CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS

The importance of digital influencers for consumption desire formation in young portuguese people

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ABSTRACT. This article addresses consumer desire formation in Portuguese young people in the age group 15 to 29 years. The article mainly sought to answer the following core question: What is the importance of digital influencers for consumer desire formation in the assessed young Portuguese individuals? Forty-six young individuals were heard in one-on-one semi-structured interviews and during focal groups. Friends, advertisements, and digital influencers were the primary source of consumer desire formation in this survey, with emphasis on digital influencers. These influencers and their standardized content are nowadays main references for young people, although the herein assessed population experiences the contradiction of knowing how their desires are formed and that they try to control them. On the one hand, this reality reflects a social integration process, and, on the other hand, it amplifies the semi-formation of these young individuals, who end up uncritically conforming to 'the always equal'.

Keywords: desire to consume; youth; digital influencers; half-education.

A importância dos influenciadores digitais para a formação do desejo de consumo em jovens portugueses

RESUMO. Este artigo aborda a formação do desejo de consumo em jovens portugueses na faixa etária dos 15 aos 29 anos. O artigo procurou responder à seguinte questão: Qual a importância dos influenciadores digitais para a formação do desejo de consumo nos jovens portugueses pesquisados? Quarenta e seis jovens foram ouvidos em entrevistas semiestruturadas individuais e grupos focais. Amigos, publicidades e influenciadores digitais foram as principais fontes de formação de desejo de consumo, com ênfase nos influenciadores digitais. Esses influenciadores e seus conteúdos padronizados são hoje as principais referências para os jovens, embora a população aqui avaliada vivencie a contradição de saber como se formam seus desejos e de tentar controlá-los. Por um lado, essa realidade reflete um processo de integração social e, por outro, amplifica a semiformação desses jovens, que acabam por se conformar com o sempre igual de forma pouco crítica.

Palavras-chave: desejo de consumo; juventude; influenciadores digitais; semiformação.

Introduction[1]

This article addresses the importance of digital influencers in shaping the consumption desire of young Portuguese middle-class individuals. It discloses some results of a broader qualitative survey carried out in 2020 about youth consumption and identity in Portugal. We herein explored how young individuals' aspiration to consume goods is formed by understanding that desire works at unconscious and libido level (Perez, 2012; Tonnetti & Meucci, 2013; Prioste, 2016); it goes beyond primordial needs. Much of what we desire is not essential to life preservation. Typically, one wants what one lacks, and the consumer culture is specialized in increasing one's sense of shortage (confusing us about what we need and what we want) and in abundantly offering objects (available in supermarkets, shopping malls, and Amazon distribution centers) to fulfil such a sense of need. We start from the premise that the

consumption culture seduces and excites our desires[2]. Neuromarketing aims at helping marketers to reach consumers faster and more efficiently. It is well-known that consumer's aspirations and most of their purchasing decisions are not conscious. "The brain makes the decision and, most of the time, we are not even aware of it" (Lindstrom, 2017, p. 171).

Young people are especially susceptible to the consumer society's appeal, as they are at a stage in life where they, somehow definitively, build their social coordinates Galland, 2017) and their identity. Accordingly, it is essential taking into consideration that consumption is part of the rites organizing social integration learning in the lives of young people. Including cyberculture in analyses about youth and consumption has become increasingly necessary in recent years, since the virtual world at the Internet is the main scenario of consumer culture nowadays. Young people are the most interested in, and adept to, new technologies, besides preferring interactive media (Prioste, 2016; Galland, 2017). We assume that consumer experiences are also forging the youth's identity, and it is essential having in mind that understanding such an identity is a core factor for understanding the youth universe. We are concerned with knowing how digital influencers participate in youth sociability and subjectivity and, based on it, we propose a critical look over the relationship among youth, cyberculture and consumption.

The following general questions guided this research: How do young Portuguese people understand their consumption desire creation process? When they identify consumption stimulus sources, what do they think about it? Research findings have pointed towards the digital influencers phenomenon. Thus, the core question guiding the herein presented reflections is: What is the importance of digital influencers for consumer desire formation in young Portuguese individuals?

We start this article by addressing participants' profile and the research method. Subsequently, we present a theoretical synthesis on youth and consumption, and then we evidence and discuss some research findings regarding digital influencers. Finally, we weave our final thoughts.

Method: paths taken and interviewees' profile

We developed a qualitative research based on one-on-one semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 2003) and on focal groups (Gatti, 2005) carried out with 46 young Portuguese middle-class individuals in the age group 15 to 29 years living in two Portuguese cities, one in Azores Archipelago and another in mainland Portugal, in order to answer the research questions. Twenty (20) men and twenty-six (26) women (according to self-declared gender) were interviewed - the focus groups encompassed teenagers in the age group 15 to 18 years. One-on-one interviews were carried out with young adults in the age group 18 to 29 years. Two black or brown adolescents participated in the focus groups, but all other participants in the research were white.

Two scripts were designed to listen to the 46 young Portuguese individuals, based on recommendations by Miles and Huberman (2003) and Gatti (2005), one for the focus groups with high school students and the other for the interviews with college students or with workers older than 18 years old. Four (4) focal groups were conducted for one hour each, on average; 23 one-on-one interviews one-and-a-half-hour duration each, on average, were performed. We listened to 23 teenagers in the focal groups and 10 young individuals in one-on-one interviews in Azores. We listened to 13 young individuals in interviews at Portugal mainland.

Participants were approached in secondary schools, in universities by people known by the researchers, or they were nominated by other participants themselves. Focal groups took place with students from 3 high schools in Azores Island, before the COVID-19 pandemic. After the coronavirus pandemic statement in March 2020, one-on-one interviews were conducted over Skype, and focus groups with high school students on the continent were canceled.

All participants signed the consent form; in case of under-age students, the consent form was signed by their legal guardians. Participants also previously answered a respondent characterization form; they provided information about their age, gender, social class, their-own and parents' schooling, their parents' profession and income, number of residents in their household, and consumer goods' possession. Interviewees' speeches were

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[2] Although we are aware that desire is different from will, as desire is unconscious and will is conscious (Tonnetti & Meucci, 2013), we will not distinguish desire from will in the present study.

audio-recorded and later transcribed in full. Subsequently, the transcriptions were analyzed based on Units of Sense (Miles & Huberman, 2003) and discussed according to the Critical Theory.

Schooling and occupation information of all 46 research participants' parents is shown in Tables 1 and 2, below.

Table 1. Parents' schooling, in Azores and on the continent.

	Azores		Continent	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Complete primary school	1	0	0	1
Incomplete elementary school	12	7	4	4
Complete elementary school	8	7	4	3
Incomplete high school	1	1	1	1
Complete high school	3	9	0	0
Technical education	3	1	0	0
Major college degree	2	2	2	2
Post-Graduate level (Masters and/or PhD)	3	3	2	2
Not informed	0	3	0	0
Total = 100%	33	33	13	13

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The monthly family income of the assessed individuals ranged from one to four minimum wages.[3] Respondents pointed out that they belonged to the middle / lower class (10%), middle / middle class (73%), and middle/upper class (17%) in the questionnaire. No participant reported to belong to lower or upper classes. In total, 80% of the total number of participants stated that they would like to ascend to the upper social classes. They justified such a comment by stating that they seek 'financial stability', 'more access to consumer goods', 'better quality of life', 'traveling', and 'the possibility of saving money and helping others'.

Of the total of herein assessed young individuals, 23 were in high school. Two male individuals who had finished high school were working as interns, with fixed-term contracts. Four female individuals who had major college degree also had permanent jobs. Five male individuals were college students and did not have a job. Nine female individuals were college students and did not have a job, and one male individual was a Master's Degree student and did not have a job.

Results and discussion

Youth, desires, and consumption

We understand that the youth identity is built under different social conditions and that there are different types of young people (Reis & Jesus, 2014). Youth is a mosaic in constant motion, similar to a kaleidoscope. We can characterize young people by age (from 15 to 29 years) and youth can be featured as a lifestyle; however, both concepts are historically and culturally defined based on multiple socialization contexts (Baldi, 2016; Pinheiro, 2017).[4] According to Galland (2017), the biological dimension 'age' does not escape the sociological domain, but it must be seen as one dimension among other analytical ones. Youth is socially built and defined based on relationships between young people, and between them and those in other age groups (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, we understand young people as social subjects who need to be seen based on their daily lives, both in the objective reality they live in and on their experiences (Pais, 1990; Dayrell, 2003; Nunes, 2007; Trancoso & Oliveira, 2014). Based on such a concept, temporal linearity does not matter much; therefore, it is necessary reflecting on the socio-historical-cultural reality of the human constitution and experience in order to better understand young people thinking. Their constitution in capitalist societies is substantiated by market mechanisms (Viana, 2015), and this is what we seek to understand at the time to assess consumption and youth; we must understand that we are not dealing with a homogeneous social category.

The Industrial Revolution opened room for the consumer society, which reached the profile we know nowadays between the years 1950-1980, when consumption was placed at the center of sociability (Padilha, 2006). The consumer society outspreads the idea of perpetual hedonism, which feeds the shopping fuzz and

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[3] Minimum wage in Portugal by 2020 was 741 euros.

[4] We followed the age group defined by the European Union. Cf. European Commission (2018).

In Portugal, the National Youth Plan 2018-2021 also considers young people those in the age group 15 to 29 years (Portugal, 2018). Galland (2017) also considered the age group 15 to 29 years in his research.

is based on the eternal present ethos (Lipovetsky, 2007; Bauman, 2008). Cultured narcissism took shape in the 20th century, when seeing and being seen became the reason for social existence and boosted the feeling of belonging to this world (Severiano, 2007; Türcke, 2010) - such a feeling gained even more relevance after Internet creation. The consumer society encourages the hyper-identification between subject and object.

Some authors claim that young people are especially susceptible to consumption, since it becomes one of the main dimensions for the construction of their identity (Currie, 1994; Kilbourne, 1999; Santos, 2004; Nunes, 2007; Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010; Crymble, 2012; Cieslik & Simpson, 2013). However, this population knows that "[...] the process of socialization in current formations is a plural space of multiple identity references" (Setton, 2002, p. 110). What we buy says a lot about who we are; consumption is a vital information-environment for understanding other people. Nowadays, young people are born in this society and consumption is part of their lifestyle. The consumer culture forces young people to socialize within a materialistic lifestyle (Ladwein, 2017), it dictates how they see and relate to each other, which also involves goods' possession and sharing cultural consumption codes (brands and fashion, among others).

We understand consumer culture (Taschner, 1997; Fontenelle, 2017) as a lifestyle created by the 18th century capitalism, although it has lasted until the present time and is featured by the re-signification of objects' using, due to individuals' predisposition to discretionary and conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1988), and to the forms and frequency of purchasing – nowadays, purchasing is seen as a leisure activity (Padilha, 2006). The market logic takes over one's desires, masks essential needs and subjects such desires to the libidinal field - where desires are at. The consumer figure, who is the essential individual to the consumption culture, was built and enhanced by the 20th century, it associates its passions with the act of consuming and with the consumed things (Fontenelle, 2017). Thus, buying a particular brand, following fashion trends and wearing what a famous person has on, can be values that are beyond the very purpose of the consumed good and make people relate happiness to the pursuit of their pleasure (cult of self). Self-image and self-esteem are built through the intermediation of purchased goods, and self-realization is mostly anchored at the social valorization sphere, where one can observe the active participation of goods' consumption. This sphere creates a framework of references and it allows people to measure and to be measured based on socially shared values, such as those of the consumption culture. These values form mental models that shape behaviors and attitudes related to consumption; it happens, simultaneously, through cognitive and emotional processes. Thus, the sense of success, happiness, social status, good quality of life, and welfare are understood in terms of individual possessions (Belk, 1985; Taschner, 1997; Santos, 2004) and it becomes stimuli to consumption. Thus, consumption is a crucial category to better understand young people in contemporary societies.

Youth and consumption in cyberculture

Nowadays, the Internet and up-to-date technologies encompass consumption features and design new experiences, mainly among young people who were born in the digital culture. Advertising is going into changes, and it calls for consumption through digital platforms. Nowadays, it is no longer possible talking about media without including a whole series of internet access technologies, such as computers and smartphones, in the discussion. There are all forms of online communication under the media's umbrella (Morimoto & Friedland, 2011). The 2010 teenagers belong to the generation known as 'digital natives'; they choose text messages as the first communication form. They consume the digital media and want to create and actively interfere in them (Reis & Jesus, 2014; Prioste, 2016; Seymour, 2020). In addition to family, friends, and school, the digital media are now essential socialization agents (Morimoto & Friedland, 2011; Prioste, 2016). A new profile of young individuals was created in the digital universe, they are fully immersed in life spectacularization: everything has to be shared, from new clothes to food on the plate, as well as in content homogenization in the name of personalization. Furthermore, young people are immersed in the web, they get informed and have fun in this universe, alone (Morimoto & Friedland, 2011; Reis & Jesus, 2014; Prioste, 2016; Seymour, 2020).

Thus, bloggers, YouTubers, and digital influencers are becoming essential for the formation of young individuals' identity; they have become the people this population learns the values deemed as necessary come from. Digital content consumers follow the daily lives of these internet figures, as well as their routines, what they eat and wear, how they decorate their homes, how they care for their hair and body, their musical taste, among other factors. Teenagers and young people who were born in the digital era are now much more exposed to advertisement than the previous generations, which watched television, since advertisement is

everywhere on the web (Seymour, 2020). Digital influencers are also projection figures, many young individuals want to be like them, to live and make money like them. Is it necessary talking about identification, in the psychoanalytic sense, to understand the admiration and adherence to digital influencers? Caetano (2020) suggests that followers look to influencers as if they were 'superior equals', models who should shape their own self.

Therefore, young people cannot be understood without understanding how information technologies influence their daily social relations. Possible interactions and content production with digital cameras, cell phones, and access to the Internet represent youth cultures. Young people communicate with each other, and see each other, as well as are seen through tools available on the Internet. Almost everything they do in their daily lives is exposed on social networks. They also seek peer approval with likes and shares. "[...] very different youth groups are interconnected and integrated under different socioeconomic and geospatial conditions to a ubiquitous formula that is referenced by elements in the web" (Reis & Jesus, 2014, p. 23). It is interesting to think that digital natives have their time increasingly dominated by the times of the web, namely: fast, constant, and non-linear. Internet time is fluid, ephemeral, and accelerated, a fact that imposes the constant need of updates despite the risk of being already late or exceeded by others. "Each choice made means giving up one hundred other possibilities, each decision is followed by the suspicion of being wrong" (Türcke, 2010, p. 69). The entire internet hypertext system is organized based on such decision-making, and its language is based on endless clicks in hyperlinks that send users to an endless universe of web pages. The excess of content simultaneously consumed at high speed may account for increased anxiety, as well as for other issues associated with continuous social media using, information overload and with how fast such information comes and vanishes. Everything leads to transformations in the ability to concentrate, dispersion starts to get more intense in young individuals' constitution (Zuin & Zuin, 2017). Nevertheless, pleasure is fleeting and ephemeral, just as emotions oscillate among momentary enjoyment, depression and anxiety. Depression, in this case, is caused by boring and apathetic Internet using, and anxiety derives from the sense of wanting more of it.

The importance of digital influencers as consumer desires' generators

'Where do you think your consumption desires come from?'; it was the motivating question in conversations with teenagers and young people. The answers to this question led us to digital influencers. Initially, we assumed that advertisement would be the primary consumer desire source among young individuals. We got to know other factors as, or more, critical than this one throughout the research, among them one finds friends and digital influencers; but we herein focused on influencers.

Young interviewees (18 to 29 years) pointed out that digital influencers followed by them on digital platforms such as Instagram and YouTube are one of training sources for their consumption desires. It is interesting noticing that women have mentioned much more digital influencers than men, and that references to influencers were much more common among individuals on the continent than those in Azores. Digital influencers were also referenced by the teenagers (15 to 18 years old) in the focus groups as shapers of their consumption desires, but they were less important than their friends. According to teenagers, friends are more important, whereas older youngsters state that advertisement and digital influencers are more relevant.

Some statements have confirmed that teenagers care a lot about the opinion of others. One teenager said that youth '[...] is the age when others have the greatest influence over [...]' them. Older youngsters reported that teenagers care more about what others think of them; they also claimed that what was important in childhood or adolescence was no longer so relevant nowadays. However, the influence other people have on young individuals is a repeating topic in their speech. What others are using, what they post on social media, what their friends have, and what 'people around' them suggest were factors of great importance to all young individuals participating in the survey. According to them, the constitution of their identity is unconsciously based on the opinions of others, mainly when it comes to consumption. They sometimes mention the word 'unconsciously' when they refer to the influence of others, but not all of them have understood how such exogenous influences on their consumption desires work. Yet, some of them deny the influence of others over them and state that they are autonomous.

Some statements made by young individuals are quite significant when it comes to the influence exerted by digital influencers. They are aware that influencers are the new advertisement vehicles, but they also say these influencers do it more honestly and authentically; in other words, they are not seen by this population

as professionals trained to sell (advertisers). Many interviewees have reported that they follow influencers in order to get to know what is up-to-date, the new trends, what they should, or should not, buy. They are more attracted to advertisements by digital influencers, because they feel it is customized, oriented to their interest and desires, and focused on what they like. According to teenagers in the focus groups, influencers also seem credible and reliable.

Letícia (20 years old, AÇO)[5] has said that young people rather watch and assimilate advertisement made by influencers than advertisement on television:

> [...] because it is more likely to customize what we want to see. Because, if we are going to watch a makeup video, the advertisements or what is being advertised in that video is about makeup. On the other hand, on television, we have a range of advertisements aimed at different audiences. [...] And television appeals to all these audiences at the same time. So I think that young people prefer digital influencers because they can see what they want.

She added to her speech by stating that young people feel that their desires are more connected to those of influencers.

Isabel (22 years old, CON) has reinforced that digital influencers make her more confident because they seem to be more sincere, mainly when they point out the positive and negative points of a product. She said that, although she knows that influencers advertise, they give feedback on what they consume and on their consumption cravings. She prefers following influencers who give their opinion about products because it makes her confident. In her own words:

> For example, I follow Helena Coelho, who is Portuguese and acts in the makeup field. However, this area is not the one fascinating me the most. I think it is the sincerity she shows the product with. In my opinion, it is the basis; a trust relationship has to be established so I can realize that she is indicating a product she uses and trusts. That is why I say that, nowadays, my desires are triggered much more by digital influencers. [...] Nowadays, I consume much more than what I see on the Internet, because influencers transmit sincerity. Because, on television, they end up saying 'a company makes this', sell this product to me, but there is no opinion from anyone. Digital influencers try, based on their audience, to produce something more sincere.

Paula (20 years old, CON) has also stated that

> Helena Coelho gets a new moisturizer, and she advertises it. But I even believe that the moisturizer is good because she often uses the product. I mean, I'm not at her house, but I think so, right? Ah, but she, for example, shows the moisturizer, says the it does this or that, what is on sale if we use her promotion code, that the moisturizer is good. Done, the advertisement is made. But it is also their life, isn't it?

Other young individuals have explained that because influencers share their daily routines, their private moments, it shows that they are 'normal' people, 'people like us', and it triggers a sense of closeness. According to them, this is different from what happens with viewers regarding actresses on television, for example. Television is not real life, and it does not show real people, just characters, representations. Claudia (22 years old, CON) has said she likes to follow influencers' daily lives, that she likes to see the reality they live in, and she said, "[...] people think they are different from us, but they are normal people".

Adriana (27 years old, AÇO) has acknowledged that the images she sees in influencers' profiles end up being 'stuck in her mind' and she said:

> I may not even be considering that at that moment, or thinking about that at that moment, but maybe later, at another time, I may need that or the product that is being advertised, I will remember it and, therefore, perhaps, I will consider that website or I will consider that brand. I think it always ends up directly influencing us; it ends up being there. Therefore, the message of those who are advertising is achieved because it reached the customer. I may not buy it at the time, but I get the idea that this is a service and that I can enjoy it later. It ends up fulfilling its role, I think.

Guilherme (23 years old, CON) has said that "Instagram and YouTube are likely the biggest sources of information on media, fashion, trends, they must be even bigger than magazines and traditional media". According to him, influencers drive young individuals' consumption because they are related to the desire to belong to the group and because they allow the appeal for individual identity. When asked about how influencers' do it, Guilherme has replied: "The secret is that, there are less and less products that everyone likes. There are more and more market niches". Moreover, he has added:

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[5] We will code respondents from mainland Portugal as CON and the ones from the Azores as AÇO. Respondents' names in this article are fictitious.

> An Instagrammer has a fashion profile; she only dresses, for example, in black and white. She will appeal and will have followers who like black and white clothing. An influencer who dresses in many colors and flowers and prints, I believe she will appeal to another taste type. I would hardly follow an Instagrammer who uses many patterns, because it does not appeal to me. But I follow several who dress in jeans, black, white, navy blue. I think it is this that captivates people. It is by taste and personal identity.

Gustavo (21 years old, CON) has acknowledged that influencers end up advertising but he also said that it does not affect him.

> Youtubers, mainly the Portuguese ones, are very fond of showing a good lifestyle, of wearing expensive clothes, having expensive cars, and of constantly eating out and I think that this should end up influencing many young people. I do not feel that it is my case, but I understand that it ends up influencing, yes.

By justifying why she feels highly motivated to buy products she sees in influencers' profiles, Silvia (28 years old, CON) has stated: "[...] as I follow brands, I also end up looking for them and, often because of influencers, no doubt about it. When they advertise product, clothing or even something to eat, I get the urge to buy... it is mainly it".

Many young people have said that they follow brand profiles on social networks, in addition to influencers. They explained that they like to check on the new trends, mainly concerning clothes, shoes, sports products, and makeup. The women and the young man who have said to wear makeup evidenced an exciting relationship between influencers and makeup. We were intrigued by the fact that many interviewees' statements have pointed out that they are very fond of makeup and that they follow many tutorials about it. This content type is among the ones mostly mentioned by women, both in the focus groups and in the one-on-one interviews. Many of these young women have said that they do not wear makeup, but they enjoy watching the tutorials. Why do they follow makeup artists and learn makeup tips if they do not like makeup? Some testimonies have shown that they even buy makeup and put makeup on at home, but do not go out with makeup on. What would be the meaning of it? Some have mentioned during the focus groups the fact that makeup helps increasing self-esteem; but that is not all. By watching the videos of some of the aforementioned digital influencers, it was possible understanding these young women's desire to be like them. Most of these influencers advertise beauty and youth, also a healthy lifestyle linked to exercising and nutrition, they mean a promise of body transform and of 'perfection' - a thin and defined abdomen. Nikkie Tutorials (which have more than 42 million views on YouTube), also known as '*The power of MAKEUP!*' make convincing speeches on the importance of makeup.[6] She states that many female followers say they are ashamed to wear makeup, that they put on makeup to please boys, or that they wear makeup because they feel insecure. Her statements made us think that, assumingly, many young women want to be someone else, to look like someone else, and that makeup would make that possible. The power of makeup would be precisely to mask the 'real' person, their natural being, it would make them different, supposedly prettier, and would correct minor 'flaws'. Nikkie shows each product she uses in that same video and informs the brands' names.

Almost all beauty and lifestyle digital influencers show the 'before and after' picture of the body (from the fattest to the leanest body) and face (without and with makeup). This quick and easy makeup transformation effect has vital symbolism because makeup allows one to go from the 'imperfect me' to the 'perfect me' in less than one hour, and it can even be fun – unlike exercising and healthy eating, that, for many people, mean sacrifice and patience. Elliott (2018) has analyzed the fascination by speed and the total transformation or short-term identity reconstruction industries - facilitated by 'technologies of the self' -, which is typical of the 'new individualism'. He has said: "In a world that values instant gratification, the desire for immediate results has never been more pervasive or more acute" (Elliott, 2018, p. 473).

Two CON young women have confessed that they do not like to follow social networks or to share their lives and, sometimes, to feel a little different because of that. Because young individuals' social life is getting more and more anchored in internet digital platforms, the ones who do not adhere to this 'lifestyle' may end up as an outsider. Türcke (2010) has explained that aesthetics has gained an ontological weight in the cyberculture that has never seen before, to the extent that "[...] an existence without electronic presence is [...] a non-being in a living body" (Türcke (2010, p. 65).

However, we have noticed the presence of rational processes related to the influence they suffer at the time to build their consumption desires. Guilherme (23 years old, CON) has said: "I always try to think: do I really want that and need that? Or are they just convincing me that I need it?" Carmem (22 years old, AÇO)

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[6] Nikkie Tutorials (2015).

was asked if she feels like buying a given product when she sees it on a digital influencer, and she had said: "Yes, I am. But, also, I am aware that I am 'being pushed'. I feel like buying, but I'm also aware that this desire was imposed on me".

Participants did not talk much about digital influencers in the focus group in Azores, they acknowledged their importance in shaping consumption desires. Teenagers also regarded influencers as famous, they rarely referred to actors, singers, or to other celebrities other than YouTubers and Instagrammers. Digital platforms are their main, or only, references. One teenager has said: 'YouTubers often sponsor or just show what they buy. We tend to like things and go to websites and see all that'. Another teenager has said: 'I watch YouTubers a lot, so whenever one of them talks about a new outfit or something, we feel like having it'. A teenage boy has said that he is infected by influencers' energy and positivity and that he feels the desire to buy the advertised goods in order to feel the same happiness as that of the influencer.

Overall, the herein assessed young people have validated the possible influences of friends and digital influencers but they also tried to despise advertisements' influence over them, since it was seen by them as manipulative and fake. They realized about advertisements' (because professionals make them) intention to interfere in their way of life and taste, and they are uncomfortable with it, but they are not disturbed by the reach of digital influencers in their lives. Based on their speech and reflections on the conflict between desire and need (which would imply internal conflict between emotion and reason) show that influences motivating consumption have stronger action in emotions than in reason, and that it is necessary being rational in order not to fall into their traps. Accordingly, Leticia (20 years old, AÇO) has stated: "It is irrational. [...] We sometimes try to find a reason to explain this desire. [...] I try to counteract the desire!". According to them, the power of manipulation depends on how susceptible people are. It seems that the greatest susceptibility emerges at emotional level and that it would have to do with lesser rationality; thus, rational subjects would have the power to control their desires. It would depend on their commitment to resist their own desires. We realized that this is an important issue that must be assessed in further research.

Digital influencers, celebrity endorsements, and social influence processes

Influencers enable a new communication flow between opinion leaders and followers. They create a consumption logic through their digital channels that reaches the audience prone to follow them (Caetano, 2020). Based on the present results it is clear that the Internet is the primary source sought by young people looking for information, entertainment, and communication. This finding confirms that understanding young people necessarily means knowing how the new generations reconfigure themselves based on using the Internet's virtual environment. We have concluded that the central role of digital influencers is undeniable among the herein assessed young Portuguese middle class individuals, not only when it comes to their consumption habits, but also to their lifestyle, tastes, and values. When respondents were asked about what they do with their smartphones most of the time, the vast majority of them replied that they access social media through it. When they were asked about who their idols were, many of them came up with the names of YouTubers or digital influencers. The names of digital influencers spontaneously came up at different moments of the interviews, mainly in women's speech. The soccer player, Cristiano Ronaldo, was the most common reference and inspiration among men. Women mentioned lifestyle, fashion, and makeup as their favorite content on the web, whereas boys mentioned games, cars, sports, and humor. Digital influencers exert fascination and appear reliable to young people; moreover, they configure themselves as important reference figures. They are seen by young people almost as friends, a fact that brings along the closeness and authenticity aspects that are fundamental to influence relationships. One of the reasons encouraging young people to follow a person and to have it as an influencer lies on the fact that they perceive influencers as authentic people with whom they identify themselves. Caetano (2020) analyzed digital influencers in light of Freud's theory of mass psychology and stated that the influencer is not the father authority figure of the Freudian approach but that it "[...] has a voice of authority when it encourages consumption" (Caetano, 2020, p. 74). Influencers tap into people's libido and, through this libidinal link, they homogenize their followers.

Digital influencers are the new celebrities and they are expected to endorse brands and products. Celebrity endorsement is a resource that has been increasingly used by companies (D'Angelo, 2003; Brandão, 2016). The person's ability to endorse a product and to convince consumers to buy it depends not only on the type or quality of such a product or brand, but also on the endorser's social power and even on its physical appearance (Liu, Huang, & Minghua, 2007). Celebrity endorsement is based on the meaning transfer model,

whose meanings in culture are transferred to the traded goods and to consumers' life (D'Angelo, 2003). Identification and internalization are the social influence processes generating endorsement processes in advertisements. Identification takes place when individuals act based on the attitude or behavior advocated by another person (celebrity); it is so, because they believe they can like him/her. Internalization also happens when individuals believe in the attitude or behavior exposed by another person and when the source of the information is perceived as honest and sincere. Consumers seek to incorporate meanings by purchasing the advertised product, due to their fascination to celebrities. Transfer of meaning is observed when the advertisement is designed to suggest similarities between the celebrity in it and the product (or brand). Digital influencers enjoy public recognition and they can use it in favor of products or brands, in addition to encourage certain behaviors, positions, and worldviews (Brandão, 2016).

We also noticed that the influencers more often cited by respondents used to develop the same content type. Their bodies, routines and lives are equally exposed, based on very similar sequences of images and videos and use almost identical languages. Their lives recorded in videos and photographs follow the same scripts. Many of the videos released by these people show the products they buy, the trends (in clothes, hair, and makeup) they are following, their travels around the world, and what they buy in these places. They also provide travel tips, show how to arrange a room or the closets in the house, their new decoration and car.

Influencers are brand endorsers for nowadays young people. Although followers do not always buy what they see, digital influencers inevitably create and validate their consumption ideal. Several interviewees have said that they feel close to, and want to be like, these influencers. This projection over digital influencers makes the formation of consumer desires for the brands used and advertised by them much easier.

Conclusion: some final inferences and digressions

The profile of, and content developed by, the digital influencers most cited by the young individuals we have assessed made us think about the concept of half-education (*Halbbildung*), in light of Critical Theory. According to this theory, half-educated subjects are satisfied with reproducing "the always equal", since they are deprived of cultural training. The alienated spirit is omnipresent and critical awareness is absent in half-educated individuals (Adorno, 1996), who feel good and can be obstinate when consuming a predetermined culture (Zuin & Zuin, 2017). They do not learn to resist, just to adapt, without questioning. Only few of them can question and make substantial changes in their lives because half-education means adequacy to continuity (Maar, 2003; Loureiro, 2007; Zuin, 2013), and it happens through adjustments makes by the market to integrate people to the consumer condition. This integration points out the 'necrosis of cultural formation' (Adorno, 1996).

Young people feel such an 'irrational' manipulation of their desires, which sometimes resembles an addiction. Flávio (18 years old, AÇO) has said: "Even if I do not buy, I desire Apple products in an almost irrational way. I look, and I like the product. I already have Apple products, and it's kind of, I wouldn't say, an addiction, but a very strong attraction for Apple products". One element making sure that the conditioning of tastes by the market works lies on the sense of similarity to everything, on the uniformity that creates a false identity between universal and particular. Uniformity is linear, simple, and it does not account for many challenges; therefore, it favors people's adjustment to the system. Half-education, which is the dominant way to train people, mainly takes place through mass media and the Internet.

Formal education, as cultural formation (*Bildung*), which is understood as reflective and critical thinking learned through the emancipatory pedagogy, is the opposite side of semi-training (Jaehn, 2008). It comprises the formative experiences constituting the critical-reflective awareness, whereas half-education experiences keep people in comfort situations and does not allow them to go beyond the uncritical instrumental training they have been receiving. Adaptation or accommodation is a social process to submit human desires and lead people to false freedom and to the illusion that they are reconciled with society. *Bildung* is the autonomous subject (when it comes to market impositions); "[…] a truly reflexive cultural policy […]" (Adorno, 1996, p. 393) capable of leading subjects to a state of transparency and self-knowledge is essential for *bildung* to happen.

We realized that it is necessary to critically analyze the trend towards socially integrated totalization - homogenization of consumer tastes and desires – that is nowadays controlled not only by traditional mass media but, also by everything existing on the Internet, mainly by social networks, when we listened to our interviewees. Such analyses allowed us to better understand a whole range of contemporary young people who are guided by digital influencers. We are concerned about the social, political, and emotional impacts resulting from a consumer society composed of self-absorbed, reified, half-educated, and uncritical subjects

who are featured by reduced reflective capacity. We also think about the impacts of this society model on nature, given the depletion of resources due to their use in goods' production and the accelerated and continuous waste disposal.

We have answered the study question, namely: 'What is the importance of digital influencers for consumption desire formation in the herein assessed young Portuguese individuals?' by following a logical network of clues (Miles & Huberman, 2003) deriving from the speech of these young people in the one-on-one interviews and focal groups. We have inferred that young people are aware of the fact that they are affected by digital influencers at the time to shape their consumption desires. However, at the same time, they try to show that these individuals are not as influential as they seem, that they only buy what they like, need or want, based on by their own decisions. According to young people, digital platforms offer personalized content that makes them feel valued, perceived; they also state that they do not waste time on what they are not interested in.

The consumer society has an essential socializing function, which is substantiated by its complex advertising system. Based on the Critical Theory it was possible understanding that such a socialization is hidden by the false conciliation between individuals and society. Therefore, these people are oftentimes subjected to desires they do not know how to control, to anxiety and anguish they cannot explain, and to a narcissism they cannot overcome. However, it is necessary knowing and considering contradictions to take into account that the same subjects who reproduce society also transform it. Actually, believing in the heteronomy exerted by advertisements does not mean that people are entirely passive and manipulated. Such a statement means accepting that alienation of desires and awareness of manipulation can act together and be contradictory in consumers' lives. New research should focus on seeking to understand how this dynamic works.

Young people are often aware that consumer appeals and seduces them, and that such a feeling come from outside them, mainly from digital influencers. They know that life in advertisements is false, be it based on artists or digital influencers, although they believe influencers are more reliable. Many of these young individuals have shown that they know they are encouraged to buy superfluous things and that they will not make them any happier. However, they also know what essential goods are and what goods exceed the limit of necessity. Such an awareness does not prevent them from desiring and buying the advertised goods; It is as if they could not help but responding to this external call, which is sovereign to them. They believe that buying new clothes will bring immediate gains (increase self-esteem and well-being) that will not last in their 'normal' lives, which goes on after they consume something. However, they know that not being fashion, not having an iPhone (Apple), or not having social networks can cast them as outsiders.

In views of what was aforementioned, we resort to an instigating question by Fontenelle (2006, p. 42): "[...] who is this subject who knows, but acts as if it does not know? Why do these young people consume images, brands, symbols that they know are illusory and act as if they didn't know? How to explain this paradox of "I know, but...?". Fontenelle (2006, p. 43) concluded that the subject who consumes the brands disclosed in advertisements a "[...] knows that everything is an illusion", is driven by an unconscious illusion [...]". Therefore, the constant need of performing dominates this subject; therefore, it uses masks and disguises to be perceived by others as part of the collectivity, as a faithful and active member of the market's religion.

The herein assessed young individuals oscillated between the awareness of being manipulated and the attempt to show autonomy and to only buy what they like. "I don't buy it because it's a trend, but because I like it" (José, 21, CON). There has never been any spontaneous reflection on their part that their tastes can be socially learned (Bourdieu, 1996) and that they end up liking precisely what is trending, an essential socializing function. We were not prone to naturalize tastes or give them the status of starting point, which precedes, or serves as, inspiration for companies' further creations to satisfy consumers' pre-existing desires. However, it is necessary recognizing that the move to form consumers' tastes and desires is complex, dialectical and multifaceted. It is also necessary remembering that young people oscillate between awareness and alienation, individual and social interests, acceptance and refusal (Viana, 2015).

Young people's perception about influencers is dubious; on one hand, they claim to be ordinary people whose everyday lives leads to the sense of closeness, young people also refer to them as unique individuals who have a certain glamour. According to Caetano (2020), nowadays, influencers need to asset fake close relationships with their followers, because the mob wants to feel desired and recognized. Therefore, advertisements by influencers seem to be so effective at reaching the young audience. The attributes turning influencers into special people for those who aim projection lie on their 'perfect' bodies, 'healthy' eating,

'happy' marriages - what Hakim (2010) has called 'erotic capital' - and their purchasing power, which allows them to have large, well-decorated houses and to travel to astonishing places. Influencers' magnetism over young people should not be neglected, since standardization resulting from repetition and the sense of projection towards their likely perfect universe can be essential sources of anxiety and low self-esteem, a fact that leads to "[...] atrophy of the individual conscious personality" (Caetano, 2020, p. 80).

We live in a society where smartphones have become an emotional prosthesis, body extensions of people who are compulsive, anxious, hurried, depressed, who have narcissistic omnipotence desires, who are helpless, powerless, half-educated (Adorno, 1996; Dufour, 2005) and unable to perceive and/or leave this reality. The 'commodity narrative' is only has strong and prevailing because it makes efficient connection between two economies: the market and the driver (Dufour, 2005). The market manipulates desires as it presents itself as capable of offering a commodity for any demand, be it cultural, aesthetic, social distinction, ornamental, sexual, the satisfaction of vital needs; thus, each desire finds an equivalent commodity. However, from a psychoanalytic perspective, this desire appeasement of desire in objects does not happen. "The subject, by having sought the satisfaction of his desire in the object, can only discover, given the nature of the driver, that 'it was not that yet,' that the lack that had given rise to the desire persists" (Dufour, 2005, p. 77). Nevertheless, is this constant disappointment caused by the non-fulfillment of impulses of "[...] the driving force behind the power of the merchandise narrative?" (Dufour, 2005, p. 77). It is part of the advertisement strategy to continually frustrate people in order to relaunch new purchase desires (Brune, 1981).

Children, teenagers, and young people have been educated, from the mid-20th century on, to have the consumer identity as one of the most important ones in their lives. Such a process has been making this population create a self-image guided by values provided by the market, which uses media and social networks in favor of companies' profit. These individuals seem to associate social approval with having consumer goods by certain brands that have been recommended by digital influencers who have achieved a particular success and wealth model and who, consequently, gained legitimacy and respect. This population have been co-opted by the ambitions that has been pedagogically imposed to them since their birth. How can we expect this population to transcend individualism (without compromising their individualities), narcissism and life performance seeking popularity, and to draw their most extraordinary sensations after such a transcendence, if having material goods and sharing cultural codes are some of the main conditions to happiness (albeit ephemeral) and for identity strengthening?[7]

Human senses are impoverished and creative energy is wasted when life satisfaction is concentrated on willing for and an having objects, as well as worshiping digital influencers who disseminate standardized and uncritical content. Thinking critically about consumer society and youth means understand all this process. Knowing the psychosocial effects, the complexity of the consumption issue is the initial step towards building possibilities of existence. According to the Critical Theory, one should not forget that the system itself produces both alienation and the conditions for overcoming it. Integration and disintegration are the two sides of the same coin (Adorno, 1995). One must pay close attention to the gaps arising from the system's contradictions when one wants to have a moment of hope for changes, be them cyclical, in the short-term; or structural, in the long term.

If young people are susceptible to influencers and more or lesser intensely adhere to them in order to outspread illusions, they can also develop critical self-reflection skill, which is the only way to access and build an emancipated society.[8] If we think of young people as social subjects (Dayrell, 2003), we must recognize their potential to become actors of resistance and change. Internet should not remain as an exclusive vehicle for alienating advertisement messages, since going back to life without it is impossible and unthinkable. The web also make available contents that lead to critical awareness formation, since social media are not the only means of outspreading meaningless content and values accounting for half-education. There is also content teaching men not to be sexist, educating people to respect racial differences, and discussing philosophy and politics, among other subjects necessary for individual formation. However, the Internet can trigger political engagement, when it is used as 'counter-fire' (Bourdieu, 1998); the herein

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[7] We refer to transcendence based on the sense attributed to it by Mészáros (2016, p. 223, grifos do autor). "The concepts of 'alienation' and 'transcendence' are closely interrelated and, consequently, if one speaks of history in terms of alienation, it is not justified to forget the problem of transcendence". Thus, transcendence implies overcoming alienation.

[8] We understand that an emancipated society is composed of human beings who are capable of recognizing their needs as part of a set of community needs and, thus, of acting based on a complex interaction between individuality and collectivity. "Individuals would be much more emancipated if they were able to make choices and decisions - beyond the field of consumption - aiming at the collective good, not only of nowadays generations, but also of future ones. It is so, because emancipation means, according to Adorno (1995), the rescue of autonomy which, under capitalism, is subsumed under heteronomy" (Padilha, 2006, p. 93).

addressed issue does not exclude the fact that many people benefit from using it (Prioste, 2016). One of the several challenges faced by society lies on ensuring that youth cyberculture prioritizes contents that encourage intellectual development without implying control or any indoctrination. If it is true the consumption desires overcome the will to knowledge and reasoning, and if knowledge and awareness make people capable to be the drivers of their humanity (Tonnetti & Meucci, 2013), how is it possible channeling such a desire to consume towards knowledge acquisition?

Other complex and difficult challenges set for society imply in becoming capable of facing the conscience (de)formation industry (cultural industry) and the culture of consumerism, by offering concrete and far-reaching alternatives to train subjects to be able of 'cracking capitalism' from the 'dialectic of inadequacy' to the system (Holloway, 2013). In this process of emancipation, People's desires within this emancipation process, at all life stages and social conditions of existence, could be guided by the search for ataraxia (the state of the serene soul) than by illusions of good life outspread by advertisements and digital influencers. The emancipatory education for citizenship is essential for critically thinking the consumer society. According to Prioste (2016), there must be proper critical education about the media and its reach over subjects' intellectual and affective construction.

The herein addressed reflections open many paths for further research. Some topics, still need to be deepened, such as the conflict faced by young people between desiring to purchase and controlling such impulse, the reality of young people from other social classes, gender specificities, and specificities of other generations. It is also necessary assessing youth based on the dialectic of conscious rationalization, which is mixed to the subjectivity damaged by cyberculture.

We need to discover new forms of reflexive action in the world, such as increasing compassion and empathy (sense of collectivity) and curbing the submission of nature by typical men of the capitalist consumer society (Anthropocene). Assumingly, it would be the way out of Plato's illusion cave, and the way to deal with our incompleteness as humans, as well as to stop ourselves from being seduced by the 'mermaid siren song' echoed from digital platforms. Reality is historical and social; therefore, it is changeable. According to Gramsci (2001), we continue with the pessimism of intelligence in analysis and with the optimism of will in action, as long as the herein addressed social phenomena remain hegemonic and TINA (There is no Alternative) mode prevails, to some extent.

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