




Instagram for showing off, TikTok for fun: characterisation of social networks as advertising platforms by teenagers

Instagram para figurar, TikTok para entretenerse: caracterización de las redes sociales como plataformas publicitarias entre los menores

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Abstract

McLuhan reminds us that the medium influences how users perceive the message. Based on this premise, this article examines the perception by underage users of social media as advertising platforms. The study consisted of a qualitative analysis of data obtained from 12 focus groups of social media users aged 16 years and under. The total sample comprised 62 participants from all over Spain. The results showed that interviewees associate different characteristics with each social network, and use one platform or another depending on the type of input they are looking for: TikTok for

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fun and learning (dances and tutorials); Instagram for self-exhibition and chatting with new acquaintances; YouTube for the world of video games; Facebook for older people; and WhatsApp as a source of gossip and rumours. The findings of the study may be of interest to brands, advertisers and managers in their attempts to increase the effectiveness of their digital advertising planning.

Keywords: social media, teenagers, TikTok, Instagram, advertising

Resumen

De acuerdo con McLuhan sobre la influencia del medio en la apreciación del mensaje, se analizó la percepción que tienen los menores de las redes sociales como contenedores publicitarios. Se planteó una perspectiva cualitativa mediante la realización de 12 grupos focales en los que participaron 62 menores de toda España. Entre los principales hallazgos, los entrevistados asocian distintas características a cada red social, buscando un tipo de input distinto dependiendo en qué plataforma se encuentren: mientras que en TikTok se procura diversión y aprendizaje (bailes y tutoriales), Instagram se utiliza para la exhibición y para chatear con personas recién conocidas. YouTube queda reservada para el mundo de los videojuegos, Facebook se califica como una red social de gente mayor y WhatsApp, una fuente de cotilleos y bulos. Estos resultados proporcionan información importante para marcas, anunciantes y gestores con el fin de aumentar la eficacia de la planificación de la publicidad digital.

Palabras clave: redes sociales, menores, TikTok, Instagram, publicidad

1. INTRODUCTION

Every era and every generation is marked by moments and events that end up shaping habits and modes of consumption (Álvarez-Ramos et al., 2019). For Generation Z, those born from the mid-1990s to 2012 (Olivares and González, 2016), social networks are a space that they particularly favour and that has become a central element in their digital life, as their consumption is preferentially oriented towards covering their socialisation and entertainment needs (García-Jiménez et al., 2020). As digital natives, they start connecting to social networks at increasingly younger ages and consider them as a tool for social inclusion (Sendín et al., 2014; Vizcaíno-Laorga et al., 2019). On the other hand, the presence of brands on social networks has boosted their notoriety, and has broadened the impact on their target and real customers due to the ease with which audiences share and consume their content (Jiménez-Marín and Pérez-Curiel, 2021).

The Annual Social Media Study (IAB Spain, 2023) shows that WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook continue to be the social networks with the highest frequency of use, while TikTok gains positions ahead of YouTube and Twitter. Moreover, in the latest study,

the network that generated the most interaction was Instagram, followed by TikTok, which increased its results by +107%. When users rate these networks, WhatsApp is usually associated with communication, friends, contact, useful, social, fast, connect, familiar; Facebook is old/old, contacts, entertaining, informative, gossip, popular, friendship; Instagram evokes photos, posturo, entertaining, funny, gossip/curiosity, friends, current, visual (IAB Spain, 2023). Following McLuhan's (1987) maxim "the medium is the message", it could be assumed that these perceptions towards platforms affect how users interact with the advertising displayed on them.

The time that young people spend on social networks accounts for a large percentage of their internet use, which makes them very attractive platforms for brand advertisers (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022). It is interesting to note that the main use that advertisers make of social networks is to sell, ahead of other actions such as customer service or clarifying doubts (IAB Spain, 2022). However, if we look at the latest IAB Spain reports on the use of social networks (2020, 2021, 2022), the level of brand following on these platforms shows a downward trend, also in the number of users who like to receive advertising tailored to their interests: only 26% of respondents according to data from 2022.

One of the characteristics that has always been associated with social networks as advertising platforms is their ability to segment users and generate an ideal context for interaction (Pintado and Sánchez, 2018; Quijandria, 2020). Advertisements can be easily avoidable when their placement is predictable (Jessen and Rodway, 2010), hence the choice of attractive locations such as video games or social networks themselves so that the positive feeling that the context generates is transferred to the advertisement and the brand (Mallinckrodt and Mizerski, 2007; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2012; Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2017); the positive sentiment to the ad will also be generated when the adolescent has prior knowledge of the brand, or visualises the advertising by an influencer for whom he or she feels credibility (Ferrer-Lopez, 2020).

Some studies (García-Jiménez et al., 2020) place Instagram and YouTube as the preferred social media among adolescents in Spain. While the former concentrates most of the activity on social networks, the latter is preferred for consuming audiovisual content. It is also interesting to note how minors perceive a greater demand for intervention and dynamism on Twitter, while a more passive profile is possible on Instagram (Vizcaíno-Laorga et al., 2019). Other research (Bossen and Kottasz, 2020) highlights the growing penetration of TikTok among the adolescent population, which points to entertainment as the main gratification sought, regardless of passive, participatory or contributory behaviour.

2. ATTITUDE OF THE NEW GENERATIONS TOWARDS DIGITAL ADVERTISING

Certain trends suggest that children take a much more negative stance towards digital advertising formats than other generations, especially towards mobile banner ads. They are more tolerant of advertising that identifies with them through real people, such as influencer marketing or social media advertising. Indeed, personalisation of the message is a quality that children value in advertising on new devices.

The new generations demand new formats, new messages and values, something that can be achieved through the creation of adaptable content designed specifically for this smaller screen, such as videos, musical narratives, synthesised and immersive messages are formats and proposals related to their experiential value, dynamics that are entirely possible through social networks.

It is interesting to note that, for children, the level of use and familiarity they have with a platform, especially with social networks (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok) has a proportional impact on the credibility they give it as a source of advertising: the more they use it, the higher the level of trust they place in it. Likewise, the level of interaction maintained with a digital ad depends on the platform on which it is inserted and, in general, ads on social networks register a higher level of visual interaction by minors, with the exception of YouTube, which tends to have a higher rate of clicks (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022).

The advertising format is another variable that influences the perception of the message (Feng et al., 2016), which can help to enhance a positive view of the message among the audience.

The scientific discussion on linking children with digital and integrated marketing actions is still in its infancy compared to that which analyses other media, such as television. This research aims to fill this gap. Furthermore, the need for research is especially relevant in the Hispanic American context, where research has been rather scarce.

In this context, it seems logical to ask what perception minors have of social networks as platforms that contain advertising, given that these evaluations end up being transferred to the content consumed through them. Thus, the following research question arises:

PI: What aspects of social networks do Spanish children highlight as advertising containers?

3. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to find out the characteristics that children associate with social networks as advertising platforms. To this end, this study gathers the perceptions of 62 children who participated in 12 virtual focus groups conducted between April and June 2021. Zoom and Microsoft Teams, platforms with which the participants are familiar, were used. This qualitative technique was chosen in order to gather

participants' perceptions through a guided discussion where there was an opportunity to contrast opinions, and generate debate among peers (Morgan, 1997).

With the collaboration of 17 schools, a non-probabilistic sample was selected, defined by two criteria: (1) age of the child: according to the academic year: 6th grade primary, 1st cycle of ESO, 2nd cycle of ESO and Bachillerato, and (2) socioeconomic profile of the school, determined by its typology (public, subsidised or private), and its location (previous indicator of the socioeconomic level (SES) of the children's households (Andrino et al., 2019). Thus, a distinction was made between high (+30,000€ income), medium (11,450€-30,350€) and low (-11,450€) schools, according to statistics from the National Institute of Statistics (Andrino et al., 2019). This segmentation resulted in the participation of eight private/concerted, nine public; six high socio-economic, eight medium, three low. In addition, children from different parts of Spain participated, achieving the geographical representation of the country (Galicia, Asturias, Catalonia, Madrid, Canary Islands, Canary Islands, La Rioja, Basque Country, Valencian Community and Andalusia). We sought to maintain the ratio between women and men, resulting in the participation of 37 girls and 25 boys.

In order to carry out the focus groups with minors under the ethical standards of research, a parental consent form was drawn up and supervised by the Ethics Committee of the university funding the project. The participants' guardians signed this document prior to the session. In addition, during the interviews, children were reminded that they could leave the session at any time.

The sessions began with two project collaborators welcoming the participants; after verifying audio and video of the attendees, they were informed that, as their parents and themselves had been informed in advance by email, the recording of the session would begin. The confidentiality and privacy of the recording was reiterated, as well as the restricted access to the researchers of the project. The average number of participants in each session was five children of the same grade, and each discussion group lasted approximately 50 minutes.

After each participant's presentation, the topic was introduced by asking them about their first experience with social networks. As the discussion progressed, they were asked about their use and consumption of social media and delved into their perceptions and feelings about social media as a content platform.

Table 1. Percentage of mentions of social networks during the focus groups (source: own elaboration).

		N	% TikTok	% Instagr am	% YouT ube	% Twit ch	% What sApp	% Twi tter	% Face book
6th grade	Low SES	34	29,4	20,6	32,4	5,9	11,8	0	0
	Middle SES	36	47,2	41,7	8,3	0	2,8	0	0
	High SES	48	39,6	14,6	10,4	14,6	2,1	6,3	4,2
1st cycle ESO	Low SES	56	66,1	12,5	10,7	0	10,7	0	0
	Middle SES	77	10,4	23,4	14,3	5,2	22,1	3,9	0
	High SES	35	17,1	20,0	25,7	0	31,4	0	0
2nd cycle ESO	Low SES	52	15,4	36,5	15,4	13,5	9,6	5,8	1,9
	Middle SES	51	7,8	43,1	9,8	0	25,5	3,9	9,8
	High SES	116	22,4	40,5	16,4	0	12,1	0,9	3,4
Bachelor	Low SES	35	28,6	37,1	11,4	2,9	5,7	11,4	0
	Middle SES	76	11,8	51,3	1,3	0	14,5	21,1	0
	High SES	44	9,1	47,7	2,3	0	18,2	18,2	4,5
TOTAL		660	25,4	32,4	13,2	3,5	13,9	6,0	2,0

As Table 1 shows, the most popular social network is Instagram (32.4% of mentions), followed by TikTok (25.4%). Next, the other most mentioned networks were WhatsApp (13.9%), YouTube (13.2%) and Twitter (6.0%). Throughout the grades, the mentioning of networks changes considerably. In the first two groups, Primary and 1st cycle, TikTok is the dominant platform, sharing space with others such as YouTube or Twitch. From the second cycle onwards, the use of the latter decreases (especially in Baccalaureate) and Instagram starts to replace TikTok. In terms of socio-economic level, it is possible to highlight a greater allusion to Instagram among children in the middle and upper socio-economic groups.

4. RESULTS

The interviewees do identify the ease of shopping without having to leave the application as an advantage: "You can write to yourself, make calls, etc. Now you can also buy" (Girl, FG5, 2nd cycle ESO; high GSE), which indicates that they recognise the commercial role of these spaces. Instagram, on the other hand, offers a more pleasant experience, as it brings together everything that interests them in one place: contacts, communication, gossip, entertainment, filters, etc.: "For example, Instagram has reels, which is the same as TikTok, it also has filters like Snapchat, it has a chat like WhatsApp, it has stories like Facebook, it has everything in one" (Girl, FG5, 2nd cycle ESO; GSE high). It was also repeatedly pointed out as the social network "of posturing".

TikTok, on the other hand, seemed less superficial and they stated that its content stimulates their imagination as well as providing them with entertainment with value: "Instagram is more like posturing [...] in TikTok, intelligence and creativity win out" (Boy, FG8, 6th grade primary school; medium GSE). The short duration of the content on this network makes it easier for children to engage with the platform: "On TikTok it

gives us the feeling that we are wasting less time than on YouTube" (Girl, FG5, 2nd cycle ESO; high GSE). This exposes them to a larger number of senders and messages: "You say I see four TikToks and that's it, four TikToks become fifty" (Girl, FG9, Bacalaureate; low GSE).

Whatsapp was the only platform that generated debate as to whether to classify it as a social network, due to the lack of communication with agents outside their close circle: "It's the one where you can communicate with people, whether they are acquaintances or not, so, by that same, by that same, by that same rule of three, I wouldn't consider WhatsApp, but my friends say yes" (Girl, FG2, 1st cycle ESO; high GSE). Classified as maintaining casual contact between peers and family, minors stated that they share chains or hoaxes more casually: "on WhatsApp I sometimes share chains or photos like that, with humour and things like that" (Boy, FG4, 2nd cycle ESO; medium GSE).

YouTube and Twitch appeared as the social networks of choice for boys interested in video games, who, in addition to using them for information, perceive them as a source of business: "There is a lot of business on YouTube, too much, and on Twitch three times as much, on Twitch they charge you three times or twice as much. You can make money if you like it a lot" (Boy, FG1, 6th grade primary school; high GSE). In addition, they highlight the spontaneity of live Twitch as an opportunity to consume more authentic content: "Live, then you can see him more natural than with an edited video" (Girl, FG9, High School; low GSE). It is interesting to note the associations with dynamic spaces, economic investment, and openness to interactivity that Twitch and YouTube represent for children.

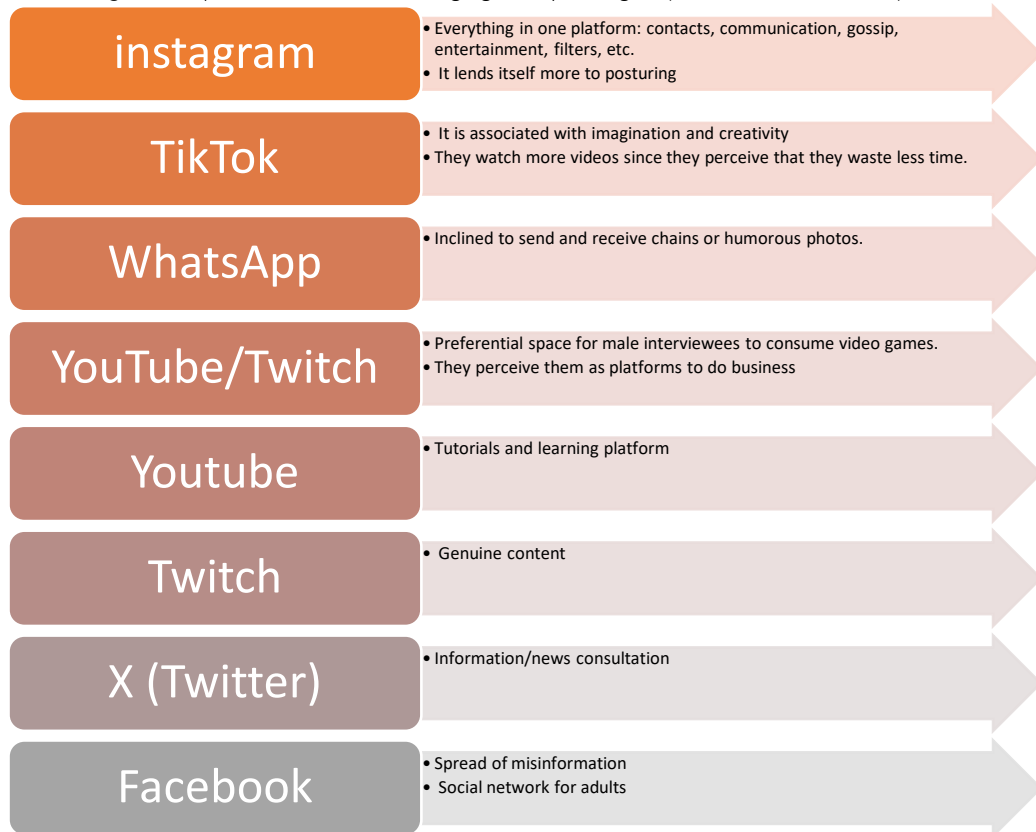
They consume tutorials and specialised content on YouTube to learn about subjects of interest to them: "From youtubers playing any kind of video game or doing any kind of interesting thing that, I don't know, that can give me advice on that, [...] I watch videos of professional people playing, so I can learn new techniques" (Boy, FG4, 2nd cycle ESO, GSE medium).

Although Twitter was rarely mentioned, older interviewees use it to keep up to date and get detailed information: "On Twitter you can go into more detail with all the threads and all this, and it's more useful for finding out about news in general" (Chico, FG12, Bachiller; middle GSE).

Facebook stood out for its high content of health-related hoaxes: "Facebook is the portal to misinformation, I like to call it that because it's crazy [...] for example, that chlorine, eating chlorine, just like that, alone, in powder form, kills the coronavirus (Chico, FG5, 2nd cycle ESO; high GSE). It was also the least frequently mentioned social network in the focus groups, mainly because none of the interviewees even have an active account, due to the association of the use of this application with older people and misinformation within the platform: "Facebook we kind of associate it with more

adult people" (Girl, FG12, Bachelor; middle GSE). Figure 1 shows the main aspects of social networks highlighted by the adolescents interviewed.

Figure 1. Aspects of social networks highlighted by teenagers (source: own elaboration)



5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The novelty of this research lies in offering ideas about the positioning that minors give to social networks, which can be transferred to their consideration as advertising media. They assume and accept that social networks contain advertising; it does not bother them as long as their browsing experience is not altered (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022). Therefore, it is essential to know what features and characteristics they associate with each network, as this will influence the perception of any message, including persuasive ones.

It was interesting to see the perception that minors have of the most mentioned network, Instagram, when they describe it as a space where strategically prepared visual content (photos, reels) is launched, which would bring an aura of superficiality to what is published. This can lead to a loss of credibility and reliability of the message, as is already the case with certain content generated by influencers (van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019), which explains the trend in the sector to provide this type of publication with a high dose of realism to increase the much-valued authenticity (Feijoo et al., 2022). WhatsApp is affected by the same circumstance: this platform is directly related to the transmission and circulation of hoaxes and gossip, which causes consumers to maintain an attitude of mistrust and

scepticism towards the messages that arrive via this channel, which also permeates commercial content.

As far as TikTok is concerned, it turns out to be the platform that minors link directly to entertainment, fun and humour, in line with previous research (Bossen and Kottasz, 2020). This relaxation that the platform generates in the user is transferred to the advertisement and the brand, in a very similar way to that produced by adver gaming (Mallinckrodt and Mizerski, 2007; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2012; Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2017), which is why they perceive less advertising saturation on TikTok. This impression could be relevant to address in further research and to learn more about the advertising potential of TikTok among minors.

Also noteworthy are the perceptions around YouTube and Twitch, two platforms that respondents, preferably males, link to video games. In this gaming context, there is a low tolerance for interruption (Mallinckrodt and Mizerski, 2007) that would harm the user experience with advertising. However, recent studies (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022) show a certain lack of attention to how minors perceive these social networks, as they are increasingly saturated with advertisements that cannot be skipped, especially on YouTube. The results of this work may be of great interest to brand managers, and to those in charge of advising them on their digital strategy. In a highly competitive scenario, and with multiple stimuli for users, understanding where and how commercial messages are most effectively perceived can be a key point in branding strategies. On the other hand, and although platforms have a huge amount of information about their users, this qualitative vision could help them to work on the correct identification of advertising content in order to achieve better protection of minors when they consume social networks.

Although it is not the aim of this paper, its conclusions could also draw the attention of educators: the naturalness with which minors assume the presence of advertising in their browsing routine may hinder their critical approach to this content. Advertising literacy efforts need to be updated to respond to this new, much more dynamic and changing reality. Only with this holistic vision can we ensure that advertising is truly effective.

These reflections are not intended to be conclusive given the limitations of the qualitative method and the processing of information. The qualitative approach provides results that should be treated with caution as we have worked with a non-representative sample.

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