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The Role of Influencers in Adolescents' Consumer Decision-Making Process: A Sustainability Approach

Charles Alves de Castro¹✉, Isobel O'Reilly², Aiden Carthy³.

Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of social media influencers (SMIs), namely their impact on adolescents' lives from a consumer behaviour perspective. Therefore, the main objective of this review is to present valuable information regarding social media influencers as critical players in influencing young people during their purchase decision-making process. The major finding is that marketers must consider online marketing strategies using social media influencers as crucial components to reach the attention of younger generations, such as generation Z. Moreover, research suggests that social media influencers have been efficiently promoting both brands and products, using target audiences to effectively enhance communication among peers. In addition, this review offers insights on the importance of encouraging SMIs to promote environmentally friendly products to reduce waste and pollution, as well as to seek to promote awareness to adopt a sustainable lifestyle, helping to achieve the United Nations sustainable development goals, and in particular SDG-13, as per the 2030 climate action agenda.

Keywords: Social Media, Influencers, Consumer Behaviour, Marketing, SDG-13, Sustainable Development, Generation Z.

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1. Introduction

Brands contract social media influencers (SMIs) to promote their products, services and mostly to generate brand awareness within a specific target audience, hence influencing adolescents in a variety of ways, mainly because SMIs are very popular amongst this specific age group. Furthermore, SMIs attempt to impact all areas of their target audience's lives, such as encouraging them to buy or use a specific product/service, using their influence to change habits, attitudes, and behaviours, including food consumption, lifestyle choices, and even how

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the target audience talks (Ryan, 2014; Solomon, 2020). Thus, SMIs can be defined as an independent third-party supporter who shape audience attitudes through social media interactions, blogs and other digital media means (Freburg et al., 2011). Research demonstrates that digital influencers are a crucial influence in young people's lives, especially because adolescents spend a significant part of their time online, being more exposed to influencers' content (Frontiers in Psychology, 2020). Also, adolescents seem to personally relate to SMIs, turning to them for entertainment, information, advice, company, and comfort. Thus, there is an ongoing and dynamic relationship between adolescents and SMIs, which is daily reinforced and integrated into adolescents' basic routines.

In the context of this paper, adolescents can be categorised within the Generation Z cohort. The most impacted and susceptible to be influenced by SMIs is Generation Z, made up of those born between 1995 to 2010 (Francis and Hoefel, 2018). Generation Z is the first generation to have grown up surrounded by digital communication, who have never experienced the world without internet access (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Additionally, Generation Z is the largest generation, accounting for about 32% of the world's population, and is expected to have a significant impact on global consumer sales (Miller & Lu, 2018). Therefore, it is important to investigate this potentially powerful cohort, and SMIs could be an important societal influence, encouraging young generations to adopt a sustainable lifestyle, and as such social media influencers can play a critical role in influencing future consumption patterns with significant implications for climate action and for sustainable economic development.

Sustainable consumption considers both the social and the environmental impacts of products and services, including political and social aspects - such as anti-corruption practices and worker's conditions - into account, forcing consumers to make ecological and political choices, even whilst making purchase decisions (OECD, 2019). More specifically, sustainable consumption is concerned with creating long-term benefits for consumers, society and the planet. Therefore, consumption is identified as a critical element in terms of enabling sustainable economic development as it can contribute to generating a better quality of life and improved wellbeing. Sustainable consumption can help in addressing issues such as absolute poverty and mitigating ecological degradation by directly improving the performance of index metrics such as food, real income, educational services, healthcare, sanitation and water supply, emergency stocks of food and cash, that can have a significant impact on environmental policies (Barbier, 1987).

Concerning sustainable consumption decisions, these can consist of purchasing less products and services or purchasing from sustainable alternatives, aiming to decrease the depletion of natural resources during the lifecycle of the product, service, or behaviour (Valor, Antonetti & Merino, 2020). Fundamentally, customers can reduce their carbon footprint by lowering consumption that is especially taxing on the environment, however consumers may require significant assistance if they are to shift to a climate friendly lifestyle (Thøgersen, 2021). Considering the percentage of young generations in the world and their role in the digital transformation scenario, they are key players when promoting the benefits and urgency of environmentally friendly actions, such as promoting green consumption and a climate friendly lifestyle. This might be promoted through SMIs modelling consumption patterns that show evidence of decisions that seek to mitigate the growing impact of climate change (Pittman & Abell, 2021; Yildirim, 2021).

The main goal of this paper is to present brief insights regarding social media influencers as critical players in influencing young people, especially generation Z, during the decision-making process mainly regarding consumption patterns that lead to better choices, for example conscious consumption towards a more sustainable world. This economic sustainability approach is very important to ensure that greenhouse gas emissions decrease, as they are mostly generated by the production and consumption of goods and services (Thøgersen, 2021). Sustainable development goal SDG-13 was established by the United Nations to raise awareness with regard to the importance of climate action. SDG-13 is of paramount importance in the marketing field and specially for SMIs who could help promote actions to deal with climate change and that will lead towards more sustainable economic models. SDG-13 targets climate change mitigation and its impact reflects an array of areas, such as economic, social, cultural, environmental or any combination of these (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development, 2022). Therefore, green or sustainable influencers might have an important role in acting as policymakers to support and promote SDG-13. Green influencers can be considered SMIs who promote environmentally friendly products to reduce waste and pollution, as well as seeking to influence individuals to adopt a sustainable lifestyle (Pittman & Abell, 2021; Yıldırım, 2021). More precisely, this research paper seeks to raise awareness within the marketing field regarding the influence of social media influencers on adolescents from a consumer behaviour perspective. Furthermore, this review offers critical insights on the role of marketers and how they can contribute to climate change issues and economic sustainability by looking at the role of social media influencers, mainly focusing on how SMIs have the power to reach young generations and spread a positive message regarding the vital importance of sustainable consumption patterns. This paper's methodological approach is based on a systematic literature review as a research method that aims to create a foundation for advancing knowledge, contrasting concepts, and outlining insights (Paré & Kitsiou, 2017).

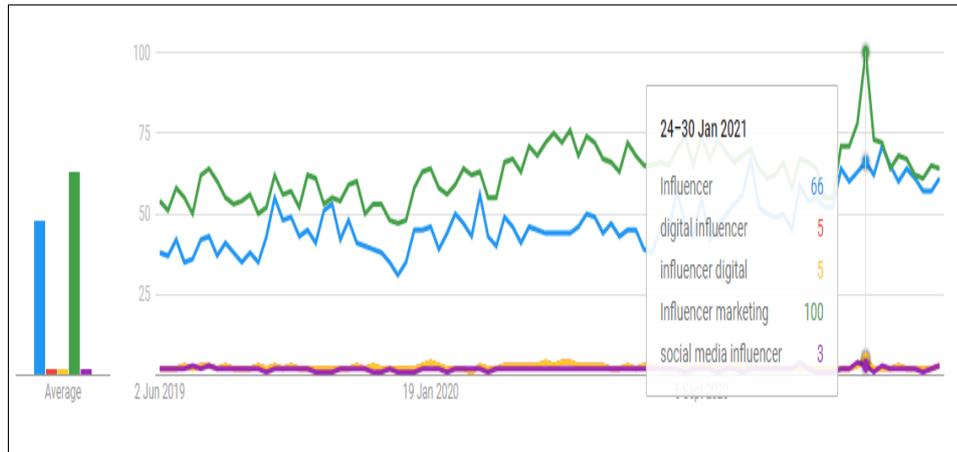
2. The Importance of Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

SMI is a growing industry, in 2018 Instagram reached 1 billion users and became one of the most important channels for advertising (Moore & Craciun, 2020). In 2019, Instagram created the possibility for influencers to sell online, which resulted in a boom in Google with searches for "influencer marketing", receiving an average of 61,000 searches a month (Brooks, 2019). In that same year, the word "influencer" was officially added to the English dictionary. According to Brooks (2020), in 2020, the influencer "industry" was deemed to be worth between 5 to 10 billion USD (\$), reaching an estimated 1.074 billion Instagram users worldwide in 2021 and signalling an important milestone for this social media platform that continues to grow as one of the most popular social media channels around the world (Mohsin, 2021). In terms of the influencer "industry", it is deemed that it is currently worth 13.8 billion USD (\$), with the United States having spent about 3.7 billion USD (\$) in influencer marketing due to its significant boost and impact on purchasing decisions for millions of users (Statista, 2021a).

Figures 1 and 2 below depict two graphs generated via Google Trends; they display the interest over time by the worldwide population regarding the following words: influencer, digital influencer, influencer digital, influencer marketing, and social media influencer. The interest is rated according to the number of searches in Google (search engine). In more detail, Figure

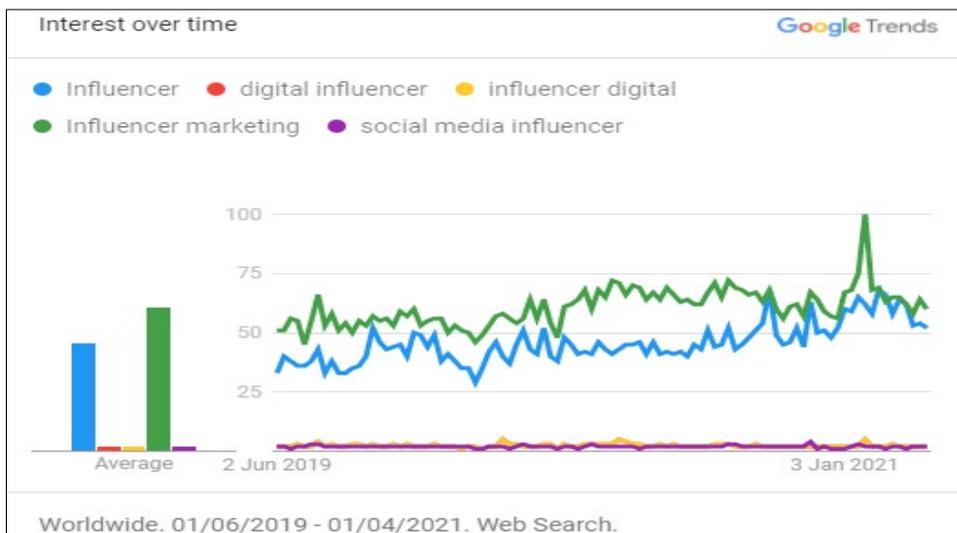
1 shows that between 2019 and 2021 the interest rate oscillates over time; however, the keywords influencer and influencer marketing are the most commonly searched for by users. In turn, Figure 2 highlights that there was a large increase in searches about January and February 2021. Taken collectively, both figures illustrate that influencer related topics have been trended, interest rates are high-ranked referent to influencer marketing and influencer, overall stable according to the date searched and assumed these keywords search will increase or remain stable throughout the years.

Figure 1 - Google Trends Search 1



Source: (Google Trends, 2021)

Figure 2 - Google Trends Search 2

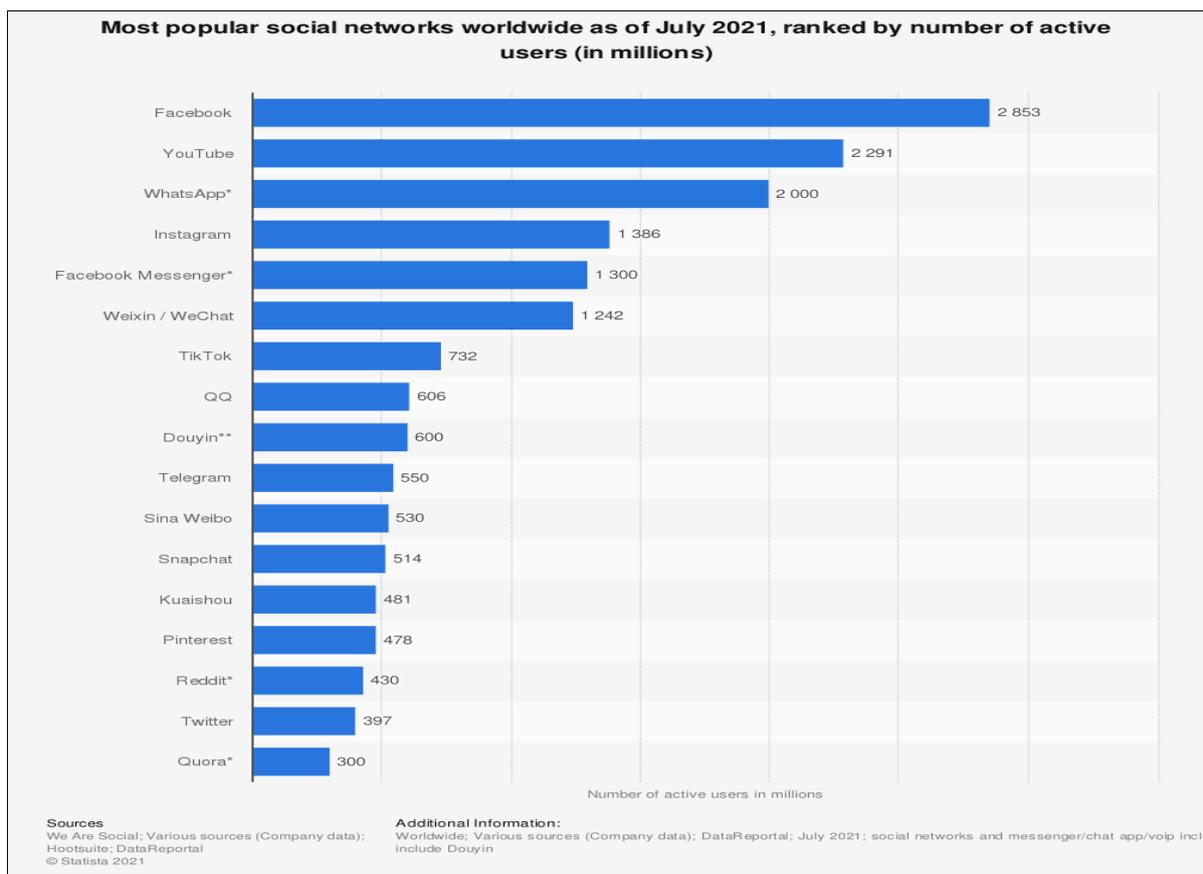


Source: (Google Trends, 2021)

Statista (2021b) offer insights on the growing trends exhibited by social media channels by active users. Figure 3 below shows that Facebook is still the leader in the market, with 2.853 billion users, followed by YouTube 2.291 billion and WhatsApp with 2 billion (Clement, 2020;

Statista, 2020; via Statista, 2020). Instagram as one of the most important channels for SMIs reached 1.082 billion, followed by the new trend Tik Tok with 800 million active users (Clement, 2020). These are the most popular social networks worldwide measured by the number of active users. In turn, SMIs influence these users' purchase decisions, namely when they use these social media platforms in their daily lives for entertainment purposes. In fact, Statista (2021c) demonstrated that 33% of consumers use social media as a source of inspiration during their decision-making purchase process; 78% of social media users discovered new products on content creator videos; that Generation Z and Millennials prefer to consult social media platforms to learn about products; and that 63% of social media users purchase products without previous planning, being directly influenced to make an impulsive purchasing decision by consumers. Gen Zers are also referred to as the iGeneration, as this population have never experienced the world without the internet, they were born in a digital world (Dimock, 2019). Thus, they have the power to spread positive or negative views through social media, which might be a useful way to raise awareness of relevant issues and to act as an information channel to young generations and future generations in an array of matters, mainly regarding the impact of climate change, sustainable actions and how to adopt an eco-friendly lifestyle to mitigate the effects of climate change and associated negative consequences.

Figure 3 - Most popular social networks worldwide as of July 2021



Source: (Statista Research Department, 2021)

Even though many adolescents spend a great amount of time online and on social media, an updated report from Lou and Kim (2019) confirms that a significant percentage of them, between 36% and 42% of Gen Zers and 31% of teenagers in the United States, try to escape

from online advertisements. According to Francis and Hoefel (2018), the most impacted and susceptible to be influenced by SMIs is definitely Generation Z.

Therefore, the most efficient way to reach this target audience is by considering social media influencers (SMIs) as a marketing strategy for brands, since Generation Z is an avid consumer of social media platforms, which in turn influence purchasing behaviours and help to determine trends (Statista, 2021c). In addition, Gen Zers might be considered as game changers in terms of consumption patterns and their importance to drive change regarding consumption sustainability and impact on resources given that they account for 32% of the entire world population (Euromonitor, 2021). Gartner (2019), argues that about 84% of millennials were likely to be impacted by social media influencers' content, ultimately leading them to purchase products/services, or to be more susceptible to adopt consumption behaviour that is advertised and promoted by influencers.

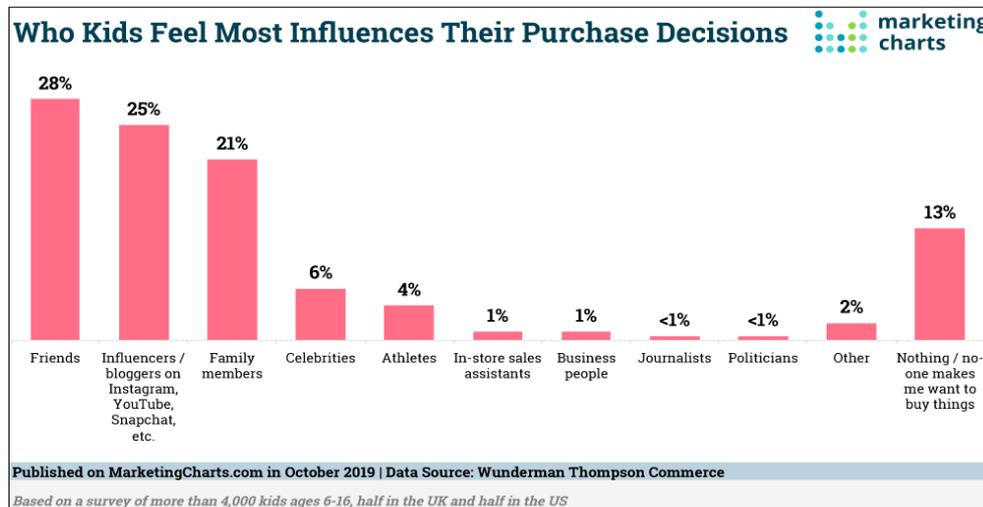
3. Consumers Behaviour in the Digital Era

Brands are on social media channels to influence and affect users' decision-making process. This is particularly relevant when we speak about Generation Z and all the digital influence behind their purchases. This group of individuals has the power to shake and drive consumption trends at global levels with significant effects in the online and offline spheres (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Overall, Generation Z refers to young people that are growing up in a technological era, where social media and digital technology is always present, either influencing them in terms of social behaviours or to purchase different products and services (Pittman & Abell, 2021). In addition, Generation Z is growing up amidst an ongoing climate crisis, which makes it more eco-conscious and knowledgeable about sustainable lifestyles, also affecting its purchasing behaviours and trends. In fact, Generation Zers are known to be more inclined to purchase sustainable products/services, with consumption sustainability significantly influencing their purchase decisions, regardless of the product's price (Greenstein, 2019). In sum, Generation Z is not price sensitive, preferring products and services from brands that share their sustainable values. Additional aspects that need to be considered relate to Generation Z consumption patterns and their impact on shaking and disrupting the speed of changing mindsets, even though it is a challenging spectrum for marketers as they change as fast as technology trends. They are now cultural leaders and digital influencers, capable of influencing purchase decision-making as well as having the power to buy, they are target audiences, mainly because they represent 32% of the world's population, that is approximately 2.47 billion individuals that integrates influences and are influenced (Spitznagel, 2020). However, reaching those adolescents is not easy, even though strategies have been designed to attract their attention, mainly based on their similarities, such as social media influencers focusing on a specific topic, such as environmental crisis/issues and being representative for their young followers as this can lead to them promoting and adopting a sustainable consumption lifestyle.

Wunderman (2019) conducted a study based on a survey that involved 4,003 children and adolescents aged between 6 to 16 years, located in the United States and United Kingdom with a balanced representation for each country. Figure 4 below reports that social media influencers affect children's purchasing decisions more than those of other family members. It is important to note that in this context, celebrities or athletes might be considered social media influencers as well. This will depend on how they behave online, mainly through their social

media channels, how many followers they have and how active they are online. Therefore, online marketing is key for brands to attract the younger population and social media influencers are key players in terms of enabling this.

Figure 4 - Who Kids Feel Most Influences Their Purchase Decisions



Source: (Wunderman, 2019)

Furthermore, individuals consume products and brands to take advantage of symbolic properties as well as functional benefits (Hyatt, 1992). The consumer chooses products and brands to cultivate and preserve their identity or related to their personality traits, and some goods are capable of serving the consumer in this sense, as they have a symbolic value. Customers use products and brands as a way of communicating with others (Hyatt, 1992). This consumption is directly related to the use of goods in the development of self-identity. In other words, there is evidence that individuals use brands as a means of encoding what they intend to be and as a means of decoding other people's consumption practices (Solomon, 2020). The reviewed research studies show that sustainable consumption is becoming a critical aspect for younger generations and Generation Z is showing a strong preference towards brands, products, and services that share the same sustainable values, respecting the environment and using alternative means to provide an eco-friendly product or service to their customers. In this sense, it is important for brands to acknowledge Generation Z preferences so that they try to adapt to these specific values and choose SMIs that share this vision and these values, to capture their target audience's attention and to ultimately influence them to purchase their products and services (Greenstein, 2019). In addition, the role of marketing in this regard should be constructing the corporate sustainability agenda and integrating that agenda into all customer/consumer brands, applying this sustainable view to all marketing strategies thus encouraging sustainable consumption that will ultimately have a substantial impact and spillover effects on economic development (White et al., 2019).

In the case of adolescents, this process can be more intense, as their personality and identity formation are in transformation. For instance, adolescents may be searching for ideologies and related identities to understand their place in the world. At the same time, they are trying to be more independent, which is often a central aspect of their personality and identity formation. Therefore, one of the ways through which adolescents can act according to their own identities or personalities is by choosing and gravitating towards certain brands or online

stores, shaping their preferences and lifestyle through social media (Ryan, 2014; Solomon, 2020). The ultimate goal is to have the consumer's personality fully aligned to the brand's personality and much study and effort is often made to develop this linkage to enhance brands' performance. Finally, through brand personality and marketing communications might be possible to change consumer's behaviour patterns focusing on a more sustainable lifestyle mainly targeting young generations.

4. Brand Personality and Consumer's Preferences

A brand's personality is defined as the set of traits people attribute to a product as if it was a person (Solomon, 2020). Thus, the brand's personality is an important tool for brand management and marketing as a whole, because it is the job of marketers to develop traits that are long-lasting and, above all, distinct. Aaker (1997) identified five dimensions of the brand's personality: 1) sincerity; 2) excitement; 3) competence; 4) sophistication and 5) ruggedness. In addition, brand personality is one of the most pertinent elements that influences and emphasises the consumer-brand relationship. *"Consumers tend to choose brands that coincide with their personality, hence companies that sell sustainable products are heavily advised to build up a brand personality that is in line with the personality of their targeted consumer, such as sustainable consumers"* (Paetz, 2021, p. 13). Therefore, applying Aker's dimensions to a sustainability approach might reinforce or create engagement with young consumers towards brands that follow green marketing and eco-friendly policies. Within this context, it is of relevance to consider that young people play different roles when it comes to consumption: they are influenced by their purchases, but they also act as influencers. Social media influencers influence them, what they say on social networks, or celebrities who perform an SMI role. Young generations influence their families and their consumption, have a remarkable ability to dictate trends and influence their purchases (Gunter & Furnham, 1998).

According to the *"Global Generational Report, How We Live, Eat, Play, Work and Save for Our Futures"* developed by Nielsen (2015), this generation has the following aims in life, and those aspects are very relevant to our consumer market and have attracted the attention of marketers:

- 1- make money (37%);
- 2- achieve a rewarding career (31%);
- 3- have a healthy life (29%);
- 4- spend more time with their families (20%);

In their free time, young people spend most of their time connected to technological devices, mainly smartphones, having instant access to social media in general. This digital era has changed people's mindset, making them more aware of what happens around them and in a global context. Youth populations have instant access to significant amounts of information, either related to politics, the economy, social issues, environmental issues, and cultural problems. Aligned with their own values, directly linked to technology and eco-consciousness, young people seek for a brand personality that does match their own personalities, sharing their values, either related to their aims in life, or to their technological, innovative, and eco-friendly values. It is also important to mention that the consumers' socialisation process influences their behaviours as consumers as well. Individuals adopt norms and values through socialisation, which in turn helps them adapting to social life in general (Solomon, 2020).

Regarding their behaviours as consumers, socialisation also allows individuals to assimilate certain skills, knowledge, and attitudes, which will also influence their decision-making process when purchasing a product or service. Some of the main aspects that directly influence adolescents' attitudes, behaviours, and motivation are peer groups (such as friends and SMIs), their families, and the media (social media channels, for instance) (Solomon, 2020). Hence, these external forces initiate adolescents in their customer socialisation, guiding them to their first consumer experience and shaping their attitudes and identities within the marketplace and as consumers (Hota & McGuiggan, 2006). Furthermore, Generation Z is much aware of digital marketing and advertisement, easily detecting whether advertising messages are important to them or not (Acoba et al., 2018). Even though this generation can be easily influenced by social media influencers, it is very difficult for advertisers to keep their message present for these young people. In fact, a Canadian analysis using data from Nielsen Digital Ad Ratings assessed Generation Z Canadians aged 13 to 17, finding that more than 90% of impressions are missed while targeting Gen Zers (Acoba et al., 2018). Overall, less than one-in 10 impressions had an impact on Canadians' Gen Zers through those promotions (Acoba et al., 2018). Therefore, advertisers must concentrate on two main goals: including Gen Z in their community efficiently and delivering relevant addressable content. That is where the social media influencers come in and their role in the market as influencers, promoters, and content creators.

Despite it being challenging and difficult for brands to deliver their advertisement message to adolescents, this is still a field in development. For instance, Facebook earns about 98% of its revenues from advertising, but it monitors consumers through newly developed private modes of communication rather than through purchasing or sharing platforms. Hence, Generation Z differs from other generations, constantly changing the field of marketing in order to keep their attention and to influence their consumption behaviours. In fact, Generation Z is composed by young people who are consumers, entrepreneurs, and advocates for several issues/problems, demanding marketers to constantly innovate to attract them to their brands, products and services (Wilson, 2020). Furthermore, this young generation are more interested in digital content, more involved and conscious of the issues affecting them, offering their views on every topic naturally. The attributes that this generation expects from its benchmarks are time, choice and creativity. This does not imply that these characteristics are necessary to build a bond with the company, as Generation Z expect the minimum promised by brands to be present on the products and services that they purchase (Commerce, 2019; Schlagwein & Prasarnphanich, 2014; Wilson, 2020). Although there are both positive and negative influences that SMIs can spread, perhaps one of the issues that can skew towards negative influences is that being an influencer is considered as a new job, within a consumption market and society that expects influencers to work for their sponsor brands. Thus, as the main aim of many companies is to be profitable, many influencers may be pressured to promote unrealistic goals or represent themselves in an unrealistic fashion to promote a given brand and profit from doing so. On the other hand, SMIs can employ strategies for better purposes such as advocating sustainable consumption patterns.

5. Conclusion

This literature review offers a contribution to the existing debate on understanding the role of social media influencers, especially their impact on youth lives from a consumer behaviour perspective. Accordingly, this research paper's main goal was to present valuable insights

about social media influencers as key players in influencing children and adolescents during their purchasing decision-making process. Currently, the world requires cooperation to accomplish the 17 main goals set by the 2030 SDGs in the long term, particularly SDG-12 that relates to green consumption and production (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development, 2022) and SDG-13 regarding climate action. The major finding of this paper is related to the level of influence that SMIs do have in adolescents' purchase decisions, with previous research stressing that both SMIs and friends are the main influencing agents behind adolescents' purchasing decisions and consumer behaviours. Therefore, it is important that brands and/or marketers choose influential and well-known people to promote their products and services, considering that they can be a crucial player when influencing young people towards specific and defined consumer patterns or behaviours. Highlighting the impact of SMIs on young target audiences, influencers can drive individuals to a sustainable lifestyle and green consumption. A great example is the study of Yıldırım (2021) that depicts that green SMIs have the power to promote sustainable consumption patterns and brings ecological perspective for sustainable consumption.

Finally, Generation Z is a very challenging generation marketing-wise, considering that they grew up with technology and with the awareness of environmental issues. Therefore, the main characteristics of these individuals according to a consumer focused perspective are related to eco-consciousness, digital advancement, and social responsibility. Based on these findings, marketers should keep in mind that to attract these young people they must develop a brand or product/service that can be relatable to the consumer, in the sense of sharing the same values and/or perspectives. To make the brand or product more appealing to young people, marketers can also contract SMIs that are relatable to consumers, defending the same causes and values and sharing some personality traits or attributes with individuals from Generation Z. Additionally, this paper argues that SMIs might be advocates to promote sustainable consumption patterns and be key players to help to achieve the 2030 SDGs and in particular to lead towards sustainable economic growth and development. However, not only green influencers should play this role, but influencers from all areas should partner to support sustainable actions to ensure and improve the quality of our lives, protect our ecosystem and ensure the preservation of our natural resources for future generations.

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