

The Body of Influencers: From Intimate Communication to Character Creation

Influencer-en gorputza: komunikazio intimotik pertsonaiak sortzera

El cuerpo de los *influencers*:
de la comunicación íntima a la creación de personajes

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes how influenced persons can become influencers themselves by presenting their bodies on social media. Two hypotheses are discussed: in the first case, influenced persons engage themselves in intimate communication process, while in the second case, they create a digital character. The qualitative methodology is based on the voices of a sample of adolescents (15-25), and the results show that neither intimate communication nor persona creation are articulated goals by the influenced persons when sharing images of their bodies. Other avenues are therefore proposed to know how influencers build digital character, such as technological standards or cultural.

KEYWORDS: digital; body; teenagers; social construction; cultural industries.

RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza cómo las personas influenciadas pueden convertirse en influencers al presentar sus cuerpos en las redes sociales. Se discuten dos hipótesis: en el primer caso, las personas influenciadas participan en el proceso de comunicación íntima, mientras que en el segundo caso, crean un personaje digital. La metodología cualitativa se basa en una muestra de adolescentes (15-25), y los resultados han puesto de manifiesto que ni la comunicación íntima ni la creación de un personaje son objetivos por las personas influenciadas. Se proponen entonces otras vías para conocer cómo los influencers construyen el personaje digital, como estándares tecnológicos o culturales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: digital; cuerpo ; adolescentes; construcción social; industrias culturales.

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Introduction

This article is part of a wider research project looking at the ability of the influenced persons (receivers) to become influencers themselves (transmitters). To achieve this, some of the influenced person will draw inspiration from the publications of influencers and the techniques used to narrate their digital identity, in some cases even becoming a ‘biodigital character’ (Jauffret and Landaverde-Kastberg, 2018). Our theoretical approach therefore presents the influencer as an important figure in the life of the influenced, so much so that they become a reference for their choices, desires, and physical appearance. This last point, the ‘bodily’ dimension of influence, is particularly decisive for our research because is more difficult to detect than discourse analysis, the advertising narrative (Olmedo Neri and García Calderón, 2023) or opinions. In fact, opinion leaders are the most common definition of influencers: ‘influencers are shapers of public opinion who persuade their audience through the conscientious calibration of personae on social media [...]’ (Abidin and Ots, 2016), but we argue here that it’s not the only one. In our case, we’re particularly interested in understanding the body activity of influencers in the fields of ‘beauty’ on social networks. Work has already been started by other researchers on fashion and beauty channels (Moldovan and Izquierdo Castillo, 2022). We are going to study them by reviewing the behaviour of the female teenagers who follow them. Female body influencers, as we will refer to it hereafter, are relevant because they share scenes of life in front of the camera, they present their way of applying make-up, dressing up, and they even talk freely about their plastic surgeon.

When you look more closely into female body influencers, the most important is to keep in mind that each influencer may become an influenced person and vice versa. In fact, the influenced person (receiver) is just as important as the influencer (sender) from the epistemological point of view of communication sciences¹. However, there are very few scientific works on influence that question influencers based on the bodily actions of those influenced persons. In order to achieve this, we have to stop for a moment considering the influenced female adolescents only as economics agents submitted to a ‘person who is paid by a company to show and describe its products and services on social media, encouraging other people to buy them’ (Ji *et al.*, 2022). The influenced female persons are not only ‘followers’, a term used by digital companies to make people forget the more pejorative² concept of ‘influenced’ person. Similarly, there are no transmitters without receivers, or directors without ‘directed’ people, there are no influencers without influenced persons.

¹ In the continuity (or criticism) of the founding works of Claude Shannon (1916-2001), Norbert Wiener (1894-1964) or Dominique Wolton (1947-).

² It would be more surprising to see some influencers celebrating having ‘2 million influenced users!’.

The latter can teach us how female body influencers work when we are more specifically interested in the construction of their digital identity (Georges, 2011) thanks to their body. There are narratives through photographs, writings that seem personal. Sometimes other stories broadcast can be more romanticized, as if they were the result of creative inventions that go beyond the individual lives of physical people. Faced with this visible tension between true and fake, our problem is the following: while influenced persons are inspired by influencers to publish their digital creations on social networks, how is their digital body constructed? To address this problem, we put forward two hypotheses:

1. Influenced person (and therefore female body influencers too, upstream) practice ‘intimate communication’ to build their digital body on their personal profile (hyp-1).

In this first hypothesis, we defend to maintain some kind of attraction to their community, female body influencers have to publish words, images and thoughts that may come close to their intimacy. Abidin (2015) share this idea: ‘Influencers [...] [have] to sustain their accessibility, believability, emulate-ability, and intimacy – in other words, their relatability’. In digital exchanges on these platforms, intimacy becomes more than ever a ‘social production³’ (Baudry, 2010). In order to conceptualize the communication between influencers (transmitters) and influenced (receivers) we can therefore rely on intimacy. Etymologically, the word intimacy derives from the Latin word *intimus*, which as early as the 17th century meant interiority. This one is based on the revelation of very intimate details about our life, our deepest identity, through perception, writing or even the sound of our voice (Castadère and Konopczyski, 2005).

2. Influenced persons (and therefore female body influencers too, upstream) create a ‘character’ to build their digital body on their personal profile (hyp-2).

In this second hypothesis, we rely on the likely transition from ‘person’ to ‘character’. Even if these two words come from the same origin, the *persona* —in Latin ‘theatre mask’— they do not have the same meaning in the context of communication. Many character typologies and stereotypes circulate in historical works of culture, and today in cultural and creative industries (Galli, 2023a). Storytelling strategies are even based on the creation of personas (Cooper, 1999; Bernet and Brangier, 2013) to build virtual relationship with organization’s customers. In all these advances, the bodies of the characters are less developed, the designers often remain on disembodied avatars. However, we observe that the influenced person is likely to innovate on this point by relying on the female body influencers. The

³ Text translated by the authors.

character principle corresponds more narrative form of intimate communication, known as ‘surface intimate communication’, which suppresses the movement towards the depths of the body’s interiority. Intimate surface content only appears at a later stage, when the individual works on ‘representation⁴’ through his or her body. This surface intimacy is shared after a calculation, an adaptation of the individual to the social group. It’s one of the foundations of social relations (Goffman, 1973), because no-one knows each other directly in depth; there are barriers (norms, codes, habits, rituals, etc.), and no-one can know each other completely. But in the case of character creation, these codes, even these stereotypes, are used to communicate about a body image imagined and told by the influenced person (and the female body influencer).

To assess the relevance (or not) of these two hypotheses, we have constructed a working method that allows us to study intimate communication, its limits and the possible shift of the content of the influenced person towards the digital creation of a character through the body. The objective is to be able to test these hypotheses based on data obtained in the physical field.

1. Methodology: an intimate conversation

1.1. ORIGINS OF THE METHODOLOGY

To address the problem of our study, we have built a specific, unique methodology over several years based on three proven techniques in information and communication sciences. Our goal is to be able to determine which hypothesis (hyp-1 or hyp-2) corresponds to the reality of the observed field. This approach initially came from the anthropology communication movement (Winkin, 1996), in the sense that we, as researchers, were looking for observable material (digital or not). However, we quickly understood that distanced observation was not enough to reach the process of intimate communication. We had to identify ‘intimacy indicators’ that cannot be analyzed without using the words of individuals: where is intimacy located among influenced persons (and therefore among female body influencers)? Why do they share their intimacy (hyp-1)? On the contrary, how do they avoid this type of intimate sharing and create a character instead (hyp-2)? Even if our problem deals with the image of digital body of influenced persons, it is difficult to explore their intimate communication (hyp-1) without looking at the intentionality of digital practices. We therefore had to explore indicators relating to the

⁴ Since Arthur Schopenhauer (1819; 1966), we have been able to differentiate between the body image (the bodily representation that can eventually be expressed) and the living body (which partly escapes its host).

representations of intimacy used in the speech of interviewees (hyp-1), but also to the way in which they possibly tell the story of their digital character (hyp-2): how do they tell the ‘backstage’ of the creation of digital content? We could study this in the same way that a theatre actor would describe the backstage (hyp-2), or would evoke elements of his personal intimacy (hyp-1).

These interviews were to be based mainly on the encounter of bodies, at the crossroads of several methods from the recent history of qualitative research. We wanted to build a new method that would allow us to identify the passage between ‘intimacy’ (hyp-1) and ‘character’ (hyp-2): to detect this possible deep intimacy (hyp-1), it could only be studied in a face-to-face interview, when the conversation with the other is not prepared, and this scientific exercise is conducive to unexpected emergences. The American experience of intimate ethnography (Turkle, 2020) was an important first reference in the constitution of our new methodology because it explores the relationships of humans with machines, avatars and digital characters (hyp-2). We also needed a second technique to immerse the influenced person in the intimate events of his life (hyp-1), to identify whether his life story (Bertaux, 2016) is related to the creation of intimate content (hyp-1) or character content (hyp-2) for social networks. Finally, a third reference allowed us to build what we finally called the ‘intimate conversation’: it is the comprehensive approach (Kaufmann, 2016) allows us to consider interviews as exercises to understand the positioning of influenced persons and their intimate representations (hyp-1). From this new methodology born from combinations of three methods, we could now recover material for our investigation and analyze it using a thematic approach (hyp-1 and hyp-2). So our intimate conversation is a methodological triangulation: the intimate ethnography (Turkle, 2020), the technic of life story (Bertaux, 2016) and the comprehensive interview (Kaufmann, 2016).

1.2. SURVEY SAMPLE

From this methodology of intimate conversation, we built a sample of interviewees with the main objective of being able to separate our two research hypotheses (hyp-1 and hyp-2). We first needed to select profiles of social media users who could correspond to the target of our survey: persons influenced by female body influencers, who in turn use influence techniques. We were particularly interested in the profiles and digital publications on platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, TikTok) as the first selection lever to constitute the sample. Indeed, influenced persons who wish to become influencers broadcast their digital content creations, or they are currently observers and will have a desire to do so. By browsing the platforms, we were already confronted with very different content on these social networks, between photographs that seemed to be part of intimate communication (hyp-1) and staged individuals who seemed to become characters in their own right

(hyp-2). During this first anthropological observation, we identified 100 profiles of the most problematic users. Little by little, over the course of our six years of investigation (2018-2024) necessary for this meticulous study of contemporary intimacy, we have selected 30 user profiles who live mainly in our geographical circle (< 100km from the city of Toulon, in the Var department, in France), in order to be able to meet them in real life and organize an intimate conversation each time.

Finally, we wanted the participants in this survey sample to know each through their social lives, between them, as this allows for the development of group conversations (Sansot, 2003), and a deeper exploration of intimate communication (hyp-1) or its distancing in conversation through characters of their young generation (hyp-2). To respond to the problematic of this article about digital body, we therefore finally mobilized 8 user profiles, therefore 8 in-depth interviews in the form of intimate conversation. These user profiles had to be above all human, intimate people (hyp-1), and not virtual characters created by companies or generative tools for example (hyp-2). These 8 influenced persons are likely to become female body influencers themselves.

We chose to select adolescent girls for our sample because first of all it is the preferred target of female body influencers. Moreover, these individuals are in a 'transition period'⁵ (Balleys, 2018) that rhymes with conquering the territory of intimacy, because intimacy is a 'growing need in adolescence' (de Kernier, 2008). Their profiles are interesting because intimate communication is at the heart of their daily lives, this is the most favorable age for examining intimacy. In addition, adolescents are the biggest consumers of digital networks, which is easily understandable since the latter appear to facilitate intimacy (Balleys, 2018). We extended the age range of our participants from 15 to 25 years. In recent years, we have observed an increase in adolescence (Emmanuelli, 2016), several clinical, field systems also extend the age up to 25 years, such as the 'Maisons des Adolescents' in France. Before each interview the aim of the research is explained and parental authorization is given. In order to preserve the anonymity of our participants, we will subsequently name them: Capucine, Elisa, Camille, Domitille, Sophie, B elinda, Chlo e and Elisabeth.

1.3. MATERIAL ANALYSIS

At first glance, it appears easier to ask teenage girls to reveal part of their personal lives through the screen of their smartphone, from a distance, by using more anonymous apps or devices to investigate. But by proceeding in this way we would be missing the communication intimate context. As for ourselves, we wish to dis-

⁵ Text translated by the authors.

cover under which conditions intimate communication situations emerge (hyp-1). Our interviews are conducted in tandem, based on affinity, thus helping to create a more spontaneous interaction. Teenage girls are more likely to be confident in the presence of someone close to them, and it's essential to establish a climate of trust to bring out intimacy. An intimate conversation follows several steps: first we chat with our participants to establish a climate of trust and confidence. Then, we ask thematic questions that get more and more focused on our research problem. During those exchanges we analyze our participants' reactions when confronted with our questions, we reformulate our statements by bringing to mind the topics that seemed problematic. We write down all our ideas, as well as our bodily sensations as they arise during the conversation.

First name	Age	Professional activity	Social networks
Capucine	22	Student (University)	Instagram (Public account) Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok
Elisa	24	Secretary	Instagram (Private account) Facebook, Snapchat
Camille	21	Student (Private school)	Instagram (Private account) Facebook, Snapchat
Domitille	16	Student (High school)	Instagram (Private account) Snapchat, TikTok
Sophie	21	Singer	Instagram (Public account) Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok
Béline	15	Student (Secondary school)	Instagram (Private account) Snapchat, TikTok
Chloé	16	Student (High school)	Instagram (Private account) Snapchat, TikTok
Elisabeth	16	Student (High school)	Instagram (Private account) Snapchat, TikTok

The body provides a measuring tool to investigate, it can even transform into a 'body analyser'⁶ (Brunel and Cosnier, 2012). Our body, in the presence of another body, can lead us to hypotheses based on emotions (Galli, 2023b), while we

⁶ Text translated by the authors.

are conducting our field research. An intimate conversation is built around ‘a body experience that cannot be given without physical proximity and the emotion procured by the mere presence of another living human body⁷ [...]’ (Martin-Juchat, 2020). We collect data thanks to influenced girls but also thanks to our own body. Carmon (2015) underlines the idea that initially was just an empirical and emotional experience for us: the ‘[...] emotions that flow daily through the researcher during their investigations could in fact be considered as «data» of their own intimacy that would be interesting to add to their reflective approach by transmitting it to the reader⁸’. A part of our singularity can therefore turn out to be a very useful tool in this research.

The actors in an intimate conversation find themselves in an intimate perimeter. The level of intimacy expressed during a conversation depends on the proximity between the bodies of the two interlocutors because ‘we don’t express ourselves in the same way, depending on if we’re close or far from the other’s body. Eye contact is linked to the distance and the territory⁹’ (Descamps, 1993). In this context, grasping proxemics is key for the researcher because it helps him, it allows a: ‘man’s use of space¹⁰ [...]’ (Hall, 1971) during the conversation. According to Hall, there are two types of intimate distance: close and distant. We have chosen to stay sufficiently away (intimate distance between 15 to 45 centimeters) from our participants. This perimeter allows us to manage the communication context in order to not disturb the experiment: ‘The head is perceived larger than usual and the facial characteristics are distorted. The voice is used but maintained in a more muttered register’ (Hall, 1971). Other authors such as Barrier (2019) provide complementary tools (speech, appearance, etc.) in this framework of proxemics, in particular to maintain the trust necessary for this type of interview.

Ultimately, the ‘intimate conversation’ that we offer falls within the context of comprehensive approaches and it provides a safe space for unexpected revelations, over a long period of time. Each intimate conversation lasts half a day, approximately 4 hours, and take place in cities close to our university, in quiet private and public spaces. This large volume of time produces a lot of material for the researcher to analyze, so much so that it takes ten times longer to transcribe the interviews and analyze them completely ($8 \times 4 \text{ h} = 32 \text{ h} \times 10 = 320 \text{ h}$ for 8 intimate conversations analyzed).

⁷ Text translated by the authors.

⁸ Text translated by the authors.

⁹ Text translated by the authors.

¹⁰ Text translated by the authors.

2. Search results: body in intimate communication

To allow a more fluid development of our analyses and an exploration of our two hypotheses, we will express below in parentheses when the results of the interviews tend more towards intimate communication (hyp-1) or towards the creation of a character (hyp-2).

2.1. INTIMATE COMMUNICATION THROUGH BODY IMAGES

Using our methodology, we are now seeking to understand the process of intimate communication. We imagine that the body is at the core of intimate communication (hyp-1), but we don't know yet what forms this takes. Body is presented through different content on social medias. Very quickly, our interviews with the influenced people show us that other users of these networks play an important role: *You need to live up to the standards of people who have Insta accounts, your friends who have Insta accounts, influencers who have Insta accounts. I can't allow myself not to be beautiful [...] (Camille)*. In the same way that our friends can be models (implicit or explicit) because we are daily imitating them, influencers become role models (hyp-2). We could then imagine the influenced people are imitating the body images of the influencers from certain personal postures (hyp-1). This hypothesis remains weak because the smartphone screen maintains a distance between the bodies: how can a living body imitate a dematerialised one? Bodies cannot feel themselves to imitate each other: bodily echoes (Brunel and Cosnier, 2012) can be reduced in a digital context (hyp-2). On the other hand, we can represent our own body and those of others; using body images from our imagination or from different medias (paper, digital and so on).

Some women who are influenced, expose their body seeking the beauty (hyp-1), as Capucine explains *The reason I published (my pictures) was for people to see them, for people to comment on them, for people send me messages saying «You're beautiful» [...] Body can be presented through different positions (sitting, lying down, standing etc.) and in many different ways (skins, muscles, tattoos etc.) more or less visible (hyp-1)*. Capucine continues by pointing out that it is now possible to fully show one's body (hyp-1) on the social medias: *You go on any girl's account there are at least five or six photos in swimming suit, for me [...] there was nothing shocking about doing that (Capucine)*. It's also an opinion that shares Camille: *I often wear mini tops, that shows my belly, I have pictures on Insta where I'm in a swimming suit and I actually thought the photo was so beautiful*.

For the influenced people, body images are not direct evidence of a shared intimacy. To find signs of intimacy, we need rather to combine the body with relationships (friends, contacts, users, etc.) Camille expresses it (hyp-1) in front of us:

I find that's less annoying to share a photo of myself in swimming suit by the sea [...] rather than a photo of me with my family, with my grandmother or something, you know? [...] on my Insta I have no picture with a member of my family.

The body images are only minor elements (hyp-1) in the process of intimate communication. Bélinda tells us: *If I post a video tomorrow, it's going to be for others. Even if I think I look really beautiful in the video, I'm going to be thinking more about how others see me than how I see myself.* Other users who are checking out the publications of these influenced people can change their intimate representations of the body (hyp-1). They can also, in return (feedback), participate in the approval of the body of the influenced people (hyp-1).

But, if the images of bodies, can help creating new situations of communication —*The more likes I got, the more attention I got, the more messages I got, the better I felt [...]* (Capucine)— they might also offer the possibility to the influenced people to create a collective aesthetic experience (hyp-2): *Sometimes I send my friends pictures in MP [private message] on Insta, just to ask them if I'm beautiful [...]* (Domitille). One can observe then a junction between intimacy and story (hyp-2), because the first one is approved (or discussed) thanks to the latter. In other words, in this case, intimate communication cannot be approved if there is not story (hyp-2). There is sometimes negative feedback, as Sophie tells us: *After all, it's no pleasure when you receive a bad comment [...] sometimes you have to question yourself, you say to yourself, «what have I done wrong», you know? [...] it's an extremely painful experience;* and other, more constructive opinions sometimes play a part in shaping body images (hyp-1):

I hesitate a lot before posting, I ask my friends if it's OK, if my face is all right and in fact sometimes I think I look better than in other pictures but other people don't share the same opinion, so I find it a bit strange, I don't know why and so yes I ask [...] my best friend, like everyone else I think [...] I think a lot before I post something [...] because of what other people think (Chloé).

In the case of influenced people, the other is taken into consideration, both before and after the images of the body are shared (hyp-1). So to be able to communicate, the influenced people use elaborate processes to normalise their images (hyp-2). This is the path that is taking Capucine during our interview:

I want to send out a good image, I'm not going to take a picture in the morning and «boom» just publish it, there's no point. People aren't going to like it, they're going to unsubscribe, they're not going to like it, they're going to say: «In real life, she's not beautiful!».

The influenced people are looking to adapt themselves to the body standards of the digital publications (hyp-2). Those standards enable us to enter the process of communication with others (even before intimate communication):

if you are sharing some ugly pictures with some old effects ect.. you are going to sound weird, on the fringes, who doesn't evolve with the times. If you share photos that are pretty and up to date, it immediately makes you look integrated, so it's a way for me to fit in (Camille).

2.2. INTIMATE COMMUNICATION THROUGH THE STAGING OF THE CHARACTER'S BODY

Normalising images of the body requires a knowledge of digital techniques. The influenced people try to use certain functionalities inherited from cybernetics (transmission, feedback, automation, etc.) to reduce interference —informational noise— within images. This way, bodies can be improved (hyp-2) through strategies: the influenced people learn to pose in front of the camera first, and then to correct their images (hyp-2). We will explain these two stages in the normalisation of images, which make it possible to stage the body (hyp-2) while moving away from intimate communication (hyp-1).

In theatre and in life, stage direction (Goffman, 1973) transforms ideas into physical play. There is a creative space between the text and the stage. Can we expect the same freedom when the influenced people put their bodies on display on digital networks? The actors in these physical scenes find themselves caught between the norm and the new. In both cases, the influenced people stand out themselves from their living bodies to create images of their bodies (hyp-2), part of a temporal episode:

It was 11 p.m., I hadn't published in a while, I got up, I got dressed [...] I took a photo, and «hop» got back to my pyjamas, in these photos I was in an evening dress, it felt like I was going out and everything, 11.30 p.m I got back into my pyjamas, people were like: «Oh you're so beautiful, where are you going?» When in reality I was in bed [...] it wasn't my real life that was published (Capucine).

Elisa confirms this process:

I've already gone skiing; I've put on my swimming suit under my ski outfit [...] I've got a photo in a swimming suit in the middle of winter just to look good because I had seen influencers doing it and I thought it looked very beautiful [...]. I went to the hassle of putting my swimming suit on, go-

ing all the way to the top and being cold for 10 minutes, just long enough to take some photos.

Influenced persons use certain events of their life to stage their bodies and produce communicative situations (messages, reactions, etc.) that are not intimate but built (hyp-2).

This normalisation work relies on the calculability of exchanges between social media users: the body becomes a calculable information (Stiegler, 2015), far from its living form. The body image must be efficient to produce reactions as a spectacle or a movie (hyp-2). Sophie admits this idea during the first exchanges: *Every post I make is calculated*, and she reveals the quantitative logic associated with:

I rarely take spontaneous photos because I don't think I'm photogenic [...] with my friends [...] Because they're more extreme than me, they get several outfits, they love it, in fact they play the model! [...] I kind of striking the pose by putting myself in my best profile and then I take a hundred photos, easy, and out of the 100 I choose one.

Elisabeth talks about *Insta shootings photos*, these sessions dedicated to photography for digital networks. Domitille also organizes this type of photo shoot with her best friend to get the best shot: [...] *my best friend and I took a special day to take some photos [...] it took us 30 minutes to get a decent photo [...] we dressed up well and everything before going [...] by the end we must have had 50 to 100 photos*. Quantity is the key to choose a single, sufficiently standardised shot (hyp-2).

According to the influenced persons, the location of the shoot is important, as it can provide a narration (hyp-2) for publication (social, event, etc.). But there's also the challenge of postures: the body must be presented from its best angle. In other words, they think about how to spotlight their body (hyp-2) and adopt the perfect posture to hide their *imperfections*. Influenced persons tell us they'd like to erase certain intimate elements (hyp-1) of during the shoot: *'unsightly bulges'*, *'hips that are too wide'* or *'arms that aren't slim enough'*, for examples. Elisa points out that there are *positions that allow you to have a flatter stomach, to have legs that are a little thinner [...]*. She seems to know enough about how a photoshoot works to place her body in the scenic space (hyp-2): *I'm going to pay attention to how I stand, I stand straight, I put my head a little higher so that people don't see my double chin*. Once again, the intimacy of communication is excluded.

This attention to photographic technique (hyp-2) is not the only strategy chosen by the influenced teenagers to stage their bodies on social medias. Indeed, several functionalities allow them to achieve the 'perfect' body image. While living bodies can be modified by cosmetic surgery, dematerialised bodies can also be can

also be enhanced with ‘virtual botox’ embodied by the filters (hyp-2). Many details (hyp-1) are edited on the pictures of the bodies, and it is not necessary to have great computer skills to do it. Camille explains this idea with her own words:

When I take selfies, I use filters, yes, to perfect my selfies because it makes me look prettier [...] on the other hand, when my friends take photos [of me], I’ll just put on a little thing [filter] that’ll smooth out my skin in no time.

This ‘virtual botox’ is used for each photograph, producing over time a different representation of the face (hyp-2), and, on a broader level, a different representation of the body of the subject (hyp-1). This new representation is long-lasting, colliding with the representation of the body that is not photographed, the body that can be observed in physical life. After this habituation, it’s difficult to publish the next images of the body without mobilizing the filters that reduce defects (hyp-2). Filters bring out the body’s most advantageous reliefs, its sharpest contours, its softest lights.

Camille notes the widespread use of these cybernetic augmentations (hyp-2), which distance the from intimate communication (hyp-1):

[...] everyone has ended up doing it because we all want to look like them [the women influencers] [...] like most girls, they don’t post photos without a filter, we’re used to seeing them with big eyes and very thin noses [...] whereas you take a photo and you’ve got dark circles [...].

3. Conclusion and discussion

To conclude this article, we would like to approach a final discussion that allows us to put our two research hypotheses into perspective: on the one hand, the results show us that intimate communication (hyp-1) is not at the heart of the expression of influenced persons on social networks, and on the other hand, the results also reveal that these same influenced persons do not completely create characters (hyp-2) on their digital profile. Indeed, if the results obtained show that there are indeed publication standards imposed by the technical device of the social network (which in fact excludes the possibility of so-called ‘deep’ intimate communication), we do not observe a deliberate choice of influenced persons to create characters either. At least, the methodology we have at this stage does not allow us to show it entirely.

Nevertheless, we have identified a technological environment and indicators that tend towards the second research hypothesis. Indeed, once normalized, it’s not easy to accept his image without the technological artifice (hyp-2): *When I take*

a selfie without effect [...] I can't (Capucine). Numerous applications are appearing to 'reshape' the shape of one's body, 'erase' certain details (acne¹¹, skin, scars, etc.), or even increase the size of one's body or that of one's muscles (hyp-2). For those influenced, the aim is still tend towards a character, with using digital tools: [...] *I don't like my nose at all, it's the complex of my life, my nose, I think it's huge and when I put filters on it it's too beautiful [...]* (Domitille). This trend is also reflected in Capucine's words: [...] *you feel fresh [beautiful] with the filter, you have the impression that you're too beautiful, then suddenly it changes back to normal, and you say to yourself that you can't go out like that, what's with your face [laughs]*. For example, the virtual botox feeds a process of normalization that produces artifices to remove intimacy from communication. The influenced girl who decided to use filters erase the history of her body and her individual life (hyp-1), which has left its mark on her face and skin, in order to construct another, less representative image, more fictional (hyp-2). These techniques are widespread, familiar and expected daily by users of digital networks. Sophie tells us that she makes 'absolutely no secret' of the fact that she retouches her photos. In the same way that clothes and make-up have come to dominate human relationships, filters now seem to be necessary to influence digital exchanges.

To find out whether influenced persons want to become characters, we note, however, that we would need to go further by asking them about the cultural references (literature, cinema, etc.) used in the creation of content, rather than simply about the digital techniques used. This line of research is stimulating because it would require shifting the scope of the intimate conversation by integrating the question of culture (and by extension the arts) into the methodology. We could then question the cultural works that shape the body images of the younger generations interviewed. This issue of the 'origin' of body representations is all the more important as more and more virtual character (De Loor *et al.*, 2017) and virtual influencers (Arsenyan and Mirowska, 2021) appear on social networks, produced in part by generative tools.

So at the moment, we only know that influenced persons are influencers because they use the same techniques, aimed at their contacts (audience, users, friends, family, etc.) and they know how to talk about their digital productions, as do female body influencers. A form of professionalization even emerges from their discourse. influenced persons are female body influencers who don't directly mobilize intimate communication but rather technical imitations. We therefore agree with Abidin's ideas (2015):

I observe how influencers appropriate and mobilize intimacies in different ways (commercial, interactive, reciprocal, disclosive), and describe a

¹¹ This issue also concerns medical studies (Ouadi *et al.*, 2022).

model of communication between influencers and followers I term «perceived interconnectedness», in which influencers interact with followers to give the impression of intimacy.

Similarly, the influenced persons also reproduce intimate communication using the same digital tools. They are enclosed in algorithms (Cabrera Altieri, 2021) and digital networks. We can therefore see that «[...] body influencers prefer to use photographic content that seeks not only to highlight the promoted product, but also current beauty stereotypes¹²» (Cuenca *et al.*, 2020). The question of ‘beauty’ that we had not identified at the start of our investigation (neither in our hypotheses nor in our initial problem) therefore appears as a serious avenue to explore in the rest of our research work. Indeed, many occurrences appear in the verbatims, and one of the desires of influenced persons, like female body influencers, is to tend towards ‘the’ beauty. However, is this relationship to beauty only influenced by technical standards, or even industrial standards in the case of cultural and creative industries, or is the beauty sought by influenced persons of another order? If the latter wish to achieve the ‘idea’ of beauty, objective, then perhaps we will find in the theoretical approach of Schopenhauer (1819; 1966) keys to understanding the phenomena observed. It would be then be a difficult degree to achieve, an ephemeral or even unattainable degree, where influenced persons could be detached from the everyday issues of their living bodies. So the body would then be presented to other users as an object of beauty and not intimacy. For the influenced persons, the body would no longer merely be alive, endowed with an history and an interiority: through images, they perhaps would build an aesthetic.

Finally, the ultimate contribution of this work can also be observed on the methodological level. Indeed, by carrying out this survey, we understood that the researcher who wishes to set up an intimate conversation must share a part of her life, her anecdotes, her ideas. Entering the realm of intimacy cannot be imagined only going in one direction: the capture of intimate data must occur during a face-to-face exchange, each participant has to share a part of himself. In other words, in order to achieve intimate conversation for research purposes on the topic, one has to perform intimate communication. The researcher’s gift is based on a calculated approach, the researcher opens up because she knows that her participants are going to confide in her even more. Thus, B elinda, one of our influenced persons, brings us back to our past: *I’m a teenager, I think a lot about my image and reputation on social networks. We’ve all been there, I think, even you did, didn’t you?* [laughter and embarrassment¹³], we respond, *Back then, I used to wear make-up, I liked to dress up*, B elinda replies: *Yeah, we all like to look good* (B elinda). We have to be careful to maintain just

¹² Text translated by the authors.

¹³ Text translated by the authors (and the following verbatims, in italics).

the right distance from our interlocutors, to avoid influencing the course of their thoughts, the investigation, from the present or from the past. This knowledge about the reflexivity of the researcher comes as an unexpected contribution to research on what intimate communication can be in the era of digital social networks, as another avenue of research to explore.

Distribution of work and order of authorship

The empirical data come partly from Charlotte Michalak's doctoral thesis on the intimate communication. David Galli, co-supervisor of the Charlotte Michalak's thesis, built the literature review and epistemological framework by incorporating the hypothesis of digital character creation. The method was designed and developed by Charlotte Michalak. The two authors analyzed the data and the results that follow. The distribution of the work justifies the order of authorship.

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