writing or in audio format, it was decided to prepare a script for a structured interview, for which the questions were previously formulated in the most proper order, ensuring a uniform set of questions for all respondents. However, the language was always adapted to the interviewees' age and the type of channel concerned (Quivy and Campenhoudt, 1992). The process of interviews with YouTubers was not always the same, as, after the first contact, the personalities who agreed to participate chose different means of collecting data. The interview script included four main topics: 1) characterization of the younger audience of their YouTube channel; 2)

perception of influence on their younger followers; 3) their role in disseminating current issues, and 4) influencer marketing and children's advertising literacy.

### *2.5. Data analysis technique*

All interviews were fully transcribed in individual Word documents, considering pauses and expressions of emotions (such as laughter and interjections).

In the case of children, the participants were anonymized. For this purpose, any personal data that could identify the children or other elements than YouTube personalities was deleted. Thus the children were numbered and, throughout the study, were identified by their respective numbers, followed by gender and age.

After reading all the interviews, synopses of the responses were prepared to allow greater visibility of the data in its entirety. Then, the data analysis was carried out by themes, following the structure of the interview script, and as the data were presented, quotes from the participants' answers were included, illustrating the results.

## **3. Findings and discussion**

### *3.1. Do children use YouTube to get about the world around them?*

The digital practices of our sample are consistent with what has been described in the literature about the topic, specifically regarding YouTube (Dingli & Seychell, 2015). Despite the minimum age for using YouTube is 13 years old, all the interviewed children are YouTube users, and 12 have their own accounts, consistently with what Araújo et al. (2017) found. They dedicate time to this activity in the evenings and a bit more during weekends. That is mostly an individual activity (Livingstone et al., 2017), as Child 4 (M, 12 years old): "I use YouTube a lot. I use it more in the evening when I am in my room, and I usually watch the videos alone. I watch a lot, and during weekends and holidays I have more time to do it"

They mostly seek entertainment and prefer fun, inspiring, or relaxing content, using this media activity as a way of evasion (Chiang et al., 2015). That also applies to YouTubers, as Child 18 (F, 8 years old) explains: "I follow YouTubers who make me laugh and have fun, but that are inspiring and help me be creative with their ideas". Preferences are quite gendered, with girls preferring music and boys gaming and sports (Ponte & Batista, 2019), but they all follow YouTubers and enjoy their user-generated content (UGC).

Besides the entertainment aspect, YouTube is identified by children as one of the main tools used for searches, as well as Google (Hassinger-Das et al., 2020; Zimmermann et al., 2020). They usually search for topics about their interests to clarify specific doubts or curiosities.

When specifically questioned about the possibility of learning from YouTuber content, all the interviewed children agreed that they learn from YouTubers, which is consistent with previous research (Chiang et al., 2015; Lewis, 2020; Zimmermann et al., 2020) - Child 20 (M, 8 years old) says "We learn from them [YouTubers]. They teach new things"; and specifically about current issues (Lee & Blasco-Arcas, 2020).



Most interviewed children declared that the YouTubers they follow had addressed current issues, such as environmental problems, Covid-19, bullying, eating healthy, animal rights, violence, homosexuality, and politics. For example, Child 19 (M, 8 years old) states: “I have seen YouTubers saying it is important to follow Covid rules. I have watched videos in which they talk about pollution and recycling. I have seen others talking about bullying, telling their story”. Younger children highlight protecting the environment, mentioning specific topics such as recycling, pollution and protecting sea animals. They highlight the “life lesson” format, in which YouTubers share personal experiences about how they dealt with some of these issues, motivating children to follow their advice: Child 2 (F, 12 years old): “in some videos, they tell us that they were victims of bullying. They tell us what happened to them or give their opinion about this topic and say we shouldn’t judge others without getting to know them. They share ‘life lessons’ because they know more about life than we do; we are younger”.

As found in previous research (Zimmermann et al., 2020), most children inadvertently come across videos on current issues rather than as a result of active search, and thus accidental learning occurs (Lange, 2019; Marsick & Watkins, 2018). Child 18 (M, 8 years old) says: “I don’t usually search about those topics, I am watching a video, and they [YouTubers] happen to mention it”. This concept includes visualising videos and reading comments or engaging in online discussions. The interviewed children revealed that they do not usually engage in online interaction on YouTube, but, as Vermeulen, Vandebosch and Heirman (2018) also found, they often discuss online content with their peers, as they usually have the same preferences and follow the same influencers. Child 11 (M, 10 years old) confirms it “Yes, I talk about the videos mostly with my friends because they always watch the same ones I do”. That reinforces their sense of belonging to peer groups (Chiang et al., 2019).

This point is in line with the YouTubers’ answers, which reveal that, although they try to promote a space for debating ideas when these themes appear in their videos, they do not usually do full content on current issues. Instead, they try to give their opinion when a topic directly relates to their daily lives or when something in the video refers to a specific current issue. Beatriz Freitas-Branco (lifestyle) and RicFazeres (gaming) explain that they prefer addressing current issues in their regular videos, if and when it makes sense, instead of making specific videos about a specific topic. They believe that children pay more attention when they address the topics indirectly and when relevant.

Thus, it is noticeable that children use YouTube, particularly YouTubers videos, to keep updated, although they do not always obtain information intentionally.

### *3.2. Do children think the information shared by YouTubers is credible?*

Children have a very positive opinion of YouTubers (Jerslev, 2016; Pérez-Torres et al., 2018). They believe they create digital content because they want to entertain their followers and help them learn, thus being guided by altruistic motivations. As Child 6 (F, 11 years old) describes: “They are people who make videos for fun and because they like to entertain”. Some children understand that YouTubers may earn money with their videos, but they cannot describe how, thus displaying shortcomings in advertising literacy (Westenberg, 2016).

Children enjoy the content YouTubers create, but when asked why they follow specific YouTubers, they are unanimous in explaining that it is because they identify with their personalities. That explains that they consume the videos released by their favourite YouTubers regularly, regardless of the type of content. For example, Child 13 (F, 9 years old) adds, “I watch the videos because of the

person. I watch everything that Mafalda Creative posts”. De Veirman et al. (2019) defined a parasocial relationship as a unilateral personal relationship established with a mediatic personality. On YouTube, that is reinforced by the publications’ frequency and the intimacy in the content, often filmed from home or even the bedroom, showing daily routines. The children identify with the YouTubers, feel close to them, and admire them, often as role models. Child 15 (M, 9 years old) gives us an example: “I know them well. They tell stuff about their lives, not a lot, but some stuff. So, if you follow them for a while, you start to get to know them. They do cool stuff, and I try to do the same”. This aspect reveals that children’s credibility in this type of video is related to their perception of the YouTubers’ authenticity and not to their critical thinking.

We found a few contradictions regarding the credibility that children ascribe to YouTubers. On the one hand, they associate a more serious tone that they tend to use when addressing current issues with higher credibility. Child 13 (F, 9 years old): “I think that when they talk about topics that are not fun or play, they talk in a more serious way so that we realize it is important”, but on the other hand, they enjoy when YouTubers can address important topics in a light and fun way that helps them understand better. Child 20 (M, 8 years old): “They talk in a more serious way, but they are still fun. It’s good that they talk more seriously but still make the videos fun so that we enjoy watching them and understand what they are saying”.

Most children are aware that there is false information circulating online. However, they have this notion due to warnings from their parents, but they manifest difficulties in identifying untrustworthy or even false content. Child 6 (F, 11 years old) admits: “I think that some of them don’t always tell the truth, but I can’t figure out when they say things that are not true”. They state trusting the content YouTubers they “know well”, meaning that they have been following them for a while and identify with produce, as is the case of Child 5 (M, 11 years old): “I don’t believe those [YouTubers] that I don’t know. I believe the ones I know well”. Thus, the parasocial relationship that children develop towards YouTubers, based on intimacy and resemblance (De Veirman et al., 2019), is key for the development of trust and for them to consider their messages authentic (Huggers et al., 2019), particularly when they address serious matters (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Additionally, Child 6 (F, 11 years old) explains how YouTubers are role models, and she believes they have the best interest of their followers at heart: “I usually agree with them because they have an important opinion to give. Some are examples we should follow because they know what they are saying. They are kind to their followers, our friends, and they try to help us better understand important topics”, thus perceiving them as authentic (Hudders et al., 2019).

Among the older children, we spotted what Davison (1983) described as the “third-person effect”. That means these children state they used to be more influenced by YouTubers when they were younger and consider that other children are easily influenced, but not them. Thus, they may underestimate or fail to acknowledge the influence of YouTubers on themselves. For example, Child 1 (F, 12 years old) explains: “Now, I am more aware that some of the things they say are not totally true, so whenever I have doubts, I search more about that topic”.

Thus, it is concluded that, although children consider that they do not always believe in what YouTubers explain in their videos, it is noticeable that, in practice, they attribute high credibility to the content their favourite YouTubers produce.

### 3.3. *Is the opinion of YouTubers important for children to consider a topic relevant?*

Generally, the fact that a YouTuber is addressing a current topic is a sign for the children that such a topic is important; as Child 11 (M, 10 years old) states: “I agree with them. If they are talking about it, I believe that it is important, and they make me think about it”. If they have previous knowledge about the topic, coming from parents, school or traditional media, this reinforces their perception of the topic as important. For example, Child 12 (M, 10 years old) explains: “Yes, sometimes I was having dinner, and I watched the news about Bolsonaro on TV. Felipe [Neto, Brazilian youtuber] had talked about that, and the news made me sure that it was true, was really happening, and was important”. However, about half the children do not feel the need to contrast the messages transmitted by YouTubers with other sources of information. Those who do resort mostly to Google searches, other YouTube videos, and conversations with parents, as Child 18 (F, 8 years old) says: “When the video is over, I check with dad if what they have said is true. Sometimes I also talk to mom or my older brother”.

Children, especially the younger ones, justify this behaviour with the strong connection they consider to have with the YouTubers, reinforcing the role of the source in the way the child perceives the message (Zimmermann et al., 2020).

### 3.4. *Is the opinion of YouTubers important for children to form their own opinion on a current topic?*

It is evident that children tend to agree with the YouTubers’ perspectives, imitate their actions, and even act upon their suggestions. Child (F, 10 years old) states: “I usually agree with them [YouTubers]. For example, when they said I shouldn’t judge people, I agreed that it was important, I agreed with them. Because it was something I already knew”. Child 15 (M, 9 years old) testifies having changed his opinion because of a recommendation from a YouTuber: “A YouTuber said that a game isn’t ok for younger ages, because it is violent, and I believe him. Probably, I am not going to play that game, even if before I thought it was a good game”.

Regarding current issues, 16 of the 20 interviewed children admitted having changed their opinion because of a YouTuber on topics such as racism, sports and recycling. Child 17 (F, 8 years old) gives us an example: “Yes, I have changed my opinion. Because of the videos that talk about important things, such as pollution, I have changed my way of thinking. I knew what recycling was, but I didn’t know it prevented garbage from ending in the sea”. That is consistent with Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura et al., 1961), in which children adopt values and behaviours according to what they observe, particularly the people they like the most (Bandura, 1998). Bentley et al. (2011) suggest including YouTubers in this category. Some children explain that their opinion doesn’t change immediately after watching a video, consistent with Westenberg’s (2016) findings. However, the video makes them reflect, and sometimes they watch more videos about the same topic, search, or are exposed to the topic elsewhere, and this long process leads to changes in their perspective and sometimes even in actions. Some children state that if the YouTuber is the first contact they have with a topic they know nothing about, they tend to be more influential. Child 7 (M, 11 years old) provides an example: “Sometimes they talk about new topics, things that I don’t know much about, such as Wuant [Portuguese youtuber] being vegetarian. I learned about the topic and realized that eating less meat is important to our planet, so I became vegetarian”.

YouTubers tell us that they are aware they are role models for children, and an information source, consistently with Backes (2019). In general, they believe they have the responsibility to use this influence in a positive way, and they try to address current issues in their videos with the aim of teaching children about topics they consider important (Lee & Blasco-Arcas, 2020).

RicFazerer (gaming) stresses the importance of addressing current issues in a dialogical manner, giving his opinion, mentioning that there are other views, and also engaging children in sharing their opinions as well, thus leading to a true discussion: “I don’t talk about specific issues. If one topic comes up in one of the games I am playing, I talk about it, give my opinion, ask their opinion, and try to relate what is going on in the game with real life. I always try to create debate. I try to make them aware of topics, through my view, but always asking about their view as well”.

Margarida Antunes (lifestyle) stresses the importance of addressing some issues lightly, as they are talking to young children, but also sharing their experiences, so that they know that the YouTubers they admire “are people like them and also have our bad days. Sometimes they think we have a perfect life, and we don’t have any problems, and I try to show them that is a lie”.

Our interviewees also worry about generating polemic and controversy that might lead to losing followers. For example, the Scribel brothers (vlogs and challenges) avoid “politics, religion and football, because those are delicate topics, and we can’t be radical about them”. Margarida Antunes (lifestyle) adds “I try to share my opinion in a light way, without hurting anyone. I try to make them think about a topic, not necessarily from my point of view, because it is very important that each one is entitled to their opinion. I don’t like to share my opinion in a very concrete way because I know that many people who follow me think differently, and that is ok. I share my opinion but carefully”.

They are also concerned about presenting solid opinions. For example, Rita Serra (fashion) states: “I always try to justify my opinions and make my followers realize that it is my perspective about that issue, but there may be others”. Margarida Antunes (lifestyle) talks to family members and close friends about what she intends to say in the videos, to make sure that she is “informing, explaining and sharing my opinion without pressuring who has different opinions”.

The YouTubers think that their usual videos are more aligned with the preferences of their followers, but some of them report having more feedback when they address current issues in terms of comments, but that these are positive and negative.

It can thus be seen that YouTubers are now opinion leaders among children, particularly regarding children’s opinion formation (De Veirman et al., 2017, Backes, 2019, Swatrt et al., 2020) on topics that allow them to expand knowledge, such as those concerning societal issues. In addition to this, YouTubers are aware of this influence they have on children.

### *3.5. Do children develop more abilities to understand influencer marketing as they grow?*

In the interviews, we explored the advertising literacy of children, observing concerning shortcomings (Dumitru, 2020). Children are able to distinguish advertising from other types of content in most media, as stated by Kunkel (2010), but struggle in identifying other types of promotional content, such as product placement, branded content or influence marketing. Only 3 of the older interviewed children mentioned that YouTubers integrated advertising in their videos, but with little certainties: Child 2 (F, 12 years old) thinks that “Advertising is when someone has a lot of views and reaches a lot of people. Others ask them to put advertising in their videos and pay them”, Child 7 (M, 11 years old) suggests that “Advertising can be when a youtuber is sponsored and gets stuff to show their followers, or when we are watching a video and an ad pops up” and Child 15 (M, 9 years old) adds “I’m not sure, sometimes they say that the video has advertising, or they write it, but I don’t what’s the point”. The younger children recall YouTubers mentioning that some of their videos are sponsored, but they are not able to explain what that means. For example, Child 3 (M, 12 years old) thinks that “some YouTubers may be sponsored to tell you what to buy. They get paid to get your attention”.

while Child 6 (F, 11 years old) believes that “I think that brands sponsor the youtuber so that he can earn money. Brands help him do that”. In addition, children also struggle to explain what the purpose of advertising is, failing to acknowledge its persuasive intent. Although still deficient, the advertising literacy of the older children is higher than in the case of younger children.

Most children are aware that YouTubers get paid for their videos, but they are not exactly sure how or by whom. Child 4 (M, 12 years old) admits “Yes, I know that they get money, but I don’t know how they get money”. About half the children know that YouTubers receive products from brands to try and make videos giving their recommendations about them, and some know that sometimes they receive money from brands to talk about their offers. However, the role of YouTube itself is less clear for them. Child 7 (M, 11 years old) risks saying: “I think they get money if people go to a website from a link that they share. If people use their link and spend money on that brand, they also get money”. Child 10 (F, 10 years old) adds her view about the role of YouTube in this process: “I think that as they [YouTubers] entertain people, and they spend money in the games just for entertaining the followers, YouTube gives them money to buy stuff and make better videos”.

Most children add that they prefer watching the YouTubers recommendations on brands and products to advertising, because YouTubers showcase the products in a fun and creative way, and ads interrupt their activities in an intrusive way. This is the case of Child 7 (F, 11 years old): “I like watching YouTubers showing things, because it is fun to see what they bought, or what they got as a present. There is always cool stuff”. The combination of the parasocial relationship children develop towards their favorite YouTubers and their lack of understanding about their activity and remuneration results in them attributing a high credibility to the recommendations of YouTubers about brands. Many of the interviewed children (12 out of 20) admit having felt the urge to buy something following a YouTuber recommendation, and some have even asked their parents to make the purchase, as the testimonies of Child 3 (M, 12 years old) - “I wanted to have some stuff, but I think that if I asked my parents, they wouldn’t buy me. Only if it was Christmas or something, because for my parents it’s too expensive” - and Child 10 (F, 10 years old) - “Yes, I thought something was cool and my mother gave it to me” - show.

This difficulty in identifying and understanding advertising is a very important aspect, because the older children identified an association between the promotion of certain products and brands and addressing current issues, namely healthy food and protecting the environment. Examples are given by Child 5 (F, 11 years old) - “When they are showing stuff they get, they may talk about healthy food. They say they will try that food that they got, because it’s healthier, and we should eat healthy” - and Child 1 (F, 12 years old) - “Some YouTubers show looks and talk about clothes that are bad for the planet, because they are made badly, and about good clothes that they get from sponsors”. In this case, the children regard the video as a “life lesson” as they explained before, they believe that the YouTuber is trying to advise them to lead a better life and miss the persuasive intent behind the message. For example, Child 2 (F, 12 years old) believes that “We watch them try sneakers and make-up on, live, so I think they say what they really think” and Child 15 (M, 9 years old) adds “He says what he thinks [about products], for sure”. The testimonies of our interviewees are consistent with Bonaga and Turiel (2016), Ramos-Serrano and Herrero (2016) and Rios (2017), children often fail to acknowledge that YouTubers influence them, either their opinions about current issues or their consumption, although this influence is evident in their behavior.

All of the interviewed YouTubers are aware that they are role models for children, consistently with Delbaere et al. (2020). The Scribel brothers (vlogs and lifestyle) say “the kids who follow us look at us as a model, a reference”, and Margarida Antunes (lifestyle)

adds “I feel a great responsibility”. RicFazeres (gaming) expands: “we have a lot of responsibility. I don’t think everything is ok when it comes to creating content for YouTube or another platform. We are influencers, we influence minds, create mindsets, so I think we have a big responsibility”. Rita Serra (fashion) adverts: “we must be careful because they copy our behavior, attitudes, and even phrases. They are very influential”.

Being aware of their influence on children, our interviewees mention aspects that they are very careful with. Beatriz Freitas-Branco (lifestyle) tries to “simplify, because there might be younger kids watching, and I want my message to be understood by everyone who watches my videos”. The Scribel brothers (vlogs and challenges) avoid “risk behaviors” such as “cursing, drinking alcohol and mocking other people”. Rita Serra (fashion) makes sure she explains and justifies the opinions and recommendations she shares.

Regarding current issues, YouTubers are aware that they have a strong weight on building the children’s opinions, as they are still developing (Delbaere et al., 2020). They believe that sharing their own opinions and experiences provides the children guidelines and examples but motivate their followers to form their own ideas. The Scribel brother (vlog and challenges) agree that “we form opinions, and dealing with young followers, who are still forming their way of thinking, they absorb everything we say. We motivate them to have their own opinion, but we know we end up inside their heads”. Rita Serra (fashion) adds “if we can be a positive influence, we should do it”.

Regarding influence marketing, the interviewed YouTubers also admit having a strong influence on their followers, and therefore being careful about the brands they work with. For example, Beatriz Freitas-Branco (lifestyle) tells us that “I only talk about brands and products I like. I have given negative feedback to brands. They invited me for a partnership and sent me clothes and I had to tell them that the clothes were not good, they were transparent, too short and were unflattering. I apologized but said that I didn’t like the products and that the partnership didn’t make sense”. On the contrary, she enjoys working with brands that promote values which are also important for her: “There are brands, as is the case of Swipe. They focus on reducing the manufacturing of mobile phones. So, they are eco-friendly. They didn’t ask me to talk about them, but I did, because I believe in what the brand stands for. And then they proposed a partnership”. On the other hand, RicFazeres (gaming) does not integrate promotional content subtly in his videos, he tries to make it clear for children that promotional content is different from his usual entertainment content: “When I show products in my videos, it is not random (...) or disguised. I do it naturally, organically, very clearly. I tell my followers what I am showing them and what the brand wants to sell”. Coates et al. (2019) advert that this may help the identification of promotional content but does not ensure its understanding. Beatriz Freitas-Branco (lifestyle) and Margarida Antunes (lifestyle) trust that children can spot promotional content even if inserted subtly in their videos. The YouTubers argue that their strategy does not arise ethical issues because they only promote brands that they genuinely like - and this is also more efficient for brands (González, 2020).

Some of the YouTubers refer that brands they have worked with have asked them to associate them with current issues (González, 2020), namely around the topics of healthy food and sustainability. Again, Beatriz Freitas-Branco and the Scribel brothers state that they only do it if they agree with the importance of the issues at stake.

Thus, even though there is awareness on the part of the YouTubers interviewed regarding their responsibility as opinion leaders for children, it is not clear to all YouTubers that children have weaknesses regarding the recognition and understanding of advertising,

and therefore they do not adopt measures to safeguard them in this aspect when they make advertising campaigns, namely on current affairs.

### *3.6. Does YouTubers' influence diminish as children grow?*

Older children explain that they currently view content produced by YouTubers less regularly than when they were younger. Child 1 (F, 12 years old) explains: "I also watch videos from YouTubers, but I've seen a lot more (...). However, regardless of age, they still attach high credibility to what these people say in their videos".

The influence of YouTubers on children's opinion and behavior is evident and common to different age groups, but we were able to observe that, as children grow up, they are exposed to more sources of information, and also become more interested in current affairs, searching actively about their interests. Thus, they naturally contrapose information that reaches them through different sources. If consistent, this reinforces their trust on YouTubers; if contradictory, this propels them to further research and reflect upon the issue.

Regarding advertising literacy, our findings also show that, despite displaying shortcomings, the older children are more aware about how YouTubers monetize their content and about how they relate to brands. In addition, at this age, the desire to purchase products promoted on YouTubers' channels is also lower than at other ages.

We believe that further research is necessary on this topic, but our findings point to a decrease of YouTubers' influence as children grow up.

## **4. Conclusion**

This study urges us to reflect on the weight that digital influencers - in this case YouTubers - bear in children's lives. Their influence goes far beyond influence marketing applied to the promotion of products, services, and brands. Our research showed that children resort to YouTube as a tool for searching - especially the younger ones - and that they consider YouTubers' user-generated content a reliable source of information and a more entertaining way of learning. In addition, YouTubers also influence the children's opinions and views on current issues.

This influence is reinforced by the parasocial relationship that children develop towards their favorite YouTubers. Children value that YouTubers share personal experiences and trust them because they are slightly older and more experienced but still close enough for them to identify with. Some of the children we interviewed admitted having YouTubers as role models and having changed their way of thinking because of YouTubers. If the children already have an opinion about the topic, they consider the YouTuber's view and form their own opinion, but if they are exposed to a topic that is new for them, they likely adopt the opinion shared by YouTubers.

The strong bond that children develop towards their favorite YouTubers presents both opportunities and risks. On the other hand, the fact that YouTubers address current issues is also an opportunity for children to learn and be aware about important topics from an early age, in a way that is accessible and even interesting to them. On the other hand, YouTubers are influential in the formation of children's opinions about current issues, and children tend to adopt the views and perspectives shared by YouTubers.

The vulnerability of children to the parasocial relationships that they develop on YouTube is countered by the acquisition of knowledge about how digital media work and what is influence marketing, by the development of digital skills, and by the development of critical thinking – all dimensions of media and advertising literacy. Either considering current issues, or promotional content – particularly because they may appear associated, as children are exposed to the influence of YouTubers from an early age, it is essential that they are supported and stimulated to develop media and advertising literacy that helps them cope with this influence critically and think for themselves. Our research also demonstrated that media and advertising literacy is developed by children as they grow up, and that this knowledge and skill is essential for them to cope safely, responsibly, and critically with the digital world. Many children in our sample claim knowing that not all the information transmitted by YouTubers is true. However, they admit identifying with YouTubers, considering them honest and authentic, and even admiring them as role models, thus forming a parasocial relationship towards them. Additionally, they also present shortcomings in their media literacy and advertising literacy, as, although aware that YouTubers have relationships with brands and get revenue for their videos, they are not able to explain exactly how that happens, nor can they describe the role of YouTube itself in this business. Thus, it is mandatory that media and advertising literacy is developed by children earlier on, as they are exposed to online advertising and to influence marketing from a young age. This should be a joint effort of families, as they are the first *locus* of contact with digital media, and also of formal education, which should include media and advertising literacy in the curricula earlier on.

Our findings also reveal that most YouTubers are aware of their influence on children and most of them display ethical concerns. However, it would be better if the protection of children relied on adequate legislation applicable to YouTubers and to influence marketing, instead of on their goodwill.

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## 6. Specific contributions from each author

|   | Name and Surname                                   |
|---|--|
| Conception and design of the work                 | Alexandre Duarte, Beatriz Pinto, and Patrícia Dias |
| Methodology                                       | Alexandre Duarte, and Patrícia Dias                |
| Data gathering and analysis                       | Beatriz Pinto                                      |
| Discussion and conclusions                        | Alexandre Duarte, Beatriz Pinto, and Patrícia Dias |
| Writing, formatting, review, and version approval | Alexandre Duarte, Beatriz Pinto, and Patrícia Dias |



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