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CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS' COMSUMER BEHAVIOUR: ONLINE SHOPPPING AND SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE FOLLOWING THE COVID-19 ERA

Vasiliki Koniakou

Athens University of Economics and Business, vasiliki.koniakou@outlook.com

Pouloudi Nancy

Athens University of Economics and Business, pouloudi@aueb.gr

George Lekakos

Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB), glekakos@aueb.gr

Vasiliki Chronaki

Athens University of Economics and Business, vxronaki@aueb.gr

Angeliki Karagiannaki

Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB), akaragianaki@aueb.gr

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CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS' CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR: ONLINE SHOPPING AND SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE FOLLOWING THE COVID-19 ERA

Research full-length paper

Koniakou, Vasiliki, Athens University of Economics and Business, Department of Management Science & Technology, koniakou@eltrun.gr

Chronaki, Vasiliki, Athens University of Economics and Business, Department of Management Science & Technology, vxronaki@aueb.gr

Pouloudi, Athanasia (Nancy), University of Economics and Business, Department of Management Science & Technology, pouloudi@aueb.gr

Lekakos, George, University of Economics and Business, Department of Management Science & Technology, glekakos@aueb.gr

Karagiannaki, Angeliki, University of Economics and Business, Department of Management Science & Technology, akaragianaki@aueb.gr

Abstract

The influence of digital devices and Internet usage on children and adolescents has emerged as a broad research field. Particularly, the impact of social networks has surfaced as a prominent research question, focusing also on how social media and influencer marketing influence children and adolescents' consumer behaviour. Contributing to this literature, in this paper we present the qualitative research we conducted in Greece within the scope of the European Research Project DIGYMATEX. More specifically, we discuss the findings we collected through qualitative research concerning the online consumer behaviour of children and adolescents, especially in relation to the use of the Internet for market research and online shopping, and the impact that social media and influencers exert on consumer behaviour, focusing on advertising literacy. The data was collected through six focus groups with the participation of 23 children and adolescents, aged 9-18. Apart from contributing to the existing literature with findings from Greece, our study highlights the need for further research on the relationship between the research questions discussed here and digital maturity.

Keywords: Children and Adolescents, Social Media, Consumer Behaviour, Advertising Literacy, Influencer Marketing

1 Introduction

Digital technologies and the Internet constitute an indispensable part of children and adolescents' daily life (Livingstone and Blum-Ross 2017; Livingstone 2020). According to a research conducted in 19 European countries by EU Kids Online from 2017 to 2019, the age at which children are introduced to digital technologies and the Internet continuously drops (Graafland 2018), while the time children and adolescents spend online or using digital devices steadily increases (Chaudron 2015; Smahel et al. 2020; Twenge, Martin, and Spitzberg 2018). Moreover, the motives, as well as the usage patterns, are progressively becoming more diverse and multifaceted, while research suggests that they may significantly vary depending on gender and across different age groups (Bond 2014; Ólafsson, Livingstone, and Haddon 2013). In this context, the influence of digital devices and Internet usage on children and adolescents has emerged as a broad research field, combining different disciplines, approaches and

methodologies. Against this background of an already remarkably technologically mediated daily life, the COVID-19 pandemic further increased children and adolescents' exposure to digital technologies, amplifying their usage of the Internet, and screen time in general. It also intensified the concerns over the impact and the effects of digital technologies on children and adolescents and brought to the forefront new questions about the influence of digital technologies and the Internet on minors.

Whereas the impact of social media on the mental and physical health of children and adolescents, their psychology, school performance, and social behaviour attract the most research interest (Shapiro and Margolin 2014), gradually research that focuses on the ways in which the Internet and social media shape and influence consumer habits, and their consumer behaviour is also gaining ground (Mahesh and Thanushree 2021; Mishra et al. 2018; Muliensyah and Rahmayanti 2019; Singh 2021). Contributing to this branch of the literature, in this paper we present part of the results from the qualitative research we conducted within the scope of the European Research Project "Establishing a Comprehensive Understanding and Taxonomy of Children's Digital Maturity" (DIGYMATEX, Grant agreement number 870578), which focuses on the digital maturity of children and adolescents. More specifically, we present and discuss our findings concerning the online consumer behaviour of children and adolescents, especially regarding the use of the Internet for market research and online shopping by children and adolescents; and the impact that social media and influencers exert on the consumer behaviour of adolescents.

Our research is the most recent one on this topic in Greece, offering insights not only regarding the Internet as a means of conducting market research and shopping, and the impact of influencer endorsement and influencer advertising, but also concerning the digital advertising literacy of minors, and the effects of the special circumstances created by the pandemic on online shopping and consumer behaviour. Although the research was not specifically designed to explore solely these particular questions, the results offer interesting initial conclusions that can serve as a valuable point of departure for further research, particularly regarding the differences in the effects of attitudinal advertising literacy across different genders. Additionally, our findings, indicate the need for further research on the connection between advertising literacy and advertised product desire considering also the level of investment in social media. The rest of the paper is organised as follows: In Section 2 we provide an overview of the relevant literature, focusing on the use of the Internet and social media by children and adolescents, the impact of social media on consumer behaviour, and the concept of advertising literacy. We then describe how our research was designed and conducted, as well as the approach we followed (Section 3), while in Section 4 we offer a broad overview and discussion of the responses. In the concluding Section, we set out our closing remarks, the limitations and our future research intentions.

2 Background

2.1 The relationship of children and adolescents with the Internet and social media

Digital technologies and the Internet have been incorporated into almost every aspect of children and adolescents' daily life. Today, children and teenagers have at their disposal a multitude of different digital devices, including various Internet connectable apparatuses. Moreover, without overlooking the digital divide between the so-called developed and developing countries (UNICEF and ITU 2020), it is fair to conclude that children and adolescents today have unprecedented access to digital technologies and the Internet. Based on data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) the number of children who have access to the Internet at home in the member countries of the Organisation is steadily increasing over the last decade, rising from 75% in 2006 to 95% in 2015 (OECD 2017). Similarly impressive is the increase in home Internet access in the 28 Member States of the European Union (EU), where the corresponding percentage reached 92% in 2021 from

65% in 2011 (Eurostat 2021), while according to a report by the American Community Survey (ACS), in 2019, 95% of people aged 3-18 had access to the Internet from home (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

The time spent online, the purposes and motives, as well as the patterns of use of the Internet, vary significantly depending on the age (Smahel et al. 2020), gender (Smahel et al. 2020; Twenge and Martin 2020), socioeconomic background (Camerini, Schulz, and Jeannet 2017; Harris, Straker, and Pollock 2017; Zhang and Livingstone 2019), as well as the mode of parental mediation, and the overall attitude of the parents towards the perceived effects, benefits and risks arising from Internet usage (Holloway, Green, and Livingstone 2013; Livingstone 2020; Steinfeld 2021). It seems that younger children, 9-13 years old, tend to use the Internet mainly to play games and watch videos, while the older ones, 14-18, are mostly interested in social media (Burns and Gottschalk 2019; Danovitch 2019; Graafland 2018). In addition to age, gender is also an important factor that seems to differentiate the way and purposes for which children and adolescents use the Internet (Kovacevic and Kascelan 2020; Livingstone et al. 2014), yet the degree of differentiation is relatively more pronounced at younger ages (Twenge and Martin 2020). Finally, the age of parents, their view of and attitude toward digital technologies and the Internet (Sorbring 2014), as well as the model of parental mediation have a substantial impact on how and how much children and adolescents use digital technologies and the Internet (Álvarez et al. 2013; Johnson and Hertlein 2019; Valcke et al. 2010), significantly affecting the freedom to access and use the Internet that children enjoy (Papadakis, Zaranis, and Kalogiannakis 2019).

Simultaneously, social networking sites, applications, and social media in general constitute an integral part of the daily life of teenagers and young people¹. Briefly, the phrase "social networks" or "social media" is commonly used as a blanket term to describe a variety of platforms, websites and applications centred around social interaction (Gillespie 2015). In general, such platforms and applications allow users to create profiles with information about themselves, share photos, videos or other material, and connect with other users, creating groups of "friends" or "followers" (Lin and Lu 2011). Offering the means and opportunities to both communicate and create groups, have fun, express oneself, channel one's creativity and develop one's sociability, by building and sharing their social identity (American Psychological Association 2011; Gündüz 2017; Veloutsou and McAlonan 2012), social media have become one of the main reasons adolescents use the Internet (Duffett 2017; Gray 2018; Tartari 2015). For instance, based on recent studies, in the US, about 97% of people between the ages of 13-17 have a profile and are active on at least one social media outlet (Anderson and Jiang 2018). Similarly in the EU, 84% of adolescents who use the Internet do so mainly to access social networking sites and applications, while teenagers and young people make up the population that makes the most use of social networks in Europe (Eurostat 2020).

2.2 Internet and social media as a channel for commerce and advertising

As Darley, Blankson, and Luethge (2010) observe, the advent of the Internet "has propelled commerce into an electronic age" radically changing "how consumers communicate and learn about product offerings, to how they shop and buy products and services." The rise of online stores and commerce-related Web sites drastically changed retail (Krymov et al. 2019; Pyle 1996). Concurrently, the affordances of the World Wide Web revolutionised the rules and dynamics of marketing and advertising (Berthon, Pitt, and Watson 1996; Lei 2000), while the development of a protocol that allowed secure online payments via credit cards (Internet Secure Payments Protocol - ISPP) essentially transformed the Internet from a conduit of communication to a channel for commerce. The Internet is also system-

¹ The terms "social networks", "social networking sites/applications" and "social media" are used here interchangeably.

atically used for market research since consumers use its search affordances to draw information on products and services that interest them, compare prices and find offers (Cui, Lui, and Guo 2012; Park, Lee, and Han 2007; Umit Kucuk and Krishnamurthy 2007). The wide variety of available information has improved the ability of consumers to make informed consumption choices and seek value for money opportunities (Aksoy and Cooil 2011; Voramontri and Klieb 2019). Whereas due to the increasing penetration of the Internet, online shopping had already become ubiquitous, the pandemic further increased its proliferation, as the restrictions, and the pandemic-induced closing of shops and businesses, effectively introduced more people to online market research and acquisition of goods and services (Sheth 2020).

At the same time, social media have widely emerged as a new, powerful, and effective tool for commercial communication and advertising (Zhao, Huang, and Wang 2020). The way social media function and the possibilities they offer combined with analytics that reveal critical information about the preferences and specific characteristics of users (Chaffey and Patron 2012; Sheth and Kellstadt 2021), allow companies to reach consumers in a more direct and sometimes less apparent way. In addition, social media platforms provide new methods of outreach and advertising (Bruhn et al. 2014; Okazaki and Taylor 2013), through personalised material. In particular, social media gave new life to word-of-mouth (WOM) advertising and redefined "celebrity endorsement" as an advertising method (Bruhn et al. 2014; Hudders, de Jans, and de Veirman 2021). The concept of WOM is rather old and refers to "person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial regarding a brand, product, or service" (Arndt 1967). In this context, Influencer Marketing (IM) has emerged as a new way of marketing and promotion. IM can be perceived as a version of WOM (Tsen and Cheng 2021), which practically refers to a special form of a third-party endorsement, and more specifically celebrity endorsement (Freberg et al. 2011; Hudders, de Jans, and de Veirman 2021). Leveraging the popularity of social media platforms, influencers are aptly used as brand ambassadors to promote products and services, by sharing pictures and information, and updating their followers about offers.

Particularly regarding attracting young people and teenagers, social media seems to have revolutionised the field of advertising, allowing creating and sharing of entertaining and engaging content, which often fits into non-obvious advertising frameworks, such as advergames, and various forms of paid promotion and third-party endorsement (Duffett 2017; Leena Hota 2022; Sweeney, Lawlor, and Brady 2021). IM appears to be remarkably successful in attracting young consumers. Research suggests that adolescents tend to build "strong (parasocial) relationships with influencers" (Hwang and Zhang 2018), often perceiving them as friends, and thus subconsciously classifying them as a reliable source of information (van Dam and van Reijmersdal 2019; Sweeney, Lawlor, and Brady 2022). This remark indicates not only the powerful persuasive function of IM as a special form of WOM, but also highlights that it is comparatively harder to identify and assess influencer content as advertising material (van Dam and van Reijmersdal 2019). The lively interest of companies and advertisers, and the weight they place on social networks seems to be validated in practice since both scientific research and statistics confirm the influence of social networks on the choices of teenage consumers. For example, 93% of teenage users of TikTok say that their purchase decisions are largely informed and influenced by content on TikTok (Marketing Charts 2021).

2.3 The ever-increasing exposure of children and adolescents to advertising and the concept of Advertising Literacy

The impact of the extensive penetration of digital technologies and the Internet on children and teenagers' lives is being widely researched from various angles and disciplines. Especially in the last decade, the impact of social networks has surfaced as a prominent research question, as social media seem to have an impact on both the physical and mental health of children and adolescents (Hoge, Bickham, and Cantor 2017; O'Reilly 2020; Richards, Caldwell, and Go 2015). Social media appear to affect

their psychology and self-esteem (Orben, Dienlin, and Przybylski 2019; Shapiro and Margolin 2014; Steinsbekk et al. 2021), their behaviour and school performance (Arjun and Juna 2015; Giumetti and Kowalski 2022; Shah et al. 2019; Talatu and Murja 2018), while they impact the ways they communicate, and the means they use for entertainment (Vlachopoulou and Boutsouki 2014). Research is also increasingly focusing on how the Internet and social media seem to influence also children and adolescents' consumer behaviour and habits, as they seem to have an effect on how their needs and desires are formed, how they become aware of products and services, as well as how they purchase, consume, and evaluate the products and services (Coates et al. 2019; Commissioner 2018; Debrececi and Hofmeister-Toth 2018; Duffett 2017). The literature in the field is particularly extensive and rapidly growing as the function and effect of social media on the consumer behaviour of adolescents is a constantly evolving subject of study (Debrececi and Hofmeister-Toth 2018; Duffett 2017; Mishra et al. 2018; Vlachopoulou and Boutsouki 2014).

Most importantly, the ever-increasing commercialisation of online media environments in which minors are routinely confronted with persuasive messages through different means and channels, combined with the extensive employment of hybrid and embedded advertising formats have brought new impetus to the academic and public policy debate on the appropriateness and fairness of advertising targeting children (Hoek et al., 2021). Particularly IM, as a form of embedded advertising, may significantly impair the ability of young consumers to identify and critically reflect upon promotional content (van Dam and van Reijmersdal 2019; Sweeney, Lawlor, and Brady 2022). More specifically, as Hudders et al. (2017) explain, it is both the embedded formats as such, and the specific characteristics of these formats that hinder the ability and motivation of minors to identify the commercial content, recognize the commercial intent, and critically assess it. Moreover, the more engaging the content is, the less easy it becomes for children and adolescents to invoke the self-regulatory mechanisms necessary to critically reflect upon it. As research on digital advertising targeting minors highlights the thin and commonly blurry line between entertainment and commercial content, there is a rapidly growing number of practical and ethical concerns regarding the potential adverse effects of such aggressive and often invisible advertising practices.

The primary concern, centred around the concept of "advertising literacy", is that children and adolescents are not adequately equipped and may lack the necessary skills and competencies to identify and critically review advertisements and other forms of commercial messages. Advertising literacy, as a subset of media literacy, describes the ability to understand, assess, and respond to advertising messages and practices (Sweeney, Lawlor, and Brady 2022; Waiguny, Nelson, and Terlutter 2014), while it includes a conceptual and an attitudinal dimension (Rozendaal, Buijs, and van Reijmersdal 2016). Focusing on children, it mainly refers to "children's understanding of advertising and their critical attitude toward it" (Rozendaal, Buijs, and van Reijmersdal 2016). It focuses on "the ability to understand advertising and to also deploy that understanding as a coping mechanism or defence filter when being exposed to incoming advertising messages" (Sweeney, Lawlor, and Brady 2022). Encouraging scepticism and critical assessment, advertising literacy is critical in developing defence mechanisms that protect young consumers against excessive and misleading marketing and advertising (Hudders et al. 2017; Livingstone and Helsper 2006). From this angle, it entails the ability to identify commercial content, become aware of the persuasive/promotional intent behind the message, recognise the advertising tactics, and critically reflect upon it (Hudders and Cauberghe 2018). As non-conventional, embedded and less obvious advertising tactics become increasingly popular and widespread, advertising literacy becomes more urgent as well as more challenging.

Against this background, academic and policy efforts are increasingly focused on the need to protect children and adolescents from misleading and/or aggressive advertising practices, developing relevant protective mechanisms, intervention techniques, and policies (Rozendaal, Buijs, and van Reijmersdal 2016). Starting from conventional media such as radio or television, many countries have implemented policies, to protect children by introducing advertising restrictions and/or seeking to increase their advertising literacy through interventions, such as advertising education programs. Particularly focus-

ing on IM and other forms of embedded advertising, the forewarning of advertising's intent has been proposed by researchers (see for example Fransen et al., 2015), while the disclosure of advertisement endorsement is legally mandated in several jurisdictions (see for example FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION, 16 CFR Part 255 "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising") requiring influencers and other content creators to clearly indicate if a paid promotion or other forms of advertising is included in their material. Whereas such initiatives are widely celebrated as significant steps, their effectiveness along with some of the underpinning assumptions are lately brought to question (Hoek et al., 2021).

3 Research context and methodology

3.1 Context and sample

The findings presented here were collected within the scope of the DIGYMATEX Research Project, which focuses on exploring, understanding, and measuring the digital maturity of children and adolescents. The Project aims to provide scientifically substantiated tools that will assist in framing and assessing the digital maturity of children and young people, as well as identify any kind of connections between digital maturity and other skills, such as creative thinking, reasoning, or memory capacity. It is also aimed at creating tools for predicting and explaining the benefits and risks arising from the use of digital technologies for children and young people. Stemming from the firm belief that children and adolescents should have their voices heard on issues that concern them, the Project regularly engages children and adolescents, employing both quantitative and qualitative research methods to collect their input. To that end, focus groups were conducted in some of the participating countries, including Greece.

Our team conducted six focus groups with children and adolescents from Greece, aged 9 to 18, as shown in the table below, from January to April 2021. The main objective was to explore the use of digital technologies, the habits, and preferences, as well as the ways, purposes and motivations for which children and adolescents use digital technologies and the Internet. Due to the circumstances created by the pandemic and the lockdown, our sampling options were rather limited, so we used convenience sampling, while we held the focus groups online. Nonetheless, we catered for gender, age and location diversity. The participants were from the metropolitan area of Athens and Piraeus, as well as from areas of Central and Western Macedonia. We hosted an equal number of groups with male and female participants. A noteworthy remark regarding the specific characteristics of our teams is that in the group of nine-year-old boys we had a pair of twins, while the participants in FG 5 are members of the Greek National Robotics Team.

	Participants	Age	Gender	Area
FG 1	4	17-18	male	Athens
FG 2	4	10	female	Central Macedonia
FG 3	3	17	female	Western Macedonia
FG 4	4	9	male	Central Macedonia
FG 5	4	15	male	Piraeus
FG 6	4	15-16	female	Athens

3.2 Preparation, Methods, and Ethics

Following the literature, the participants were grouped by age, gender and level of intimacy (Gibson 2012; Morgan et al. 2002). Each group had three to four participants of the same gender, with an age

difference of up to two years, who were already familiar with each other. The focus groups were conducted based on a Discussion Guide covering eight key thematic areas of interest regarding the relationship of children and adolescents with digital technologies and the Internet, namely (i) access to digital devices and the Internet, variety of available devices, mobile ICT, and usage patterns; (ii) parental mediation; (iii) digital literacy, skills, competences and (perceived) self-efficacy; (iv) technology and emotions; (v) Social Networking Sites (SNS); (vi) cyberbullying; (vii) online shopping; (viii) privacy and digital citizenship. The discussion was led by a moderator, while occasionally a co-interlocutor participated, offering additional questions, asking for clarifications, and/or adding points for further discussion (Krueger and Casey 2008; Morgan et al. 2002). The discussion format was semi-structured, the moderator was asking questions based on the Discussion Guide seeking to cover all the main topics of interest while allowing room for the participants to freely develop their thoughts, interact, and even lead the discussion, to some extent. The average duration of the focus groups for the younger participants was sixty minutes, while with the older participants our discussion lasted up to ninety minutes.

Regarding the main themes of this paper, through the discussion in the focus groups, we sought to explore:

- (RQ1) how familiar children and adolescents are with the online market research and online shopping and to what extent they have used the Internet to seek information and buy consumer goods and services; and
- (RQ2) whether they are aware of IM and to what extent influencers' promotion affects their choices and consumer behaviour.

As will be further discussed in the next Section, RQ2 was not addressed in the focus groups with the younger participants, as they demonstrated little to no interest in social media, while none of them had a profile on a social networking site.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Overall remarks on the relationship of children and adolescents with the Internet and social media

The participants' responses revealed the central role that the Internet has in the lives of children and adolescents in Greece. Without overlooking the impact of the special conditions in which the research was conducted, it was clearly indicated that children in Greece make extensive and intense use of the Internet and digital technologies on a daily basis, to meet a large number of needs and desires. All the participants noted that during the pandemic the time spent on digital devices increased exponentially, while especially the ten-year-old girls emphasised the significance of the Internet and online communication applications to get in touch with their friends, during the restrictive measures of the lockdown. However, it appears that even before the global lockdown they spent a considerable amount of their free time using digital technologies. Turning to the age at which children in Greece are introduced to digital devices, it seems that parents usually introduce their children to both digital technologies and the Internet from an early age, since both younger participants and teenagers reported that their parents used various digital devices to put on music and videos to entertain them as toddlers, or to play games with them. Such results are in line with the findings of the EU Kids Online survey in Greece in 2014.

Additionally, our research confirmed the literature regarding age as a differentiating factor concerning the interest in social media, as well as regarding the different motivations and patterns of Internet use across different age groups. The younger participants reported no interest in social media and social networking applications since they use the Internet mainly to watch videos on platforms such as YouTube or to play games. On the other hand, the teenagers identified social networks as the main

motive for using not only the Internet but also most of their digital devices, such as their cell phones or tablets. They also told us that they spend most of their day connected to the Internet to update their profile on social networks, refresh their newsfeed on social media, and follow their social media friends' updates. From their descriptions and what they shared with us, it is easy to conclude that social media is now part of their social life and a key element of their interpersonal relationships. All participants seemed conscious of the excessive time they spend on social media, with some reporting that they have tried or would like to try to restrain it, but as they verbatim admitted "they are rather addicted".

Another interesting finding, which also confirms the literature, is the way children and adolescents perceive different social media, and how they rank them based on the audience they think they attract. The teenagers told us that Facebook "has died" for people of their age, since, as they noted, it is Instagram that is "juicy", with features and capabilities with which they seemed extremely familiar and comfortable. Practically, based on their responses, it seems that they choose the social media and social networking applications they use based on a combination of criteria, including their affordances and popularity among their peers. Finally, the idea that Facebook is for older age groups was also reflected in the responses of the younger participants. For example, when we asked them on which social network they would get a profile if allowed, a participant from the group of ten-year-old girls responded to Instagram because as she told us "this is more for children."

4.2 RQ1 Online market research and online shopping

Focusing on the use of the Internet for market research and online shopping, our purpose was to explore how familiar children and adolescents are with using the Internet for purchases and to what extent they have used the Internet to seek information, do market research for a specific product, and buy goods and services. We were also interested in investigating the degree of independence in using the Internet to buy goods and services, while we also hoped to add a comparative perspective, asking the participants whether and to what extent the pandemic has affected their use of the Internet for such purposes.

Across all the age and gender groups, all the participants appeared both aware and familiar with the affordances of the world wide web related to "hunt" for purchase opportunities, deals, and offers. For example, all the participants in the focus group of the ten-year-old females told us that they have often looked up on the Internet things they wanted to buy, and they have bought with their parents a wide variety of products online, from pet accessories to clothes and gifts for Christmas. Although they admitted that this habit was amplified by the pandemic, as the lockdown had effectively left them with few other choices for shopping, they reported that this was pre-existing. Similarly, in the adolescents' groups, except for two, all the participants reported making purchases online often, both for products they wanted themselves and for their families. In fact, in GF 5, one of the participants told us that he set up his own computer from scratch by selecting and buying the pieces from the Internet, while a participant from FG 6 mentioned that she regularly creates wish lists of products she is interested in, at the sites she commonly uses for online shopping. For those who do not choose online shopping, shipping methods and delays in receiving the products were mentioned as the main reasons they tend to avoid it. Ultimately, all the participants appeared to be familiar with online shopping long before the changes that COVID-19 and the restrictive measures caused on traditional shopping. It became more common during the pandemic, while based on the discussions during that period they started shopping online also for goods that they would otherwise acquire through traditional in-store shopping, yet it was a consumer activity they had already experienced.

Moreover, all participants were also remarkably familiar with the process of research for reviews and information provided by other consumers. However, whereas buying products and services online was addressed in both younger and older groups, actively seeking information and shopping opportunities on the Internet did not emerge organically from the discussion with the younger ones. From the differ-

ent age groups, the adolescents were both remarkably familiar with the mechanisms of online search and acquisition of products and with seeking reviews and consumer-provided information. Focusing particularly on market research, one of the sixteen-year-old males in FG 5 mentioned "value for money" searches, and others mentioned "smart shopping." It is noteworthy that the majority of the adolescent participants told us that when they are looking for a new device they search for and compare the available alternatives both based on the manufacturer's description and by reviewing the feedback they find from other consumers, which ultimately influences their final decision.

Concerning age as a differentiating actor, the main difference appeared to be the independent use of the Internet for online shopping between the different age groups, which was rather expected. Nonetheless, in the group of nine-year-old males, one of the boys told us that he regularly uses digital stores to buy digital games. He noted that he saves the pocket money his parents give him to buy games from a gaming console online store using prepaid cards. Although it was not clear whether he proceeds with the acquisition of the digital copy on his own, or with the assistance/supervision of his parents, it was rather apparent that he could independently choose the game copy (provided that it was age-appropriate). Yet, that particular participant made a lasting impression on our research team because of the levels of familiarity he demonstrated with digital technologies in general. Further building on this remark, it would be worthwhile to explore the relationship between familiarity with using the Internet for purchases and market research with other digital skills and literacy.

4.3 RQ2 The impact of influencers on the choices and the consumer behaviour of adolescents

As noted earlier, social media were mainly discussed with the adolescent participants. Our purpose was to explore whether they are aware of IM and to what extent influencers' promotion affects their choices and consumer behaviour. Focusing on advertising literacy, in particular, we hoped to investigate whether such awareness (conceptual advertising literacy, i.e. understanding of the advertisement's selling and persuasive intent) leads to reduced advertised product desire. A first notable remark regarding the awareness of adolescents and their understanding of the advertising function of social media is that all participants seemed fully conscious of the fact that social media are widely used for advertising purposes in multiple ways. They appeared aware that social media pages are often used as means for marketing, containing hidden advertisements and/or advergaming. They realised that many influencers promote certain companies, and the material they upload often contains product placement and/or paid promotion. Moreover, they appeared informed about the sponsorship mechanism as a source of revenue, as they all seemed to know that influencers receive money and other forms of compensation from brands to advertise and promote their products. From this angle, it seems that the participants had no difficulty in recognising the advertising nature of the content they see online and the commercial intent, regardless of whether there was a disclosure of paid promotion displayed on the screen. From this angle, it seems that the fact that the practices involved in IM are widely known to adolescents, who appear to be informed about the relevant mechanisms, successfully activates their conceptual advertising literacy, even in the absence of forewarnings or other forms of disclosure of commercial/advertising intent.

Turning to the critical assessment of the commercial message (attitudinal advertising literacy), their responses are very interesting and vary depending on their gender. The male participants seemed not only knowledgeable but also highly critical of some of the tactics. As an example, the older participants in the group of 17-18 years old males, told us that they frequently share with their friends influencers' promotions that they find outrageous, such as content that promotes unrealistic standards or makes clearly false promises. Thus, they appeared not only to understand the promotional and advertising intent behind certain social media content, and influencers' posts, but also to be highly critical of the entailments of some advertising messages. On the other hand, the female adolescents, although

appeared equally informed, and also expressed doubts about the accuracy and truthfulness of IM, did not entirely rule out the possibility of useful information and genuine advice. Moreover, they drew a clear line between "the influencers (they) trust" (FG 6), adding that those particular influencers are a source of reliable information for new products, a trustworthy source for reviews, and a source of ideas regarding fashion and style, or free-time activities.

Yet how much, if at all, does IM impact the choices and consumer behaviour of adolescents? In other words, to what extent do conceptual and attitudinal advertising literacy affect product desire? The responses regarding the impact of social media in the role of influencers in shaping and affecting their choices differ significantly between male and female participants. All the male participants explicitly declared that they do not care about what is being promoted by social media, and social media stars. Particularly the participants in FG 1 told us that they come across the advertisements, and the influencers' paid promotions, but other than joking with their friends about them, they did not perceive them as influencing them at all. On the other hand, the responses of the females in both focus groups of adolescent participants were utterly different. First, it is noteworthy that whilst all the adolescents stressed the centrality of social media to their social life and mentioned that being constantly online for social media-related reasons is a part of their daily routine, the female participants took the discussion a step further. They talked a lot about the time and thought behind what they post online, they addressed the significance of how their posts are received and emphasised the emotional impact of social media on their lives, and their influence on their image.

Focusing on the extent to which social media impact their choices, buying decisions and overall consumer behaviour, four out of seven reported that Instagram directly affects their style and choices, while of the other three the two said that although it does not necessarily influence them directly, they do get shopping ideas from Instagram and Pinterest. Discussing the impact of influencers on their desires and their purchasing choices, the 17 years old participants reported that they often choose clothes and accessories based on photos uploaded by the influencers they follow. Similarly, the group of the 15-16 years old females focused mainly on cosmetics and told us that while they would not trust so much what they see on social networks to buy clothing, they follow influencers' endorsements and recommendations for cosmetics and beauty tips. For example, they told us that if they intend to buy cosmetics they will actively seek reviews from the influencers they trust. From this angle, it seems that although conceptual advertising literacy is significant, the attitudinal element is critically affecting the advertised product desire. Furthermore, whilst gender seemed to be the main differentiating factor in our study, there seems to be ample room for research regarding the connection between the role of social media in adolescents' life, and advertised product desire, as well as the relationship between the significance of social media for an individual and the effectiveness of advertising literacy-related interventions. Finally, it would be worthwhile to explore the relationship between digital advertising literacy and digital maturity, as well as the relationship between digital maturity and advertised product desire.

5 Concluding Remarks

Our research has some limitations, as exploring these particular questions was not among the key objectives of our research in the design stage, while the sample was rather limited in terms of the participants in each age group. Concerning the research questions, this research presents findings collected through focus group discussions conducted to explore the concept of digital maturity. Hence, the usage of the Internet for the acquisition of goods and services, the impact of IM and the role of digital advertising literacy were only on the periphery of our research objectives. Simultaneously, our findings would benefit from a larger sample of each age and gender group. Nonetheless, even with these limitations, this study has several theoretical and practical implications.

First of all, our research confirmed the literature and earlier findings, reaffirming the central role of digital technologies and the Internet in children and adolescents' life in Greece, while it was the most

recent one on this topic, addressing certain aspects of advertising literacy and IM impact that have not been researched with Greek participants. All the participants appeared aware of the consumer-related affordances of the Internet, although the extent to which they have independently used them varies with the age. Looking beyond age as a differentiating factor, our research indicates the need to further explore the connection between digital maturity and independent usage of the Internet for the acquisition of goods and services. Turning to the role and the impact of social media advertising and IM to the consumer choices of adolescents, our study offers a number of noteworthy findings. Young users of the social media in our country appear to perform remarkably well in all the key elements that comprise the core of advertising literacy. However, based on our findings, advertising literacy, and awareness of the promotional and persuasive character of influencers' content, do not automatically nullify the effectiveness of such messages in affecting consumer behaviour. Practically, the female participants in our research were conscious of the marketing intent and the for-profit purposes of IM, yet they both relied on the influencers "they trust" for information, and they were affected by them in the process of desire formation. On the contrary, the male participants were rather critical of these methods and reported that they are not affected by them at all. Although this observation is both age and gender-specific, it raises the question regarding the relationship between advertising literacy and self-regulation mechanisms, that allow minor receivers of such content to filter the message and mitigate its effects, especially regarding the desire for the advertised product. In turn, this observation clearly indicates the need for further research on the relationship between the role of social media in adolescents' life, and advertised product desire, as well as the relationship between the significance of social media for an individual and the effectiveness of advertising literacy-related interventions. Finally, the relationship between digital advertising literacy and digital maturity ought to be further investigated, as well as the relationship between digital maturity and advertised product desire.

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