

“I Was Born Wrong”: Sexualised Self-Presentation Of Teenage TikTok Influencers And Its Effects On Their Communities

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Academic Year 2021 / 2022

Research Project of the MA in International Studies on Media, Power, and Difference
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Abstract

Adolescence is a period of life when teenagers develop senses of identity and belonging. In that context, social media has become a prominent environment for teenagers to exercise their self-expressions, as they have been spending increasing amounts of time on these platforms. Previous research suggests, however, that adolescents' self-presentation on social media may trigger tendencies of self-objectification and sexualisation. These conducts can entail various mental health disturbances – especially among girls. Through an ethnographic immersion in the TikTok profiles of Luara Fonseca and Gabrielle Severino (a.k.a. Melody), this research explored the sexualised self-presentation of teenage influencers on TikTok and how their audiences reacted to this content. The study explores the extensive impact that social media platforms may take on young people. Its findings may generate insight on how to make social media a safer environment for young people.

Keywords: Adolescence; Social Media; TikTok; Sexualisation; Mental Health; Body Image.

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1. Introduction

Throughout the last decades, most societies have been witnessing an unprecedented phenomenon: the escalating role that social media seems to be occupying in the lives of millions of people (Franchina and Lo Coco 2018). Notably, the use of these platforms is even more intense among adolescents. Research shows that as much as 50% of teenagers are on social media daily, dedicating at least 1 hour every day to the use of social networking sites (Bucknell and Kottasz 2020).

Within this context, it is particularly relevant to draw attention to TikTok. Created in 2017, the video-sharing social media platform has gathered over 2 billion downloads and 800 million active users over the last years (Schellewald 2021). Currently, it is the fastest-growing social network on the planet – with most of its users being 24 years old or younger (Rach 2021).

Adolescence is a period of life when one develops a sense of identity and belonging – and social media has become an encouraging environment for teenagers to not only exercise their self-expression, but to mobilise for social and humanitarian causes (Feixa 2021). On the other hand, it is also when self-comparison and self-evaluation behaviours peak (Steinsbekka et al. 2020). Hence, although over 60% of teenagers see TikTok as a tool for leisure (Guo 2022), both TikTok and other platforms carry the potential to trigger social comparison behaviours in that audience. Such conducts often lead to other negative psychological issues – especially concerning appearances, such as impaired body image and self-esteem (Steinsbekka et al. 2020).

Research also indicates that alongside the increased possibilities of self-expression and self-presentation in social media also come tendencies of self-objectification and sexualisation – that is, “the process whereby one becomes more concerned and engaged with how one’s body is perceived by others while de-emphasising one’s subjective feelings and internal awareness” (Papadopoulos 2010, 56). Said tendencies are displayed mainly by girls, as they seem to be a consequence of the dominant male gaze – which ensures that “female sexual expression only gains validity under the surveillance of men” (Papadopoulos 2010, 24).

Even though it is just one among many forms of gender oppression, the sexualisation of adolescent girls can entail a multitude of consequences, ranging from mental health disturbances to increased risks of sexual abuse and even employment discrimination (Papadopoulos 2010). As TikTok seems to exert a “profound influence on the youth, in an

educational, social, and perceptual way” (Guo 2022, 1393), it becomes relevant to understand how the dynamic of sexualisation happens within this platform.

Through the case study of two teenage TikTok influencers from Brazil – namely, Luara Fonseca and Melody – this dissertation combines the methods of virtual ethnography, interviews, and qualitative content analysis in order to explore two main topics: (1) How these creators self-present sexually on their platforms, and (2) How can this content impact the audiences who consume it. Ultimately, it contributes to the understanding of societal practices of adolescents, the expression of their identities, and how social media can progress to become the safest possible environment for young people.

2. Literature Review

Although a considerable amount of literature was found on the correlation between adolescence, social media, and sexualisation, studies that associate these theories with the environment of TikTok are still limited. In order to theoretically place this dissertation, this section reviews, compares, and elaborates on existing literature on its main concepts, those being (2.1) *Adolescence*, (2.2) *Self-Presentation*, (2.3) *Sexualisation*, and (2.4) *The effects of Social Media on Mental Health*. As this study contributes to the understanding of societal and cultural practices of teenagers and the expression of their identities, the chapter starts with an investigation of the physical, psychological, and cultural aspects of adolescence.

2.1. Adolescence

Etymologically, the word *adolescence* originates from the Latin term *adolescere*, meaning ‘to grow’ or ‘to develop towards maturity’. Adolescence, therefore, is understood as “the stage in individual life comprised between physiological puberty [...] and the recognition of the adult status” (Feixa 2011, 1634). Nevertheless, it is an inherently social construction – meaning that its definition may vary depending on factors such as culture, economy, space, and time. As this study was conducted in Europe, it adopts the definition most commonly employed by Western societies – which understand adolescence as the time of life preceding the majority of age, usually ranging from 12 to 18 years old (Feixa 2011).

Although its limits have changed throughout space and time, one common ground between every definition of adolescence is that it is associated with physical and psychological transformation. Developmentally, it encompasses the maturing of various

skills – from cognitive (e.g., advanced reasoning and abstract thinking) to psychological (e.g., autonomy and self-identity) and social (e.g., emotion management and relation to others) (De La Brena 2021).

Over the last century, social, cultural, and economic aspects caused the definitions of adolescence and youth to adapt. Feixa (2011) lists two factors that may be considered relevant for the context of this study:

- (1) *The dissemination of mass communication*, which led to the articulation of a universal “youth culture” in the media – influencing young people to no longer identify with their class or ethnicity, but rather with their contemporaries;
- (2) *The modernisation of cultural habits and rejection of conservative morals*, a movement led mainly by young people, which culminated in various social changes – including the so-called “sexual revolution”, which first separated sex from procreation.

The concepts of social media and sexualisation, which relate to the above-mentioned points, will be explored in the following sections.

Among the societal factors that helped shape youth as it is today, it is possible to extract one key takeaway: that “young people do not search for the truth in a superior entity, but in the networks of mutual trust built by them” (Feixa 2021, 9)¹. With the creation and propagation of the Internet, these networks have become increasingly digital, and younger generations are born surrounded by various electronic devices. As digital environments become more present in everyday life (Franchina and Lo Coco 2018) – and progressively intertwined with the offline world – it is relevant to understand how these networks shape young people’s approach to their lives and the world surrounding them (Feixa 2011).

2.2. *Self-Presentation*

Before investigating the relationship between adolescence and social media, it is valuable to understand a concept that is common to both universes: the notion of *self-presentation*.

In “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”, Goffman (1959) defines self-presentation – or “impression management” – as the actions employed by individuals aiming to control others’ perception of them. By expressing their abilities, statuses, and emotions, one becomes capable of influencing the individuals around them, making them more likely to

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, translations are those of the author.

respond to them positively. In essence, self-presentation happens when individuals adopt a performative “front stage behaviour” to display a good image (Hui Hui and Chang 2016).

Adolescence, as aforementioned, is a period in which teenagers experience increased concern with others’ perceptions of them – and the opinions of their friends and peers play paramount roles in their development (Hui Hui and Chang 2016, Steinsbekka et al. 2020). Consequently, teenagers often experience mixed feelings about their personalities and how they present themselves. If an increased concern with public image is inherent to adolescence, so is the development of their identities (De La Brena 2021) and, therefore, the construction of their self-presentations.

Social media also relates closely to this concept, as it can be a valuable tool for individuals to project their self-presentations into the world (Carr and Hayes 2015). The use of social media platforms allows users to develop multiple digital identities, through which they can emphasise or minimise certain aspects of themselves. As they navigate through these avatars, they hold the power to design their online self-presentations, which could make teenagers even more interested in spending their time on social media (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013). By using these platforms as tools to build their self-presentations, teenagers ultimately seek to project themselves as authentic, seek parasocial identification, and enhance their reputations (Caliandro 2017).

The strategies adopted in constructing one’s online self-presentation do not only tell about their personality. Rather, they involve the social structures and cultural values of the environments in which they are inserted. In the following sections, this study investigates how behaviours of sexualised self-presentation might have become a cultural trend among young people and how this could affect them.

2.3. Sexualisation

Over the last decades, most societies have experienced a peak in conservative and xenophobic movements. As a response, young people have been leading various social movements, especially through cyberactivism (Feixa 2021).

Although the activist movements led by younger generations have undeniable social relevance, they can generate backlash – especially when incorporated by the markets and communicated through a capitalist logic. As argued by Papadopoulos (2010), for instance, it is not uncommon for the sexualisation of teenage girls to be mediated and marketed as female “empowerment” – when, arguably, these depictions can reinforce a dominant male

gaze. In that context, exploring the effects of the sexualisation of adolescents – and how this can eventually lead to their own sexualised self-presentation – can be a valuable tool for understanding the social structures behind these dynamics.

Papadopoulos defines *sexualisation* as “the imposition of adult sexuality [on] children and young people before they are capable of dealing with it, mentally, emotionally or physically” (Papadopoulos 2010, 23). De La Brena (2021) adds to that definition by suggesting that it necessarily involves objectification – that is, the reduction of an individual to someone whose only purpose is to serve others’ needs. In practical terms, the process of sexualisation takes place through the sexualised exhibition and exposure of one’s body (Choi and DeLong 2019). Factors such as clothing, make up, and body language are often utilised to sexually depict an individual. Ultimately, sexualisation outlines a cultural trend in which “the common denominator is the use of sexual attributes as a measure of a person’s value and worth” (De La Brena 2010, 24).

Both authors understand sexualisation as a mechanism that aims to enforce the dominant male gaze, thus assuring that women’s sexual expression is valid only when observed by men. This dynamic may contribute to increased sexual violence among young people. Consequently, sexualisation could play a relevant part in perpetuating gender stereotypes (Khattab 2019, De La Brena 2021).

The extended exposure to sexualised media content is identified as a cumulative phenomenon called the “drip-drip effect”: as teenagers – especially girls – observe their role models (e.g., influencers and celebrities) repeatedly self-sexualise on social media, they may assume that type of content is not only popular, but acceptable and even trendy – which can then lead them to internalise and replicate these behaviours (Papadopoulos 2010, De La Brena 2021).

Safety is also a common issue regarding this topic, as young people are sometimes known for displaying naïve or reckless behaviour on social media. Though some studies argue that this naïveté is a myth (De Leyn et al. 2021), literature shows that teenagers tend to lack the development to either consume or reproduce highly sexualised content on social media.

Moreover, research demonstrates that sexualising minors can increase threats such as child abuse and sexual violence (Papadopoulos 2010, De La Brena 2021). When mediatised images of teenagers picture them as to resemble adults, receivers of these media might understand these depictions as acceptable and desirable, contributing to the normalisation of these abuses. Girls are the most likely to suffer from these acts, since media vehicles are

also likely to perpetuate the male gaze. As stated by Papadopoulos, “there is a danger that we are turning boys into consumers of the female body, who see sex as a means of domination and control rather than an act of intimacy” (2020, 66).

Ultimately, if teenagers are inserted in a cultural context that encourages behaviours of self-sexualisation, they are also likely to reproduce them in their self-presentation strategies – including their social media profiles. As they go through adolescence, the exposure to sexualised content could trigger behaviours of self-surveillance and social comparison. Research on the topic suggests that when teenagers self-present in sexual ways, they become more vulnerable to factors that endanger their mental and physical health, such as decreased self-esteem, depression, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders (Papadopoulos 2010, De La Brena 2021, Liu 2021).

2.4. Social Media, TikTok, and Body Image

As discussed throughout the previous sections, social media can be a powerful catalyst in self-presentation and sexualisation behaviours. This section investigates the concept of social media and how these platforms may affect the mental health of its users in this context. Carr and Heyes (2015) define social media as

Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others. (Carr and Heyes 2015, 50).

Rahm-Skågeby (2011) adds to this definition by pointing out that these platforms carry a solid capacity to be tools for mass-personal communication and user engagement. As the Internet becomes more and more embedded in our everyday lives, social media has been providing its users with increasingly individualised and personally curated experiences (Hine 2017).

In most online networks, however, the ability for effective mass-personal communication is unevenly distributed. Although social media technically allows any user to become an “information broker”, it is only a minority of users who concentrate the majority of connections and the power to disseminate messages effectively. González-Bailóna and

Wangb define this concept as *networked power*, which consists of “the power that some social actors have over other actors in the same communication network” (2016, 97).

The concept of networked power can be directly related to *digital influencers* – which, as described by Torres et al., are “content creators who have accumulated a solid base of followers” (2019, 1267). These creators’ main productions encompass content that provide their followers with curated insights about their lives. The concept of digital influencers is very relevant for this dissertation, as its purpose is to investigate the profiles and communities of two TikTok influencers – both of whom have significant amounts of followers and, therefore, can efficiently disseminate the messages of their choosing.

Taking into consideration the previously listed characteristics of social media, namely: (1) mass-personal communication, (2) user engagement, (3) personally curated experiences, and (4) networked power, it is fitting to analyse TikTok, as it is known for providing its users with all of the experiences above.

Created in 2017, the Chinese short-video sharing platform TikTok has gathered over 2 billion downloads and 800 million active users over the last years (Schellewald 2021). Currently, it is the fastest-growing social network on the planet – with most of its users being 24 years old or younger (Rach 2021). Among the aforementioned characteristics of social media, mass-personal communication and personally curated experiences are arguably the most influential within the application. Differently from its two main predecessors – i.e., Facebook and Instagram – TikTok is known to deliver content to vast audiences through a highly personalised algorithm. In contrast, previous social media platforms required more “effort” for users to see the content of their liking (Digital Agency Network 2021). TikTok’s “For You” page offers its users “an endless stream of TikTok clips selected by the platform’s algorithms attempting to identify those videos that will likely resonate with a user’s interests” (Schellewald 2021, 1438). Furthermore, as TikTok’s users are primarily young, the platform provides teenagers with a sense of community, where users can access content with a sense of humour similar to theirs (Family Education 2020, How-To Geek 2020).

Because it offers opportunities for its members to self-present and build social connections, TikTok has become a valuable artefact for contemporary youth, generating high social capital among teenagers (De Leyn et al. 2021). As previously discussed, adolescence is a period when individuals directly relate the building of social connections with mental health; Hence, the consequences of not building these connections may be linked to a

decrease in self-esteem and other mental health disturbances (Bucknell and Kottasz 2020). These can be further aggravated by self-sexualisation and self-objectification behaviours.

From a gender perspective, literature shows that these dynamics affect teenage girls the most. A study by Steinsbekka et al. (2020) showed that the use of social media among teenagers of both genders only decreased self-esteem in girls. The authors associate this with four factors:

- (1) Girls tend to use image-based social media more frequently than boys;
- (2) They are more likely to post media of themselves;
- (3) They are more likely to compare themselves to others girls on these platforms;
- (4) Comparison behaviours have stronger negative impact on females' body images than they do on males'.

Given that this bias was identified in more than one piece of empirical research (Papadopoulos 2010, Steinsbekka et al. 2020, De La Brena 2021), this research focuses on the effects that sexualised self-presentation has on teenage girls, specifically.

As adolescents construct idealised versions of themselves, these versions eventually integrate with their self-perceptions. As girls view, engage, and evaluate others' self-presentations on social media, they increase social comparison behaviours, which can affect their self-perceptions (Steinsbekka et al. 2020). Additionally, when one's self-presentation on social media is sexualised, teenagers not only increase their chances of developing mental health disturbances, but of exposing themselves to dangerous situations (e.g., unauthorised image use or soliciting of sexual content). Finally, the sexualised self-presentation of teenage girls is hardly a conscious choice, but rather the reproduction of an internalised mechanism of objectification and a structural reproduction of sexual oppression. Therefore, behaviours of self-sexualisation can not only lead to mental health disturbances, but to the lowering of barriers that can make them victims of violence against women (Papadopoulos 2010).

3. Research Problem

As previously outlined, the topic of this research is the sexualised self-presentation of teenage female influencers on short-video platform TikTok. Through the immersion in the TikTok profiles of two Brazilian influencers, it aims to explore the self-presentations of

teenage influencers Luara Fonseca and Melody, gathering insight on how their audiences react to their sexualised content and how it can ultimately affect the mental health of their communities. The study seeks to respond to the following research questions:

RQ1: Do Luara and Melody self-present in a sexualised way on TikTok? How often?

RQ2: How do the influencers' audiences receive and respond to this kind of content?

RQ3: Can this sexualised self-presentation influence the mental health of the receivers of Luara and Melody's TikTok content?

4. Methodology

The advent of social media fundamentally shifted the Internet (Hine 2017). As social media platforms become more “complex, fluid, and fragmented” (Caliandro 2017, 1), they can be understood not only as spaces outside of one's offline experience, but as environments that intertwine the offline and online worlds. In order to understand this complex environment, it was paramount that the methods employed in this research reflected said complexity. Through the analysis of case studies, this dissertation employed virtual ethnography and interviews to seek answers to its questions. The collected data was mainly analysed through qualitative data analysis, using quantitative data to provide further insight.

4.1. Case Study: Luara Fonseca and Melody

The case study method is an empirical research approach that analyses real-life situations to formulate, prove, or refute the research questions posed by a study. Applied to ethnography, Burawoy (1998) defends the use of case studies in order to implement reflexive science to ethnographic research, thus aiming to “extract the general from the unique” (Burawoy 1998, 5). Coller (2005) breaks down the method in a series of steps – namely, the selection of an appropriate case, collection of data, and subsequent coding and further analysis of said data. Over the following sections, this study will describe the protocols and proceedings adopted in each step mentioned above.

4.1.1. Luara Fonseca and Melody

This study analysed the case of two Brazilian TikTok influencers and their communities:

(A) Gabrielle Severino – commonly known by her artistic name, Melody – is a 15-year-old Brazilian Funk singer from the São Paulo, Brazil, who became famous in 2015. At the age of 9, the Public Ministry of São Paulo issued an inquiry against the singer’s parents, accusing them of putting Melody under “premature sexualisation, strong erotic content, and sexual appeal in her performances” (Coimbra 2016, 2), thus violating Severino’s right to dignity. The case reperculated internationally (Coimbra 2016), and not long after, the singer achieved fame in Brazil. Six years later, Melody is still managed by her father, and is frequently featured in the Brazilian media for being involved in controversies regarding her sexualisation and plagiarism (Jornal O Dia 2021, Lima 2021).

(B) Luara Fonseca is a 17-year-old digital influencer from Santos, Brazil. She started her career as a content creator at in Musical.ly, a short-video platform deactivated in 2016. Before it ended, Fonseca migrated to other social networks. It was the creation of her YouTube channel in 2015, however, that increased her reach and amount of followers, both on YouTube and on other platforms (Bispo 2022). Currently, Luara is one of the most famous teenage influencers in Brazil (Criadores iD 2022).



Image 1: Luara Fonseca



Image 2: Gabrielle Severino, a.k.a. Melody

The influencers' profiles were suitable for the study, as both have robust communities on their TikTok pages. As of the date of this study, Luara had 22 million followers (@luara, May 12th, 2022), while Melody had 1.4 million (@melody_ofcial, May 12th, 2022). Their videos have significant views, likes, and comments, which provided the study with sufficient data to be collected and analysed.

4.2. *Virtual Ethnography*

As argued by Hine (2017), traditional ethnography involves the immersion of a researcher within a community to understand the cultural habits of the people who participate in these settings. Similarly to its traditional form, *virtual ethnography* can be defined as the implementation of ethnography in particular virtual communities, on particular communication platforms (Rahm-Skågeby 2011). The use of virtual ethnography, therefore, can play aid in the “understanding of the social significance of the Internet” (Hine 2017, 315), as long as the ethnographer works with sensitivity to the technological complexities of virtual environments. As a qualitative outlook on the gathering of data in virtual communities (Rahm-Skågeby 2011), the employment of virtual ethnography aims to go beyond the numbers and statistics commonly associated with digital settings, shedding light on the behaviours and sentiments experienced by an online community, as well as its social and cultural dynamics (Hine 2017).

Applied to social media, Schellewald (2021) defends virtual ethnography as the preferable approach to collecting data from short-video platforms – as is the case of TikTok. Caliandro (2017) asserts the importance of virtual ethnography in social media studies, as the process of studying these platforms implies the researcher should not only immerse in an online community, but “map the practices through which users and devices construct social formations” (Caliandro 2017, 560). The immersion allows the ethnographer to dive deeper into the cultural dynamics of social media communities, enabling them to look past presupposed assumptions to find comprehensive insights into the ways of life of communities (Hine 2017).

Given the objectives of this study, virtual ethnography can represent a solid approach to exploring the self-presentation of Luara and Melody in her TikToks, as well as how these are received by their communities. The application of virtual ethnography represents “a means to question taken-for-granted assumptions about what the Internet means, to suspend

judgment and to explore what is going on from the perspectives of those involved” (Hine 2017, 316).

4.2.1. *Ethnographic Procedures*

The practice of virtual ethnography encompasses two fundamental epistemological tools: observation and participation in the day-to-day of the studied community (Hine 2017). The purchase offered by ethnographic presence involves being able to see what people are doing, to feel how it feels to do this and to ask questions about what it means” (Hine 2017, 321).

The present virtual ethnography took place over the course of 20 days, starting on April 28th and ending on May 17th, 2022. Initially, the immersion was planned to last 30 days. However, as the research approached its third week, the collected data became repetitive. Therefore, the ethnography was interrupted ten days in advance, thus avoiding the risk of reaching data saturation. As argued by Rahm-Skågeby,

With regard to online ethnographic data collection it is also important to consider the balance of collecting data to the level where no additional or new information emerges and the risk of collecting too much data. Due to the availability and ease of data collection, huge amounts of data can be accumulated, increasing the risk of having an insurmountable record and spending too little time actually classifying and analysing them. (Rahm-Skågeby 2011, 424).

During this period, the researcher engaged in a routine of using TikTok from 45 to 90 minutes every day, employing two approaches: (1) Observing Luara and Melody’s self-presentations, and (2) Observing how their communities received and reacted through comments on their videos. The author immersed in the influencers’ profiles on alternate days, thus resulting in 10 days of immersion in each community. A Word document was kept as a field diary, where the researcher annotated the perceived interactions and behaviours of these communities.

According to Rahm-Skågeby (2011), virtual ethnography usually encompasses three main data collection methods. The author employed two of them:

(1) *Document Collection* concerns the asynchronous gathering of data, as was the case of the retroactive recollection of comments made in Luara and Melody’s TikTok videos. The document collection was *targeted*, meaning the comments were selected because of their perceived relevance in answering the study’s research questions.

(2) *Online Interviews*, which are one of the leading research approaches in social media. Intending to interact with interviewees as synchronously as possible, the author conducted them through instant messaging platforms. Further details are provided in section 4.3.

During the phase of online observation, the virtual ethnographer's participation in the community can be either open, hidden, or both. However, if the ethnographer is perceived as an insider by a community, they will likely have fewer difficulties collecting data. A hidden participation approach can be defended on the following conditions: (1) If used along with other data collection methods, and (2) If it does not deal with private or sensitive data, "but as a way to confirm insights about ways of conduct in a general sense" (Rahm-Skågeby 2011, 416). As the data collected on the comment sections of Luara and Melody's video are public and the commenters' identities were protected, the author chose to use the hidden observation approach.

4.3. Interviews

Given the researcher did not identify herself or her purposes during the ethnography, it became necessary to employ methods that would help gather insight about how Luara's and Melody's audiences receive their content. Therefore, this study employed semi-structured online interviews to better understand the research problem from the perspective of adolescents. As argued by Rahm-Skågeby (2011), the implementation of online interviews poses various advantages for ethnographic research:

- (1) Allowing interviewees to reflect more deeply on their answers prior to responding the ethnographer's questions,
- (2) Sharing of more personal, sincere, and deep information,
- (3) Long-distance and synchronous implementation – which, with the interviewees being from outside of Europe, was a central requirement for the procedure, and
- (4) Facilitated transcription.

Participants were selected through an announcement in the author's social media profiles, and had to fulfil two main criteria: (1) Being frequent users of TikTok, and (2) Knowing both Luara and Melody. Interviewee #1 is a 17-year-old girl from São Paulo, Brazil,

who lives in Miami, Florida. Interviewee #2 is also a 17-year-old girl from São Paulo, Brazil, where she currently lives. Since both the respondents were minors, their names were redacted from the interview transcripts, and Informed Consent Forms were signed by their guardians.

4.4. Data Analysis

Traditionally, *qualitative content analysis* is defined as a method to investigate, identify, and classify elements of written documents in order to explain social phenomena (Fernández 2002). However, it has become increasingly common that the method is also applied to multimedial forms of data collection (Rahm-Skågeby 2011). The present study performed qualitative content analysis on two different types of media – Luara and Melody’s TikTok videos and the comments left on them. This approach was found suitable for this research because it facilitates the analysis of large volumes of information – both audiovisual (Huber 2020) and textual, allowing the analysis to show underlying insights in the collected content.

Complementary, the data also went through a brief quantitative analysis to provide further insight on the frequency in which Luara and Melody sexualised themselves and received certain types of comments.

4.3.1. Sample Selection

The first look through Luara’s and Melody’s TikTok accounts showed that the universe of the sample had a sufficient size. As of May 2022, Luara had posted 2,014 times on her account (Social Tracker 2022) and Melody, 135 times (@melody_oficial, May 13th, 2022). After screening their profiles, the author selected a sample of 20 TikToks from each influencer. These had to meet two criteria: (1) They should depict the influencers’ faces and/or bodies, and (2) They should have received at least 200 comments.

The author then read the complete comment section of each TikTok, purposefully selecting the comments which related to the study. Given the nature of the analysis, specific demographic information about the users was unavailable, and thus it was not feasible to perform a gender count. However, as most profiles displayed the names, pronouns, and profile pictures of the commenters, a look through their TikTok pages allowed the author to infer their genders most of the time.

4.3.2. Data Collection and Coding

This study conducted a thematic analysis of the collected data, which happened in three phases. Firstly, the author examined all the 40 TikTok videos² and their section comments, employing purposeful sampling to select all the comments related to the research problem of this dissertation. This generated a sufficient sample of 320 comments, which were then recorded in an Excel spreadsheet. TikToks and comments were coded separately.

Secondly, the author developed an initial coding of the collected data, guaranteeing the material was information-rich and organising them in a preliminary coding scheme, including categories, sub-categories, and their respective definitions. The coding was reviewed as many times as necessary, eliminating discrepancies and assuring categories were mutually exclusive and adequately linked to the reviewed literature. This process led to the identification of four TikTok themes and five comment themes, which are analysed in-depth throughout the next section.

5. Results

5.1. Videos

The analysed TikToks were categorised into four themes: (1) Dance, (2) Fashion & Beauty, (3) Edits, and (4) Comedy. For further insight about the videos, the thematic analysis of each theme is complemented with quantitative data.

Dance: Dance TikToks are videos of the creators engaging in dance routines – a common type of content within TikTok (Kennedy 2020). Seen by TikTok users as “challenges”, these routines often consist of a pre-established choreography to a song that is trending within the platform. Most of the routines performed by Luara and Melody consist of Brazilian Funk songs. The genre, which is the most popular among the Brazilian youth (Simmer 2021), is known for often carrying sexually explicit lyrics.

Although most of the analysed TikToks consisted of the creators performing choreography, the videos were sometimes used as a platform to communicate and publicise accomplishments from Luara and Melody’s careers. Some of Melody’s dance TikToks, for instance, were posted to publicise her most recent songs – the singer, who dances to a

² Each video received a code with the creator’s initial and a number (e.g., L1, L2, L3, M1, M2, M3) so the author could later identify the TikTok in which each comment was posted.

choreographed routine of her song “Assalto Perigoso”, shares subtitles such as “Have you danced to my new song yet??” and “THEY ROBBED MY HEART AND MY SISTER’S PHONE BATTERY [...] GO LISTEN TO MY NEW SONG ‘ASSALTO PERIGOSO’”.

The same logic is applicable to Luara, who used some of her TikToks to promote her acting career. In these videos, as the creator dances to trending TikTok songs, the subtitles and captions say: “I’m playing Florinha in the movie ‘Partiu América’ follow to see everything”, or “One more costume from Florinha for you guys #PartiuAmérica”. Unlike Melody, the dance routines performed by Luara do not directly relate to the content of the videos (i.e., promoting her participation in a movie). As dance trends are very popular on TikTok, this could be a choice of the creator to bring more attention to her videos. However, a brief analysis of the videos’ engagement rates³ showed there is not a significant difference between the engagement of Dance and Non-Dance TikToks (Table 1).

	Average engagement rate (%)
Dance	9,4%
Non-Dance	9,3%

Table 1: Average engagement rate of Luara and Melody’s Dance vs. Non-Dance TikToks

Fashion & Beauty: Fashion and Beauty videos are ones in which the creators display their clothing and make-up choices. This content was only identified in Luara’s sample, as Melody mostly adhered to dance trends. One of Luara’s Fashion and Beauty videos, for instance, shows the creator promoting a partnership with a Brazilian lingerie brand. As the influencer displays her outfit choice for the camera, the subtitle says: “I am in love with this top!! If you want access to a super special discount on HOPE to buy this and other beautiful clothes, CLICK THE LINK on my bio @hope.oficial”.

Edits: Very common on TikTok, an *edit* is a video in which one curates, arranges, and edits different photos and videos. Luara, for instance, participates in an edit trend in which the objective is to reveal her birth year. The video starts with a picture of the creator with the subtitle: “How much is 4010 divided by 2?”. The text then disappears and is replaced with a series of pictures and videos of herself. The video subtitle says only “2005”, thus implying

³ The engagement rate was calculated by dividing the sum of likes and comments on the video by its number of views ($E = [(L + C)/V] * 100$).

Luara’s birth year. Although this category only represented 7,5% of the total sample, edits appeared to be a powerful self-presentation tool, allowing creators to curate their self-presentations to their liking.

Comedy: The Comedy category was the least present among the profiles of Luara and Melody. Only one video of the sample fits into this profile – which consists of TikToks in which the creator produces comedic content using original or pre-existing audios on the platform. The video, which was posted by Melody, makes a common joke among her TikTok community – that the creator has been 13 years old for several years. The subtitle reads: “Relax guys, I’m still going to turn pretty. I’m only 13 years old”. Although most of Melody’s videos consisted of dance routines, this video was very well received within her community. Not only was it the most commented among her sample (2.427 comments), but it also showed the highest engagement rate (12,9%).

As shown in Table 2, 80% of the videos analysed consisted of the creators performing dance trends. Dance TikToks also represent a majority when analysing each creator individually, as they comprise 70% of Luara’s and 95% of Melody’s content. The second and third most representative categories – namely, Fashion & Beauty and Edits – were only posted by Luara (each representing 15% of her sample). The least representative category was Comedy, encompassing a single video from Melody (5% of the individual sample and 2,5% of the total sample).

	Dancing	F&B	Edit	Comedy
Luara	70%	15%	15%	0%
Melody	95%	0%	0%	5%
Total	82,5%	7,5%	7,5%	2,5%

Table 2: Share of TikToks themes by creator

A brief quantitative analysis of the videos (Table 3) shows that both Luara and Melody display a sexualised self-presentation in most of their videos. Luara appeared to self-sexualise in 90% of her videos, whereas Melody, 80%.

	% of TikToks with sexualised self-presentation
Luara	90%
Melody	80%

Table 3: Share of TikToks with sexualised self-presentation by creator

Generally, there was no significant difference between the engagement rates of sexualised and non-sexualised TikToks. As shown in Table 4, the difference between these values is only marginal. This could mean that the posting of sexualised content does not directly benefit Luara and Melody, as they do not necessarily provide the influencers with more views, likes, comments, or followers.

	Average engagement rate (%)
Sexualised	9,38%
Non-Sexualised	9,46%
Total	9,41%

Table 4: Average engagement rate of sexualised vs. non-sexualised TikToks

Looking at the previous analysis, it becomes possible to answer the study's first Research Question: Luara and Melody, as identified on their TikToks, tend to self-present in a sexualised manner most of the time. Although this study does not aim to understand the motivations behind these self-presentations, the following section investigates how their audiences receive to this kind of content, and how it could affect them.

5.2. Comments

After exploring the comment sections of all 40 videos, the author found a sample of 320 comments related to the research questions of this study. As shown in Table 5, the videos had an average of 1.115 comments each, with Luara's average being slightly higher than Melody's. This was not a surprising outcome, given that Luara's follower base is significantly higher than Melody's. Proportionally, Luara's TikToks received a slightly smaller number of comments that related to the themes of this study (see Table 5).

	Avg. comments per TikTok	Comments analysed	Share of comments per TikTok
Luara	1.270	128	40%
Melody	960	192	60%
Total	1.115	320	100%

Table 5: Average amount of comments per TikTok vs. amount and share of comments analysed

After selection, comments were analysed and categorised into six groups (see Image 3), which will be analysed by frequency: (5.2.1) Self Comparison, (5.2.2) Age, (5.2.3) Sexually Suggestive, (5.2.4) Supporting, (5.2.5) Criticism, and (5.2.6) Social and Ethnic Differences.

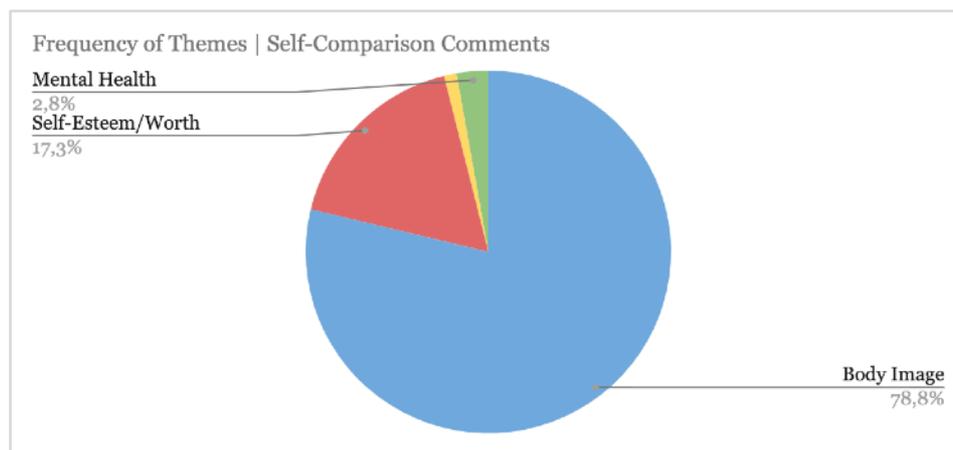


Image 3: Frequency of comment themes

5.2.1. Self Comparison

Most comments (56,7%) fell into the Self Comparison group. In these, authors engaged in comparison behaviours between themselves and the influencers, showing dissatisfaction with their physical attributes or implying that Luara's or Melody's physical appearances made them feel ugly, unworthy, or depressed. Although it is not possible to confirm the gender of the users, the majority of the comments appeared to be left by adolescent girls. Comments were divided into four subcategories: (1) Body Image, (2) Self-Esteem or Self-Worth, (3) Mental Health, and (4) Eating Disorders (see Image 4).

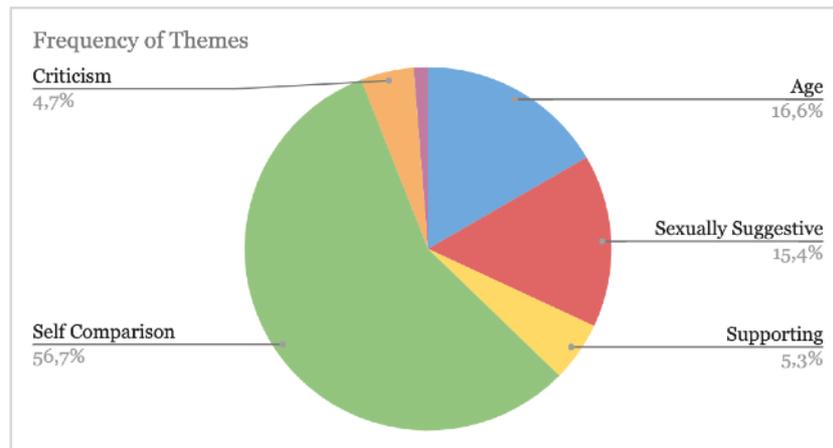


Image 4: Frequency of Self Comparison comment subthemes

Body Image: Most Self Comparison comments (78,8%) were placed into the Body Image sub-group. In this category, most users showed dissatisfaction with their bodies or the desire to attain or develop bodily features similar to Luara’s or Melody’s, leaving comments such as “She’s so pretty, I wished I looked like her”, “I look at her and I see the body that I’ll never have”, or “You look beautiful in denim pants, I look like a wooden plank”. Others established comparison by using Luara’s and Melody’s ages as standards for how they believe they should look, such as “I’m older than her and I don’t get even close to the beauty of this girl, my God”, “I’m her age and I don’t have this body, ugh”, or “She’s 14 and I am too, why don’t I have her body?”. Lastly, a smaller portion of the comments showed users’ curiosity about the influencers’ bodies – e.g., “Melody, how much do you weigh?” – or a desire to mimic their lifestyle habits (e.g., “Melody, my God, what do you take that makes your body look so beautiful????”, or “You’re so pretty, can you give me a recipe so I can look this fit?”).

Self-Esteem/Self-Worth: The second most frequent type of comment in this category (17,3%) were ones in which users expressed discontent with their self-esteem or sense of self-worth. Most of these suggest the users experienced a decreased sense of self-esteem after watching the TikTok – e.g., “This girl lowers the self-esteem that I already don’t have”, or “My self-esteem just went through the drain”. Others suggest the commenters felt a general sense of unworthiness, such as “I feel so humiliated”, “We’re the same age, I think I was born with a factory defect”, or even “OMG, I was born wrong”.

Mental Health: Around 2,8% of the Self Comparison comments point to the possibility that watching Luara’s and Melody’s TikToks affected the users’ mental health. These include discourses such as: “I don’t know if I’m in love or depressed”, “Everytime I watch a video of her I develop depression”, or “I’m giving up on life”.

Eating Disorders: About 1,1% of the Self Comparison comments alluded to the commenters engaging in conducts inherent to eating disorders – e.g., “I’m off to eat some ice” – which hints at self-starvation behaviour.

Regarding the last two sub-groups, it is not possible to tell if these audiences struggle with psychological disturbances or if the comments are exaggerated statements alluding to a dissatisfaction with their bodies. Nevertheless, TikTok comments are public and accessible to everyone, and openly discussing such sensitive topics could trigger audience members who suffer from mental health or eating disorders.

5.2.2. Age

The second most representative comment category (16,6%) was Age. Unlike Self Comparison, comments falling within this category do not draw a comparison between the users’ appearance and the influencers, nor do they specifically express sentiments of dissatisfaction, frustration, or sadness. Rather, commenters suggest that they find it impressive that Luara and Melody look older than they are. This category encompasses comments such as “I thought you were 20 years old”; “Dude she looks like she’s 18”; “I still find it unbelievable that she’s the same age as I am”, and “Oh my God how old is she, 30?”

Interestingly, Melody’s audience tended to be more impressed than Luara’s about how older the singer looked (see Table 6). Comments falling into the Age category represented 21,4% of Melody’s sample, whereas only 9,4% of Luara’s. This could happen because Melody is two years younger than Luara, although further research would be necessary to prove this.

	Share of TikToks (%) with age-related comments
Luara	9,4%
Melody	21,5%
Total	16,6%

Table 6: Share of Age comments by user

5.2.3. Sexually Suggestive

Around 15,4% of the analysed comments were grouped into the Sexually Suggestive category. In these comments, users made a range of sexually-charged comments about the influencers' appearances, personal lives, and their desire to engage in sexual activity with them – even when they seemed to know they were talking about underage girls. A brief look through the users' profiles suggested that most were adult men. Sexually Suggestive comments were divided into three subcategories: (1) Predatory, (2) "Comedic", and (3) Assumptions.

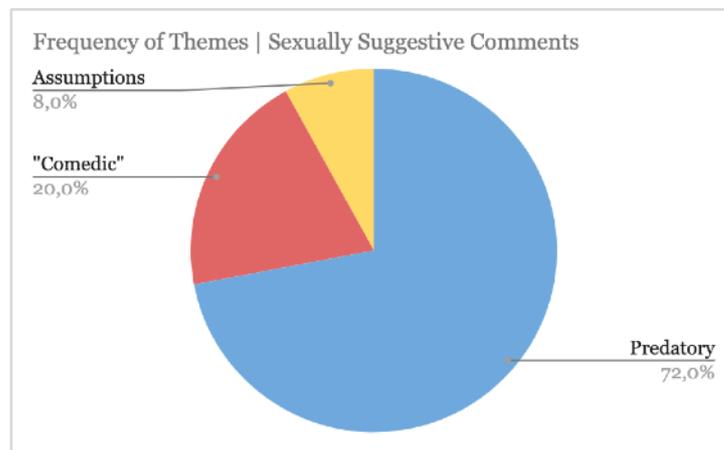


Image 5: Frequency of Sexually Suggestive comment subthemes

Predatory: Predatory comments were the most representative within the category (72%). This sub-group comprises comments that, either explicitly or implicitly, were charged with predatory intentions towards Luara and Melody. The category includes comments such as "I'll leave a more expressive comment when she turns 18", "Wait this is really hot", and "OMG the things I'd do to you".

"Comedic": Comments considered "Comedic" were the second most present among the category (20%). In this sub-group, users made sexually-charged jokes. The most recurring comment within this category were jokes about Neymar – a Brazilian footballer known for dating younger women – showing interest in the creators after they became of age (e.g., "Neymar is just waiting for her to turn 18 lol", or "Just one more year Neymar"). Other comments made "jokes" about going to jail (e.g., "Jail doesn't sound that bad"), implying the users would be willing to go to jail if it allowed them to sexually engage with these minors.

Assumptions: A smaller portion of the Sexually Suggestive comments (8%) consisted of assumptions or suppositions about Luara’s and Melody’s sexual lives (or lack thereof) – e.g., “Do you think she had sex yet?”. On a video in which Luara dances sensually with her boyfriend, a few users left comments such as “We all know what happened later”, which also theorises about the creator having a sexual life.

A brief comparison of quantitative data of Luara’s and Melody’s videos demonstrates that Luara showed a sexualised self-presentation in 90% of her TikToks, while in Melody’s case, this occurred 80% of the time. However, sexually suggestive comments were present in only 35% of Luara’s videos – opposite to Melody’s, where they appeared in half of the sample (see Table 7).

	TikToks with sexualised self-presentation	TikToks with sexually suggestive comments
Luara	90%	35%
Melody	80%	50%
Total	92,5%	42,5%

Table 7: TikToks with sexualised self-presentation vs. TikToks with sexually suggestive comments

5.2.4. Supporting

A portion of the comments (5,3%) were grouped into the Supporting category, which includes comments that show support for Luara and Melody and the way they choose to self-present. While some comments showed gratuitous support to the influencers (e.g., “Man I love that fact that Lu doesn’t care about not wearing bras, doesn’t care about others’ opinions, she’s so free”), most seem to have been posted in response to negative comments (e.g., “Dude, why do people criticise her so much I don’t get it, if she wants to look 30 years old so be it! [...] Just stop!”, “Why do people criticise this girl so much? I don’t think she ever harmed any of them, her body IS BEAUTIFUL!”, or “You speak badly of her but you wish you had her body lol”).

5.2.5. Criticism

About 4,7% of the comments were categorised as Criticism. In these comments, members of Luara and Melody’s communities criticise a range of the influencers’ attitudes. Some of

these comments express discontentment with the influencers' self-presentation (e.g., "Wearing clothes? What a miracle!"), sometimes even shaming the influencers' parents for their behaviour ("Wow I can't believe your mother lets you do this stuff for the world to see at the age of 14"). Other comments adopt a tone of constructive criticism, expressing concern about the way the influencers dress – e.g., "Mel, try not to wear such short clothes, you're perfect but if you wore clothes for girls your age you'd look even more perfect", and "Dude you're beautiful, you should just expose yourself less, like the clothes you wear are for adults but ok the decision is yours, just know that you're beautiful". Interestingly, some users seem to be very aware of Luara and Melody's self-sexualisation, even using the term in their comments – e.g., "Why does she bite her lips in every video man lol", "Sexualising herself LMFAO", and "She keeps sexualising herself on the internet at only 14, apparently she thinks she's 18". Individually, Melody (5,2%) received a slightly higher amount of criticism than Luara (3,1%).

5.2.6. Social and Ethnic Differences

The least representative comment group (1,3%) was categorised as Social and Ethnic Differences. The category contemplates comments that show users' perceptions about Luara and Melody's social and cultural backgrounds. Within this group, only one comment approached this matter critically, as the user criticised members of the community that shamed Luara and Melody for their self-presentations: "You keep judging her, but if she wasn't Brazilian you'd be obsessed with her OMG". The other portion of the comments generally replicated stereotypes associated with Brazilian women, implying that dancing in a sexualised way was "normal over there" or "super easy for Brazilian girls".

5.3. Interviews

After in-depth interviews, the participants' responses were coded and separated into three main themes: (5.3.1) Habits & Motivations on TikTok, (5.3.2) Impressions on Luara and Melody, and (5.3.3) Consequences of Sexualised Self-Presentation.

5.3.1. Habits & Motivations on TikTok

When asked about their habits and motivations for using TikTok, participants' responses were significantly different. Although both respondents were frequent TikTok users, Interviewee #1 did not show the habit of following many influencers – and even though she

knew of Luara and Melody, she did not seem to be deeply aware of them, as her primary motivation to use TikTok is to spend her free time “watching funny videos” or “making videos by myself or with my friends”. Interviewee #2, on the other hand, claimed she does follow influencers on TikTok, as she does not only use the platform for leisure, but also for seeking fashion and lifestyle inspirations. Interviewee #2 showed a deeper awareness of Luara and Melody, their backgrounds, and the kind of content they tend to post on TikTok. This factor also seemed to influence how she perceived the consequences of Luara’s and Melody’s self-sexualisation, a topic which will be further discussed in section 5.3.3.

5.3.2. Impressions on Luara and Melody

After sharing their motivations for using TikTok, participants were asked about their impressions of Luara and Melody. Both seemed to be aware of the highly sexualised content posted by the influencers. At first, Interviewee #1 did not objectively address sexualisation: “I mean, they look a lot older than they actually are. They can kind of dance, I guess, but they’re shaking their ass more than dancing”. When presented with the term, the respondent agreed that both Luara and Melody showed sexualised self-presentations. Nevertheless, Interviewee #1 only seemed to attribute this behaviour to the influencers’ dances, and not their clothes or other elements of the video. “I think it’s just the dance, honestly, because they’re not really wearing ‘inappropriate’ clothing”.

Interviewee #2, on the other hand, provided a more assertive point of view: “In all of her videos, the clothes [Luara] wears are tight and bring attention to her body. In her content, in which she mostly dances, she uses her body in a very sensual way, and adding this to the clothes she wears, the focus of the videos ends up being her body”. The participant also made a point about the music used in the creators’ videos, stating that the Brazilian Funk songs Luara and Melody dance to “are usually associated with a high exposition of the body”. After being shown a TikTok from Luara’s sample, she states: “It’s kind of distressing, because she’s still a teenager and her body becomes the focus, the only thing people comment about”. Both respondents, however, believed that Luara and Melody are very aware of how sexualised their content is and that they choose to do it in order to increase their follower base on TikTok. “The problem is not her dancing or wearing these clothes, it’s that she uses this as a form to increase engagement”, stated Interviewee #2.

5.3.3. Consequences of Sexualised Self-Presentation

Lastly, when asked about the possible outcomes of Luara and Melody self-presenting in a sexualised manner, participants listed five main consequences:

It affects themselves and their friends: Interviewee #2 shared that consuming sexualised content could induce self-comparison behaviours in herself and her peers: “I guess it affects me because it generates a certain amount of body and beauty standards comparison [...] it also influences the way girls dress, not in my case, but I, for example, have friends that wear a lot of clothes in the same style”. Interestingly, Interviewee #1 did not share the same concerns, as she believes consuming such content does not affect her or her friends.

It affects Luara and Melody: Secondly, both participants seemed to believe that Luara and Melody producing self-sexualised content could potentially demoralise them and affect their mental health. “I mean, one bad thing about having these videos be sexualised is that it taints their image [...] People will now only see them for their bodies, faces, etc. It puts them in a box”. Complementary, Interviewee #2 states: “I think that it has a consequence on their minds, on their self-esteem and self-worth, because sexualisation also comes with demoralisation”. Interviewee #1 also expressed concern for those who might consume this content: “It makes their following more prone to boys and men not watching for the ‘right reasons’”.

It affects their online communities: Most of the participants’ concerns were directed toward how Luara’s and Melody’s content could affect their audiences. As said by Interviewee #2, “they could use it as inspiration and replicate this strategy of exposing their bodies from a young age”. In agreement, Interviewee #1 stated: “In general, people see the attention these videos get and kinda go into the same path just for the views and followers. [It] also affects girls who just want to be liked and are insecure about their looks, and feel like they’ll only be liked if they look like that, which in no way is true”. Interviewee #1 also believed that although this sexualised self-presentation could be replicated by a portion of the audience, it could also exert the opposite effect on other users: “Either the girls will wanna look and act like them, so they do things like dress [how they dress] and act how they think they’d act, or some girls will sway away from that, and will not want to dress and act like them, because they don’t want to be viewed like that”.

It affects how other influencers produce content: Interviewee #2 briefly commented that Luara and Melody’s content could also affect other content creators: “It’s like a dispute – so, if [self-presenting sexually] is a form of increasing engagement, [this behaviour] could either spread

or overshadow contents that don't focus on [sexualisation]". In other words, the participant expressed concern with the normalisation and proliferation of sexualised content on TikTok.

It affects society as a whole: Lastly, Interviewee #2 also critically commented on how this sexualised content could ultimately affect greater social dynamics: "A lot of people could submit themselves to producing sexualised content just because of profitability, and brands could invest in that... There's also what I said about the toll it could take on the mental health of these girls, and how it could strengthen women's stereotypes in society".

As will be further elaborated in the Discussion section, the analysis of comments and interviews provides insight into the answering of the second and third Research Questions of this study – i.e., how do Luara's and Melody's audiences respond to self-sexualised content and how does this content may influence the mental health of these audiences.

6. Discussion

As argued by Khattab (2019), TikTok can significantly influence young people in matters of sexualised behaviour. After approaching the topic of this dissertation from multiple standpoints, it became possible to gather insight about the sexualised self-presentation of teenagers on the platform – and how this content may affect the young people who consume it. The analysis of TikTok videos, comments, and in-depth interviews with adolescent girls not only demonstrated that Luara and Melody almost always self-sexualise on their TikToks, but that this conduct may lead to consequences for users inside and outside their communities.

Through the analysis of Luara's and Melody's videos, it was possible to infer that both influencers display a solid tendency to self-presenting sexually in their videos. Although further research would be needed to understand the motivations behind these self-presentations, literature suggests that behaviours of self-sexualisation and objectification hardly happen due to a conscious choice, but rather to a belief that this will make them more likeable and desirable. This seems to be particularly true for teenage girls, whose senses of self-worth are often associated with their physical attributes (Papadopoulos 2010, De La Brena 2021).

In some cases, Luara's and Melody's audiences seemed to hold them accountable for their self-sexualisations. As suggested by the interviews and a portion of the comments on their TikToks, some users seem to view the influencers' self-presentations as a conscious choice,

made with the intent of increasing their engagement on the social media platform. On the other hand, interview results indicate that, generally, teenagers seem to be aware of the consequences of self-presenting sexually on the internet. Therefore, if Luara's and Melody's self-presentations were to be a conscious choice, it could eventually be because they understand it as "female empowerment". As shown by previous research, the sexualisation of teenage girls is often marketed and mediated as such, even though its ultimate purpose is to reinforce a dominant male gaze (Papadopoulos 2010). However, the most relevant takeaway of this argument is not whether their self-sexualisation is conscious or unconscious choice – but that TikTok delivers this content to audiences who consciously consume it.

Both Luara and Melody share a significant amount of followers on their TikTok profiles, and can thus be understood as digital influencers (Torres et al. 2019). As they hold the ability to widely disseminate any message they choose, an essential objective of this study was to analyse their audiences' reactions to their TikToks.

As teenagers undergo the accelerated development of cognitive, mental, and social abilities, they also experience an increased concern with their self-presentations and how others perceive them (Hui Hui and Chang 2016, Steinsbekka et al. 2020). This seeking of parasocial identification (Caliandro 2017), however, commonly leads to a peak in comparison behaviours and a decrease in self-esteem – and social media, as demonstrated by previous research, has shown to be a fertile environment these conducts.

These dynamics could be observed through the ethnographic immersion in Luara's and Melody's profiles, as most of their TikTok videos seemed to have received at least one comment suggesting self-comparison. Notably, while mainstream media is responsible for setting beauty standards, social media has become responsible for reinforcing them (Khattab 2019). Therefore, it is unsurprising that most of the self-comparison comments analysed implied physical comparison between the users and the influencers – and appeared to come from girls.

Among self-comparison comments, sentiments of decreased self-esteem and self-worth were also recurrent, and a smaller portion of the users even alluded to mental health disturbances, such as depression and eating disorders – tendencies which were identified in previous research (Papadopoulos 2010, Bucknell and Kottasz 2020, De La Brena 2021, Liu 2021). Interview respondents also seemed aware of these consequences, as both showed

concern for girls who, after watching Luara's and Melody's TikToks, might feel they will "only be liked if they look like that".

A relevant percentage of the comments expressed surprise with how older the influencers look. By self-presenting as older than they are, Luara and Melody reinforce their own sexualisation, as this process inherently encompasses the picturing of children or adolescents as adult women (Papadopoulos 2010).

Luara's and Melody's self-sexualisation also seemed to expose them to undesired audiences, since around 15% of the comments analysed made sexually invasive or predatory remarks about them. These conducts – which can be classified as sexual online harassment – pose a threat to the creators themselves, as they may make them feel "threatened, exploited, coerced, humiliated, upset, sexualised or discriminated against" (Childnet 2022). For their audiences, this could lead to the normalisation of sexually inappropriate conduct on social media – which can ultimately have a role in lowering their barriers to sexual assault, abuse, and other variations of violence against women (Papadopoulos 2010)⁴.

Through the individual analysis of the influencers, it is also interesting to point out the differences between the data of Luara and Melody. Although Luara self-presents sexually in 90% of her TikToks, only 35% received sexually charged comments. Melody, on the other hand, received these comments in 50% of her videos, although proportionally she self-sexualised less often than Luara (80%). Furthermore, Melody received more criticism than Luara for her sexualised self-presentation. Both of these factors could happen because Melody is inserted into the Brazilian Funk industry, a musical genre from the Brazilian peripheries. Since the genre is often marginalised (Alves 2021), this could decrease the audience's respect for Melody, thus increasing the amount of sexually aggressive or critical comments she receives.

Overall, Luara's and Melody's sexualised self-presentations on TikTok impact themselves and their communities in a multitude of ways. As behaviours of self-comparison were the most common among the analysed data, it is relevant to reflect and discuss the long-term

⁴ TikTok has a section in their Community Guidelines specifically dedicated to Minor Safety and the sexual exploitation of minors – which states "TikTok will take action on any content or accounts involving CSAM [Child Sexual Abuse Material] or sexual exploitation of a minor" (TikTok 2022). Nevertheless, one can question the extent to which these directives are applied, as the platform's standard procedure is to take down "content that engages with minors in a sexualized way, or otherwise sexualizes a minor" (which includes content "depicting a minor that contains sexually explicit song lyrics", or that depicts the "sexually explicit dancing of a minor" (TikTok 2022).

impact of these self-presentations, especially in the context of TikTok – a network which seems to be occupying an ever-growing role in the lives of teenagers.

7. Conclusion

The present body of research aimed to explore the sexualised self-presentation of teenage content creators on TikTok, and in which ways these presentations could affect their online communities. The investigation took place through an ethnographic immersion in the TikTok communities of Luara Fonseca and Gabrielle Severino, combined with in-depth interviews and the content analysis of the collected data.

7.1. Final Remarks

This research approach not only showed that these influencers tended to frequently self-sexualise on their TikTok accounts, but that this kind of content seemed to exert a wide range of effects on their communities – ranging from body image concerns, to an affected sense of self-worth, to the engaging in sexually-charged and invasive comments towards Luara’s and Melody’s self-presentation.

Through the course of this dissertation, one can consistently perceive the power of social media in the shaping of young people’s approach to their lives and the world that surrounds them. If teenagers are constantly exposed to hyper-sexualised content on social media, it is expected that this affects their body images, self-esteem, and mental health. As this study has demonstrated, this logic is especially true for teenage girls. Ultimately, consuming sexualised content could sell the idea that, regardless of age, girls should always aim to look sexually attractive.

As this dissertation gathers essential information on the aforementioned topics, it also shows potential to contribute to academic fields such as communication, education, public administration, psychology, and social psychology. Hopefully, the insights gathered throughout the study can provide professionals in these fields with insight for making social media a safer, more inclusive, and more respectful environment for adolescents. Despite the concerning trends hereby identified, the author believes the relationship between youth and social media can still generate positive outcomes, as it has previously shown potential to catalyse social change.

7.2. Limitations

Although this study provides an interesting investigation of the relation between social media, sexualisation, and adolescence, there is a set of limitations that must be taken into consideration. Firstly, it is paramount to point out that the employment of virtual ethnography is mostly meaningful from the specific standpoint of the analysed community (Hine 2017). Therefore, the previously exposed results are not necessarily transferable to other virtual communities (Rahm-Skågeby 2011).

Secondly, the collected TikTok comments prevented a strict demographic analysis, depriving the author of relevant information about the commenters, such as gender, race, class, and their exact ages. This factor prevented the researcher from including demographic data in the analysis. Thirdly, as comments are inherently interactive, users were most likely influenced by previous comments on the TikTok videos, which could also influence the collected data.

Finally, like all research, the present study is influenced by the author's context, who takes an interest in the topics of social media, mental health, and youth. Therefore, the results of this dissertation should be seen as just one interpretation among many possible.

7.3. Future Research

In order to better understand the tolls that self-sexualised social media content might take on teenagers, it is suggested that future research explores the topic through methods not used in this dissertation – for instance, through the application focus groups or in-depth interviews with more extensive and diversified samples.

Previous research has demonstrated that girls are more likely than boys to be praised and rewarded for their physical appearances. Thus, their self-esteem is also more likely than boys' to be affected by social media (Steinsbekka et al. 2020). However, as argued by Papadopoulos (2010), teenagers have been incentivised to replicate polarised gender stereotypes from an increasingly young age. Therefore, it could be interesting for future studies to investigate the effects of sexualised social media content on adolescent boys.

As social media reinforces a monolithic standard of beauty, it also strengthens a racially biased system in which there is little to no room for girls who do not conform to these standards (Papadopoulos 2010). Hence, as both Luara and Melody are white – but live in a country where most of the population identifies as brown or black (IBGE 2019) – future

scholarship could also benefit from exploring the sexualised self-presentation of teenagers from a racial perspective.

7.4. Afterword

After the data collection period of this research, the author had access to interesting information – sent by one of the interview respondents – about how the process self-sexualising affects the mental health of the influencers. During an interview for a Brazilian podcast, Luara talked about changing her self-presentation, as it was affecting both her work and her mental health. “There was a time in which people talked a lot about my body, about my appearance”, she stated. “This affected me, because I started getting paranoid. [...] Right now, I am wearing more modest clothes, because I want for people to look at me at someone who works with the Internet, and not only post pictures wearing a bikini”. The creator also shared her perception about the relationship between sexualised content and audience engagement: “Because it brings more engagement, people think we only have this to offer” (@luara, June 17th, 2022).

It was found relevant to end this dissertation with this observation, as it interestingly compliments the previously collected and discussed data. After all, both Luara and Melody are teenagers – and if their content affects their online communities, it is only expected that it affects them.

8. References

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