



CRITICAL AWARENESS AND EVERYDAY INFLUENCE IN GREEK ADOLESCENTS' ACCOUNTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Aikaterini K. Virvidakiⁱ

School of Humanities, Social and Education Sciences,
European University Cyprus,
Nicosia, Cyprus

Abstract:

Research on adolescents and social media influencers often treats critical awareness as a source of protection from persuasion. Adolescents' own accounts, however, suggest a more complex relationship. This article examines how young people understand and negotiate influencer content while recognising commercial motives, curated self-presentation, algorithmic personalisation, and misinformation. This article presents preliminary findings from three individual interviews and one focus-group discussion involving eight students aged 15–16 at a public upper-secondary school in Attica, Greece. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, with attention to critical media literacy, authenticity, perceived susceptibility, consumption, body image, and digital self-regulation. Four connected patterns emerged. Participants tended to locate vulnerability among younger or less critical peers while also describing changes in diet, exercise, appearance-related comparison, and selective trust in their own accounts. They recognised influencer content as constructed and commercially shaped, yet continued to use it for information, motivation, and practical guidance. Commercial scepticism functioned as an evaluative resource rather than a basis for automatic rejection, while agency was practiced through feed curation, source checking, consultation with trusted others, and withdrawal from creators whose values participants rejected. The findings show that critical awareness and influence can coexist within adolescents' accounts. Media literacy therefore emerges as a situated practice of managing influence rather than as immunity from it. The article contributes an adolescent-centred account of negotiated agency within influencer culture and identifies implications for media education grounded in young people's existing interpretive practices.

Keywords: adolescents, social media influencers, critical media literacy, advertising literacy, algorithmic awareness, negotiated agency

ⁱ Correspondence: email katvirvidaki@hotmail.com

1. Introduction

Social media influencers now occupy an ordinary place in adolescents' media routines. Their posts combine entertainment, personal disclosure, advice, promotion, and commentary in formats that move easily across TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. The persuasive force of this content depends partly on that mixture. Commercial messages arrive through people whose communication is presented as personal and accessible, and recommendations sit beside stories about health, appearance, relationships, and everyday life. The same creator may be treated as an entertainer, an information source, and a model for conduct within a single viewing session.

Influencer communication has attracted sustained attention because its commercial form is often difficult to separate from the relationship cultivated with followers. Research has linked credibility, identification, and parasocial relationships with adolescents' materialism and purchase intentions (Lou & Kim, 2019). Studies of sponsorship disclosure also show that recognising advertising does not produce a uniform response. Disclosure can strengthen persuasion knowledge, while attitudes towards the creator and subsequent behavioural intentions continue to depend on credibility, attachment, and context (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; van Reijmersdal & van Dam, 2020). Teenagers may understand that a post is promotional and still regard the recommendation as relevant, useful, or socially meaningful (Sweeney *et al.*, 2022).

This distinction matters because media literacy is sometimes represented as a stable competence that stands outside media influence. Once a viewer recognises persuasive intent, the assumed sequence moves towards resistance. Earlier work on children and advertising questioned this protective assumption by showing that conceptual knowledge of advertising does not automatically reduce its effects (Livingstone & Helsper, 2006). More recent research on influencer marketing reaches a similar conclusion. Spanish adolescents showed considerable capacity to question influencer advertising, yet their critical responses varied across the cognitive and affective dimensions of advertising literacy (Feijoo *et al.*, 2023). Survey findings published in 2025 also connected body-related concerns with adolescents' advertising literacy, indicating that awareness and embodied self-evaluation can develop together (Feijoo & Sádaba, 2025).

Influencer culture adds further complexity because authenticity itself has become a communicative practice. Creators disclose selected details of private life, display vulnerability, and present ordinary routines in ways that sustain visibility and intimacy. These practices can support a sense of closeness while remaining carefully managed forms of self-presentation (Cotter, 2019; Audrezet *et al.*, 2020). Adolescents are familiar with this selectivity from their own social media activity. Research on self-presentation has found that young users understand the work involved in choosing suitable images, managing impressions, and meeting platform-specific expectations (Yau & Reich, 2019). Recognition of curation therefore tells us that an adolescent understands how an image

was produced. It does not tell us how the image enters comparison, aspiration, consumption, or action.

The evidence on adolescent social media experiences increasingly supports close attention to variation within the same person. A qualitative study based on adolescents' own words found common patterns, substantial differences between participants, and duality within individual experiences (van der Wal *et al.*, 2024). Young people could describe positive and negative effects without reducing social media to a single outcome. Qualitative work in other cultural settings has likewise shown that adolescents combine enjoyment, connection, perceived risk, self-regulation, and parental negotiation in their accounts of use (Throuvala *et al.*, 2019; Purboningsih *et al.*, 2023). A recent scoping review of social media influencers and adolescent health found a field divided across possible benefits and harms, with outcomes shaped by the content, creator, audience, and setting (Engel *et al.*, 2024).

Media-effects theory provides two useful ways to approach these layered accounts. The third-person effect describes a recurrent tendency to attribute stronger media effects to other people than to oneself (Davison, 1983). The perceptual gap is especially likely when the influence under consideration is socially undesirable or associated with a negatively evaluated source (Perloff, 1993). In influencer research, this perspective can illuminate statements in which adolescents present themselves as critical while describing younger peers as easily persuaded. It cannot establish whether an individual was actually influenced. Its value for qualitative analysis lies in showing how claims of autonomy are socially organised and how vulnerability is assigned.

The Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model offers a complementary emphasis. Media effects vary with developmental, dispositional, and social conditions, and they emerge through cognitive and emotional responses that differ across people and situations (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Recent adolescent-centred research has reinforced this person-specific approach. The same platform can support connection or distress, and the meaning of an encounter changes with the user's motives, vulnerabilities, and social environment (van der Wal *et al.*, 2024). This makes influencer effects situated processes whose form changes across encounters.

The platform also participates in these processes. Adolescents do not encounter a neutral stream of posts. Feeds learn from likes, skips, watch time, follows, and searches. Users act on the feed, and the feed organises later opportunities for attention. Research on influencer visibility has shown how creators adapt their practices to algorithmic systems whose rules remain only partly visible (Cotter, 2019). From the audience side, algorithmic awareness may encourage curation and caution, although awareness offers limited control over incidental exposure. Viral content and recommendation systems continue to introduce material that users did not deliberately seek. Emerging research has begun to describe influencers as possible digital super peers for adolescents seeking social and political information, especially when creators make complex issues accessible outside immediate peer networks (Van Houtven & Schmuck, 2026). This informational

role expands the range of judgments adolescents must make about expertise, motive, and trust.

The Greek evidence base remains limited, particularly for qualitative work that follows adolescents' own reasoning across different forms of influence. Close attention to that reasoning can show how adolescents make influence intelligible. Their accounts may include scepticism, attraction, distancing, and behavioural change within the same interview. Giving any one of these positions the status of a final or true stance would flatten the empirical material.

This article focuses on the relationship between adolescents' critical awareness and their continued engagement with influencer content. It examines how young people understand, evaluate, and manage influence while recognising the persuasive, commercial, and algorithmic features of social media environments. The article addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do the participating adolescents position themselves and their peers in relation to susceptibility to influencer content?
- 2) How do adolescents evaluate and manage influencer content while continuing to use it in everyday life?

2. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative interpretive design informed by social constructionism, examining how adolescents understand and negotiate influencer content, social and gendered norms, civic issues, and the role of media education. Semi-structured interviews and one focus group were used to capture both individual experiences and meanings developed through peer interaction. The analysis reported here focuses specifically on adolescents' perceptions of autonomy, critical awareness, and everyday influence in their encounters with digital content.

The broader doctoral research project aims to involve a purposively selected sample of 20–24 students aged 15–16 attending the second year of a public upper-secondary school in Attica, Greece. The present article reports preliminary findings based on data from eight students, collected through three semi-structured individual interviews and one focus-group discussion. Participants were selected on the basis of their regular engagement with social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, while diversity in gender and social and cultural background was also sought. The school provided a familiar setting for discussing everyday digital practices, although the researcher's professional role within the school required attention to the potential power asymmetry between researcher and participants.

Data were generated through three semi-structured interviews and one focus-group discussion conducted in Greek. The questions addressed everyday social media use, credibility and authenticity, commercial motives, lifestyle and appearance, gendered expectations, social and civic issues, fact-checking, algorithmic personalisation, and the potential role of school-based media education. Open-ended questions and follow-up

prompts allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences and to qualify or reconsider earlier statements, while the focus group discussion enabled the exploration of agreement, disagreement, and collective negotiation among peers. Discussions were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed, and quotations used in the article were translated into English with attention to preserving their original meaning and tone.

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021). Analysis involved repeated engagement with the transcripts, iterative coding, and the development and refinement of themes across the dataset. Particular attention was given to critical thinking, source evaluation, commercial influence, authenticity, algorithmic awareness, social comparison, lifestyle practices, resistance, and perceived vulnerability. The analysis examined tensions between participants' claims of independence and their descriptions of everyday influence, leading to negotiated agency as an organising concept for understanding how adolescents evaluate, accept, modify, ignore, or reject influencer content. Analytic memos and attention to divergent accounts were used to support reflexivity and interpretive transparency.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of European University Cyprus prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, with written informed consent from parents or legal guardians and informed assent from the adolescents; participants could decline questions or withdraw without consequences. Personal data were processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2016/679; GDPR), with identifying information removed, anonymised identifiers used in reporting, and digital files securely stored with restricted access. Given the researcher's professional role within the school, the distinction between educational and research roles was made explicit, and reflexive memoing was used to consider how institutional position and prior assumptions might influence data generation and interpretation (Berger, 2015).

3. Findings

Across the three individual interviews and the focus-group discussion, participants presented influence as a process that they actively interpreted, evaluated, and managed rather than simply accepted or rejected. Four closely connected patterns emerged from the analysis. Students tended to locate vulnerability more readily in others than in themselves, demonstrated considerable awareness of the constructed nature of influencer content, distinguished commercial intention from the possible usefulness of a message, and described everyday practices of curation, verification, consultation, and withdrawal. Across these patterns, autonomy appeared less as freedom from influence than as an ongoing negotiation over which messages were considered credible, useful, acceptable, or personally relevant.

3.1 Influence Belongs More Readily to Others

Participants often began by presenting themselves as competent and relatively resistant media users. Personal judgment was described as already developed, while greater susceptibility was attributed to younger adolescents, peers with limited critical thinking, or people experiencing insecurity. One student, when asked directly whether influencers affected him, answered simply, “No,” linking this resistance to maturity and the ability to judge whether a message corresponded with his own beliefs. Discussing credibility, he stated, “*I will understand it on my own,*” and elsewhere reduced his approach to the direct principle that “*you need critical thinking.*” Yet the same student described in detail how idealised content could affect others, explaining that someone might think, “*He has perfect abs and I have a belly,*” particularly “*if they already had an insecurity.*” His account therefore identified existing vulnerability as a condition that could make digital content personally consequential while preserving his own position outside the category of those most easily influenced.

This distinction between self and others appeared across the wider discussions. Students frequently described younger users as more impressionable and expressed confidence in their own judgment, although this distinction became less stable when conversation moved from beliefs to ordinary practices. One student who rejected influencers as a major source of personal values later acknowledged, “*I started watching what I eat more,*” after engaging with health-related content, and also described creators who encouraged exercise, self-care, and perseverance. Such changes remained compatible with his sense of autonomy because they were classified as beneficial rather than manipulative forms of influence. Resistance, in this account, concerned unwanted persuasion over beliefs and values more than any possible change in everyday practice. Another student drew this distinction more explicitly. She described her social and political beliefs as relatively settled while acknowledging that influencer content could alter everyday behaviour, including exercise, diet, friendships, and wellbeing. In one example, she admitted, “*I might see that a food is very fattening and stop eating it. I do not look it up. I hear it, and I might stop.*” The statement complicates a general self-presentation as a critical user, yet she did not treat the two positions as contradictory. Rather, she distinguished between domains: ideas concerning diet, appearance, exercise, or wellbeing could enter everyday practice relatively quickly, whereas ideological change required a much higher threshold. The relevant question therefore became not simply whether adolescents were influenced, but which forms of influence they recognised as consequential.

The self–other distinction also carried a moral dimension. Harmful influence was easier to attribute to others when it was associated with naivety, immaturity, insecurity, or unreflective use, whereas positive influence could be acknowledged without threatening a sense of autonomy. This helps explain why students could reject the idea that influencers controlled them while later describing changes in motivation, habits, self-care, consumption, or information seeking. The meaning attached to the effect mattered:

influence understood as inspiration could remain compatible with agency, while influence understood as manipulation could not.

3.2 Knowing that the Image Is Made

Participants showed substantial awareness of selective and constructed self-presentation online. One student repeatedly described influencer profiles as edited versions of everyday life, observing that *"they only show their perfect selves."* She emphasised what remained outside the frame: difficult moments, crying at home, personal problems, or simply waking up on a bad day. The resulting presentation appeared to her *"a bit like a utopia"* and *"outside real life."* Her awareness extended to filters, cosmetic procedures, carefully organised routines, selected moments, and claims concerning psychological wellbeing, and she recognised that creators could present *"something different from their real self."* At the same time, she continued to invest some profiles with aspirational value, explaining that *"they show a very attractive profile and a very attractive appearance. They seem to be doing well in terms of their mental health. I want to believe it."*

This final qualification is important because awareness of construction did not necessarily eliminate the appeal of the image. The same student deliberately followed women whose content connected exercise, healthy eating, independence, family relationships, gratitude, and psychological wellbeing, explaining, *"I want the influence on me from them to be positive."* Influence could therefore be actively sought rather than merely resisted. Her comments about appearance demonstrate the same tension: she could identify the techniques through which idealised bodies were produced and still say, *"I see what beautiful bodies they have, and I want to achieve that too."* Repeated exposure also prompted imagined bodily changes, including the thought, *"Maybe I should smooth the lines, get Botox, add a little to my lips, pull in my stomach, get rid of the cellulite."* Such reflections were described as indirect pressure rather than explicit instruction. The image operated as a recurring point of comparison through which particular forms of self-modification became imaginable.

Other students described a similar cumulative process. One participant recognised greater diversity of bodies and identities on contemporary platforms, including body-positive content that normalised features such as bellies and cellulite, while still arguing that dominant bodily standards retained influence through repetition. As she put it, *"When you see an image every day and come into contact with it every day, it becomes a kind of brainwashing."* Another student similarly linked comparison to existing insecurities. Taken together, these accounts suggest that idealised content did not usually operate as a single persuasive message. Its significance emerged through repetition, circulation, familiarity, and its connection with concerns that participants already carried. Recognising that an image was edited, selected, or commercially produced changed how students interpreted it, but did not necessarily remove it from processes of comparison and self-evaluation.

3.3 Commercial Intent Can Coexist with Usefulness

Commercial scepticism was evident across participants' accounts. One student routinely questioned the interests behind influencer advice, asking, *"What basis does this have? Does this person gain something from it? Are they trying to sell me something?"* Such questions indicate an active awareness of persuasive intention in which credibility depended on the perceived motive of the creator, the evidence supporting the message, and its relevance to the viewer. Sponsorship or financial interest could weaken trust, but it did not automatically make the content useless.

The same student explicitly accepted the possibility of mutual benefit, explaining that *"all of this obviously brings profit to influencers because they get money and exposure. Everything ultimately serves money, but it still helps the cause, the goal."* Commercial intent therefore reduced assumptions of neutrality without necessarily cancelling practical or social value. A message could benefit its creator while also providing information, motivation, or visibility to an issue the participant regarded as worthwhile. Recognition of persuasion became one element in the evaluation rather than a reason for automatic rejection.

Other students described comparable forms of selectivity. One participant followed influencers partly because their routines provided ideas about exercise and food, describing how seeing someone at the gym could motivate her to exercise herself. Another distinguished the commercial status of a creator from the usefulness of particular messages, using perceived expertise, consistency, and the responses of other users as additional criteria for judgment. Trust also remained reversible. One student described abandoning a creator after hearing an opinion that conflicted with his values: *"He said something I did not like. Since then, I have not engaged with him. I do not even look at what he posts."* Another expressed the same withdrawal more abruptly when encountering views she considered harmful: *"Skip. Done. Gone."*

These accounts show that participants did not understand influence as moving only from creator to follower. They also regulated access through following, ignoring, checking, and unfollowing. Authenticity was assessed provisionally through consistency between content, conduct, perceived expertise, values, and motive. Students recognised that they could never know a creator's private self completely, so credibility was constructed from available signs. Audience reactions formed part of this process as well; as one student explained, *"I will look at other people's comments,"* treating other users as an additional source through which claims and creators could be evaluated.

3.4 Agency is Practiced through Curation and Consultation

Participants described agency through practical strategies for shaping and responding to their digital environments. One student gave a particularly clear account of algorithmic personalisation, explaining that *"the algorithm runs on the basis of what I like and things like that."* She believed that her routine choices had helped create a feed containing largely positive material, with skipping unwanted content forming part of that process. At the same time, she recognised that viral opinions, political messages, and other material

could still appear without deliberate selection. Her description therefore presented platform use as recursive: users influence what they are subsequently shown, while the resulting feed also structures later exposure. Control was meaningful but incomplete.

Evaluation also frequently extended beyond the platform itself. Students described searching for further information, consulting trusted people, reading comments, and discussing issues with family or peers. One student explained, *"I will take the information, but I will look it up and question it. If it is something tragic, I will discuss it with my parents. If it concerns young people, I will ask my friends."* Different social relationships therefore supported different forms of interpretation. Parents could become important interlocutors for serious events, while peers were particularly relevant to issues connected with youth experience. Critical media engagement in these accounts was therefore not an exclusively individual cognitive skill; it was also supported by conversation, shared experience, and access to other judgments.

Participants did not, however, apply the same level of scrutiny to every piece of content. The effort devoted to verification depended on perceived importance, personal relevance, interest, and risk. Some claims were accepted quickly, as in the dietary example above; others prompted further searching or discussion, particularly when they concerned war, politics, health, or issues affecting young people. Material regarded as irrelevant or objectionable could simply be skipped. One student summarised this orientation by stating, *"You cannot avoid information. You are going to receive it. The issue is how you manage it."*

Management therefore involved a combination of curation, verification, consultation, selective acceptance, and withdrawal. It also involved deciding when influence was welcome. Some students actively sought motivational or wellbeing content, others accepted messages encouraging self-care or resilience, and others retained useful information despite recognising the creator's commercial interest. Across the four themes, participants demonstrated critical awareness, identified conditions of vulnerability, recognised commercial and performative techniques, and actively shaped their feeds. At the same time, they described changes in attention, consumption, diet, exercise, body evaluation, and information-seeking practices. Their accounts therefore point to a form of negotiated agency in which critical awareness does not remove adolescents from influencer culture but provides resources through which influence is evaluated, managed, accepted, or resisted.

4. Discussion

4.1 Negotiated Agency in Influencer Culture

The central finding is that critical awareness and influence remained present within the same adolescent accounts. Participants recognised curated self-presentation, hidden commercial interests, misinformation, and algorithmic personalisation, while also describing influencer content entering ordinary decisions and self-evaluations. This pattern supports research that treats adolescent social media experience as internally

variable. Van der Wal *et al.* (2024) use the term duality to describe differences within adolescents' own experiences. The present study identifies a related duality at the level of media interpretation: a young person can recognise a persuasive mechanism and remain responsive to its content.

This finding complicates a competence model of media literacy. Participants did not move through a simple sequence from recognition to resistance. Their knowledge changed the terms of engagement. Some questioned who benefited from a message and what evidence supported it; others recognised the selective production of perfection or relied on personal values, perceived expertise, and audience comments as credibility tests. These practices resemble the critical operations identified among Spanish adolescents, including clarification, evaluation, and justification (Feijoo *et al.*, 2023). Their consequences varied: some posts were skipped, others investigated, and others adopted because they appeared useful.

The distinction between recognition and consequence is consistent with research on advertising literacy. Livingstone and Helsper (2006) showed that knowledge about advertising cannot be assumed to mediate its effects uniformly. Studies of influencer disclosures similarly show that persuasion knowledge and disclosure responses are associated with evaluations of the creator and with the influencer–follower relationship (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; van Reijmersdal & van Dam, 2020). Sweeney *et al.* (2022) further distinguish moral advertising literacy from the ability to identify commercial content. The adolescents in the present study also judged whether creators appeared fair, responsible, authentic, opportunistic, harmful, or inconsistent across content and conduct.

Commercial scepticism therefore functioned as an evaluative stance rather than an automatic rejection of influencer content. Some participants assumed that profit lay behind influencer communication but still accepted a message when they considered it useful. This resembles the broader influencer dilemma in which credibility and commerce remain mutually entangled. Authenticity claims operate within a professionalised attention economy, and audiences judge whether commercial activity fits a creator's established identity and relationship with followers (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). For adolescents who already expect commercial intent, the more relevant question becomes which forms and uses of influence remain acceptable.

4.2 The Self and Other Gap

The tendency to deny or minimise personal influence while describing greater vulnerability among peers closely resembles the perceptual component of the third-person effect (Davison, 1983). The focus-group material suggests that this pattern extended across participants, with younger adolescents and peers perceived as having weaker critical judgment being described as more susceptible, particularly to harmful or manipulative content. Such attributions can protect a competent self-image and place risk at a social distance. Third-person perceptions are stronger when influence is considered

undesirable, which may help explain why participants more readily acknowledged inspiration and positive motivation than manipulation (Perloff, 1993).

The qualitative material adds an important domain-based distinction. Participants did not apply the self–other gap equally across all forms of influence. They tended to defend autonomy over values and political beliefs while acknowledging effects on food, exercise, appearance, products, attention, and everyday practices. The social meaning attached to influence therefore shaped how it was disclosed. A new exercise routine could be framed as chosen self-improvement, whereas ideological change could imply diminished independence. Researchers asking general questions about influencer effects may therefore receive responses shaped by whichever domain participants associate most closely with personal autonomy.

These accounts also caution against treating third-person statements simply as evidence of misperception. Participants may genuinely differ in their susceptibility to particular forms of content. Several identified age, insecurity, maturity, and critical ability as conditions that intensified or reduced influence, an interpretation compatible with the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). The analytic significance lies not in determining whether participants objectively underestimated their own susceptibility, which interview data cannot establish, but in examining how they explained differences in vulnerability and constructed boundaries between themselves and others.

4.3 Curated Authenticity and Embodied Effects

Participants demonstrated considerable awareness of selective self-presentation. They referred to hidden sadness and difficulty, filters, cosmetic intervention, and the repeated performance of ideal routines. These observations align with studies of adolescents' own self-presentation, which show awareness of the labour involved in selecting images and maintaining an acceptable profile (Yau & Reich, 2019). Research on influencer authenticity similarly presents authenticity as something actively managed through passion, transparency, and the handling of commercial partnerships (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020).

At the same time, recognising construction did not eliminate aspiration. As one student expressed it, *"I want to believe it,"* despite recognising that an attractive and apparently psychologically healthy profile might not reveal the creator's complete reality. Such accounts moved between recognition of idealised presentation and willingness to adopt practices related to exercise, diet, wellbeing, or gratitude. Authenticity judgments therefore appeared to concern not only whether a portrayal was factually complete, but also whether the represented lifestyle remained meaningful or desirable as a model.

Body-related material made the limits of cognitive recognition especially visible. Participants could explain that idealised appearances might reflect surgery, editing, filters, careful selection, and disciplined presentation, yet repeated exposure could still generate comparison and imagined modification. Others described normative bodily

pressure persisting despite the greater visual diversity available on contemporary platforms. These accounts are consistent with evidence connecting advertising literacy and body self-perception among adolescents (Feijoo & Sádaba, 2025) and with the health literature reviewed by Engel *et al.* (2024), which shows that influencer content can provide motivation and information while also carrying risks related to body ideals, diet, and self-evaluation.

The findings do not establish a causal effect of influencer content on body image. They show how adolescents themselves connect repeated exposure with comparison, aspiration, and possible behavioural responses. Influence was described as cumulative and conditional, with existing insecurity, personal interest, repetition, and positive identification shaping how particular images were experienced.

4.4 Algorithmic Awareness as Partial Control

Participants' accounts showed that algorithmic awareness could operate as practical knowledge. Some understood likes, skips, follows, and other interactions as signals that altered subsequent recommendations and described deliberately curating their feeds. At the same time, viral content, political opinions, and unfamiliar material could still appear without deliberate selection. Agency within personalised environments was therefore understood as meaningful but incomplete.

Agency within a personalised platform environment is relational, as users interpret and respond to platform affordances while algorithmic systems structure, without fully determining, subsequent behaviour and visibility (Cotter, 2019). The adolescents in this study did not describe complete control over their feeds; instead, they described repeated adjustments through skipping, unfollowing, searching, checking comments, and consulting trusted people. These practices provided ways of managing uncertainty within environments that remained partly shaped by platform mechanisms. The social dimension of evaluation is particularly important. Source evaluation was rarely described as a purely solitary or technical practice. Participants referred to parents, friends, trusted others, and public comments as resources for interpreting information. Some turned to family members for serious events and to peers for issues associated with young people, while others used comments as an additional credibility check. These practices resemble qualitative findings showing that adolescent media use is embedded in family and peer relationships (Purboningsih *et al.*, 2023). They also suggest that media literacy is partly relational: young people compare interpretations across different social settings, even when the quality of those interpretations varies.

Influencers' growing informational role increases the importance of such distributed evaluation. Van Houtven and Schmuck (2026) found that adolescents may use influencers as digital super peers for sociopolitical information. Similar tendencies appeared in the present material, where students described watching short explanatory content or encountering viral opinions incidentally. Accessibility may widen contact with social and political issues while leaving questions of expertise, simplification, credibility, and commercial motive unresolved.

4.5 Implications for Media Education

The findings support media education that begins with adolescents' existing interpretive practices. Participants were already familiar with the language of algorithms, sponsorship, filters, misinformation, and critical thinking. Educational work can build on this knowledge by examining how recognition interacts with emotion, repetition, trust, comparison, and behaviour. Teaching that stops at identifying whether a post is sponsored, for example, may miss why a recognised advertisement can remain persuasive or useful.

Participants' own practices suggest several directions for classroom activity. Students could compare influencer claims with their sources, examine how recommendations change following different interactions, analyse comments as forms of social evidence, and discuss how apparently positive messages can simultaneously serve commercial interests. Body-related material requires particular care because critical analysis can itself reproduce comparison or shame. The emphasis should therefore remain on how images are constructed, circulated, repeated, and connected with existing vulnerabilities.

One student's observation that *"You cannot avoid information. You are going to receive it. The issue is how you manage it"* captures the educational direction emerging from the findings. Media literacy can strengthen judgment within continued digital participation rather than treating successful literacy as withdrawal from influence. This orientation is consistent with adolescent-centred research that understands young people as active interpreters whose experiences combine benefit, discomfort, pleasure, pressure, and self-regulation (Purboningsih *et al.*, 2023; van der Wal *et al.*, 2024). At the same time, individual critical skills should not obscure structural conditions: users can curate their feeds and evaluate content, while platforms and commercial actors retain substantial power over visibility, personalisation, and data-driven recommendation.

4.6 Limitations

The study was conducted in one public school in Attica with participants of the same age who shared a common school environment. This context enabled close comparison across accounts but limits transferability beyond the specific setting, while differences related to socioeconomic position, ethnicity, disability, and unequal levels of platform access were not examined systematically. The analysis drew on iterative coding, analytical memos, interview material, and focus-group data; although these sources supported comparison across individual and collective accounts, closer attention to the full interactional context could reveal additional nuances in sequencing, pauses, and participants' talk. Given the preliminary nature of the analysis and the small sample of eight participants, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than representative of the broader adolescent population.

The researcher's professional position within the school may also have shaped participants' responses, particularly by encouraging performances of critical competence or responsible media use, and reflexive interviewing and memo writing were used to

account for this institutional relationship in the interpretation. In addition, the data were generated in Greek and translated into English for publication, which may have reduced some cultural and colloquial nuance. Finally, the study relies on participants' accounts rather than behavioural observation, platform data, or direct measures of media effects; the findings therefore concern how adolescents understand and negotiate influence rather than the objective magnitude of influencer effects on their behaviour.

5. Conclusions

The adolescents in this focused study possessed a detailed vocabulary for criticising influencer culture. They recognised selective self-presentation, commercial motive, repeated bodily ideals, misinformation, and algorithmic personalisation. They used that knowledge to skip content, question sources, consult others, and withdraw trust. Their accounts also contained dietary change, exercise motivation, body comparison, information seeking, and hope invested in carefully selected creators.

Critical awareness gave participants resources for making judgments within ongoing exposure. Its presence did not end the effects they described. Influence became acceptable when it appeared useful, positive, or self-chosen and became threatening when it implied manipulation of values or loss of independent judgment. This distinction shaped what participants admitted about themselves and what they attributed to peers. The concept of negotiated agency captures this movement. Adolescents acted on feeds and creators while responding to environments organised by commercial visibility and algorithmic recommendation. Their agency was practical, social, and partial. Research that listens closely to these negotiations can move beyond broad claims of vulnerability or resistance. Media education can then work with the questions adolescents already ask and extend them towards a fuller understanding of how persuasive systems continue to operate after their techniques have been recognised.

Funding Statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Creative Commons License Statement

This research work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>. To view the complete legal code, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode.en>. Under the terms of this license, members of the community may copy, distribute, and transmit the article, provided that proper, prominent, and unambiguous attribution is given to the authors, and the material is not used for commercial purposes or modified in any way. Reuse is only allowed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Aikaterini K. Virvidaki is a secondary education teacher and Director of the Evening General Lyceum of Kallithea. She is a PhD candidate at European University Cyprus, where her research examines adolescents' perceptions of influencers' digital content, the social and gendered norms promoted through media, and active citizenship. Her research interests focus on digital media, media literacy, adolescents' perceptions and experiences, and contemporary issues in education and inclusion. She has also been active in research and academic writing, with publications and conference participation in the fields of education, digital technologies, and media.

References

- Audrezet, A., de Kerviler, G., & Moulard, J. G. (2020). Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. *Journal of Business Research*, 117, 557–569. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.008>
- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in reflexive thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>
- Cotter, K. (2019). Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. *New Media & Society*, 21(4), 895–913. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684>
- Davison, W. P. (1983). The third-person effect in communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1086/268763>
- Dhanesh, G. S., & Duthler, G. (2019). Relationship management through social media influencers: Effects of followers' awareness of paid endorsement. *Public Relations Review*, 45(3), Article 101765. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.03.002>
- Engel, E., Gell, S., Heiss, R., & Karsay, K. (2024). Social media influencers and adolescents' health: A scoping review of the research field. *Social Science & Medicine*, 340, Article 116387. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.116387>

- Feijoo, B., & Sádaba, C. (2025). Adolescents' advertising literacy and body self-perception in the face of influencer marketing. *Cuadernos.info*, 60, 93–120. <https://doi.org/10.7764/cdi.60.82134>
- Feijoo, B., Zozaya, L., & Sádaba, C. (2023). Do I question what influencers sell me? Integration of critical thinking in the advertising literacy of Spanish adolescents. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10, Article 363. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01872-y>
- Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. J. (2006). Does advertising literacy mediate the effects of advertising on children? A critical examination of two linked research literatures in relation to obesity and food choice. *Journal of Communication*, 56(3), 560–584. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00301.x>
- Lou, C., & Kim, H. K. (2019). Fancying the new rich and famous? Explicating the roles of influencer content, credibility, and parental mediation in adolescents' parasocial relationship, materialism, and purchase intentions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, Article 2567. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02567>
- Perloff, R. M. (1993). Third-person effect research 1983–1992: A review and synthesis. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 5(2), 167–184. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/5.2.167>
- Purboningsih, E. R., Massar, K., Hinduan, Z. R., Agustiani, H., Ruiter, R. A. C., & Verduyn, P. (2023). Perception and use of social media by Indonesian adolescents and parents: A qualitative study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 985112. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.985112>
- Sweeney, E., Lawlor, M. A., & Brady, M. (2022). Teenagers' moral advertising literacy in an influencer marketing context. *International Journal of Advertising*, 41(1), 54–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2021.1964227>
- Throuvala, M. A., Griffiths, M. D., Rennoldson, M., & Kuss, D. J. (2019). Motivational processes and dysfunctional mechanisms of social media use among adolescents: A qualitative focus group study. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 93, 164–175. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.12.012>
- Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2013). The differential susceptibility to media effects model. *Journal of Communication*, 63(2), 221–243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12024>
- van der Wal, A., Valkenburg, P. M., & van Driel, I. I. (2024). In their own words: How adolescents use social media and how it affects them. *Social Media + Society*, 10(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241248591>
- Van Houtven, E., & Schmuck, D. (2026). Influencers perceived as digital super peers? Outcomes of adolescents' use of social media influencers for socio-political information. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 31(2), Article zmag002. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmag002>
- van Reijmersdal, E. A., & van Dam, S. (2020). How age and disclosures of sponsored influencer videos affect adolescents' knowledge of persuasion and persuasion. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 49(7), 1531–1544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-019-01191-z>

Yau, J. C., & Reich, S. M. (2019). "It's just a lot of work": Adolescents' self-presentation norms and practices on Facebook and Instagram. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 29(1), 196–209. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12376>