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HOW TIKTOK IS INFLUENCING GENERATION ALPHA GIRLS' SKINCARE ROUTINES

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ABSTRACT
This study examines how TikTok shapes skincare routines and consumption among Generation Alpha girls aged 10–12. Using a qualitative approach, structured interviews with seven experts and semi-structured interviews with 20 Portuguese girls were conducted. Findings show that TikTok acts as an entry point to early beauty practices and a strong driver of consumer behaviour, amplified by algorithmic visibility. Girls associate skincare routines with maturity, identity, and social belonging. While TikTok can foster confidence and creativity, it also promotes premature consumerism, unrealistic beauty ideals, and potential health risks, revealing its ambivalent influence on young users.

PALABRAS CLAVE
TikTok
Generación Alpha
Cuidado de la piel
Influencia
Consumo
Plataformas

RESUMEN
Este estudio examina cómo TikTok influye en las rutinas y el consumo de cuidado de la piel de la Generación Alfa. Mediante un enfoque cualitativo, se realizaron entrevistas con siete expertas y con 20 niñas. Los resultados muestran que TikTok actúa como puerta de entrada a las prácticas de belleza tempranas y un fuerte impulsor del comportamiento del consumidor, amplificado por la visibilidad algorítmica. Las niñas asocian estas rutinas con la madurez, la identidad y la pertenencia social. Si bien TikTok puede fomentar la confianza y la creatividad, también promueve el consumismo prematuro, ideales de belleza poco realistas y posibles riesgos para la salud.

1. Introduction and Literature Review

In recent years, the intersection between digital platforms and beauty consumption has become an increasingly relevant area of academic interest, especially in the context of younger audiences (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Among these platforms, TikTok has emerged as a cultural force, shaping trends, redefining communication, and influencing user behaviour in profound ways (Abidin, 2020; Boeker & Urman, 2022). The emergence of the "BeautyTok" phenomenon —in which skincare routines, product reviews, and aesthetic transformations are showcased in short, catchy videos - has transformed how beauty content is produced, shared, and consumed online (Garg & Bakshi, 2024; Haenlein et al., 2020). For Generation Alpha —the cohort born between 2010 and 2024— TikTok is more than a digital social platform, it is a space of identity construction, peer interaction, and consumer discovery (Hales et al., 2024; McCrindle & Fell, 2020).

At the same time, the global skincare market has undergone significant expansion. Once predominantly targeted at adult women, skincare is now being marketed to younger demographics, including pre-teens and adolescents, who increasingly see skincare as part of their daily routines and self-expression (Mintel, 2025). The rise of influencers, user-generated content, and algorithm-driven exposure contributes to a scenario in which even the youngest users are actively engaging with beauty discourse and forming consumer preferences based on digital practices (Haykal, 2022; McCoy et al., 2024).

User-generated content and platform-mediated recommendation systems create an environment where young users actively engage with beauty narratives, imitating routines that may be unsuitable or even harmful for their age and skin type (Danhauser et al., 2024; McCoy et al., 2024). Recent studies highlight growing concerns among dermatologists and paediatricians about the proliferation of anti-ageing ingredients in children's routines, the absence of sunscreen, and the psychological implications of early engagement with adult-like beauty norms (Parikh & Lipner, 2024; Saunders et al., 2018). Understanding how TikTok contributes to the shaping of skincare practices in Generation Alpha is, therefore, critical, not only due to the potential health risks involved, but also because of its profound influence on preteens' self-image, self-esteem, and evolving sense of identity.

2. The allure of TikTok

Launched in 2016, TikTok rapidly positioned itself as one of the most downloaded applications globally, with a distinct format that prioritises short-form video content enhanced by music, filters, and fast-paced editing (Anderson, 2020). Unlike other platforms, TikTok's algorithm tailors content based on user interaction, rather than follower counts, allowing any user to become viral and, consequently, to influence others regardless of their social capital (Kaye et al., 2022). This content discovery model fosters a sense of instant visibility and accessibility that resonates with younger audiences, particularly those in Generation Alpha.

One of TikTok's most powerful features is its For You Page (FYP), which curates a personalised feed based on user activity, interests, and behaviour. This results in a highly immersive and addictive experience, where users are continuously exposed to trends, challenges, tutorials, and influencer content. According to Zulli and Zulli (2022), TikTok's algorithmic structure creates a continuous loop of attention, making it especially effective in shaping behaviours and tastes among impressionable audiences.

The platform's appeal is further enhanced by its participatory culture. Users are encouraged to replicate trends, lip-sync to popular audio clips, and engage in duets or remixes, fostering a communal environment where identity expression is both individual and collective. For younger users, this participatory nature offers a sense of agency and visibility, while simultaneously reinforcing conformity to viral aesthetics and practices (Abidin, 2020). In the realm of beauty and skincare, this manifests in widespread imitation of routines, product hauls, and transformations promoted by influencers, often without critical engagement or awareness of age-appropriateness.

3. How Generation Alpha is using TikTok

Generation Alpha is the first cohort to be fully born into a digital environment. They have never experienced a world without smartphones, Wi-Fi, and algorithmic media. As such, their engagement with digital platforms is not merely recreational, it is integral to their learning, socialisation, and identity development (McCrindle & Fell, 2020). TikTok, in particular, plays a prominent role in their digital routines. Pre-teens in the 10–12 age range —many of whom are just beginning to define their preferences and sense of self— turn to TikTok not only for entertainment but also as a source of inspiration, information, and validation.

The way Alpha girls navigate TikTok is shaped by a combination of peer dynamics, platform mechanics, and influencer culture. Influencers on TikTok —particularly micro- and nano-influencers— have a direct impact on their followers due to the perceived authenticity and relatability of their content (Haenlein et al., 2020). Unlike celebrities on more traditional platforms, TikTok creators often film from their bedrooms, speak directly to the camera, and adopt an informal tone, which enhances the credibility of their recommendations. This is particularly effective in areas such as skincare, where “before and after” transformations and personal testimonials are compelling forms of persuasion (Hales et al., 2024).

The trend known as "BeautyTok" has become a dominant category within TikTok content. It includes skincare routines, product reviews, tutorials, and recommendations from both professionals and amateur creators. Videos are often framed as “tips for glowing skin” or “products every 12-year-old needs”, effectively normalising skincare routines among very young audiences. The aesthetics of cleanliness, self-care, and transformation are central to these videos, creating aspirational narratives around skincare that are highly attractive to pre-teen girls (Hales et al., 2024; Haykal, 2022).

Importantly, the use of skincare is increasingly associated with emotional well-being and self-worth. Several studies indicate that young girls report feeling more beautiful or more grown-up when they engage in skincare routines (Hales et al., 2025). TikTok content reinforces this by portraying skincare not only as a hygienic practice but also as an act of self-love, maturity, and social status. However, this can create problematic associations between beauty, value, and consumption —particularly when driven by commercial interests.

4. Generation Alpha as skincare consumers

Over the past decade, the global skincare industry has witnessed remarkable growth, with the market projected to reach over $200 billion by 2026 (Statista, 2021). A significant factor contributing to this growth is the inclusion of younger demographics in marketing strategies. Brands have started to position skincare as a lifestyle product, promoting routines that cater not only to dermatological needs but also to emotional and social aspirations.

Adolescents and pre-teens, especially girls, are increasingly targeted through tailored campaigns, social media influencers, and retail environments designed to appeal to their tastes. Shops like Sephora and brands like The Ordinary and Drunk Elephant have adapted their packaging, language, and marketing tactics to attract younger consumers. As a result, girls as young as 10 now report using products such as serums, exfoliators, and face masks - often without dermatological guidance or awareness of long-term effects (McCoy et al., 2024).

TikTok plays a critical role in this consumer dynamic. The platform operates as a hybrid between entertainment and marketplace, where trends can transform obscure products into best-sellers overnight. Influencers promote affiliate links, sponsored content, and unboxings, while user-generated content (UGC) provides an illusion of peer endorsement. As Dobele et al. (2005) note, this fusion of commercial and interpersonal communication blurs the boundaries between authentic opinion and covert advertising, especially for younger users who may lack the critical skills to differentiate them.

The power of TikTok in shaping consumption is also linked to the phenomenon of virality. When a product becomes associated with a viral sound, challenge, or influencer, its desirability

increases rapidly, often independent of its efficacy. As Dobele et al. (2005) explain, viral marketing leverages emotional triggers —humour, surprise, aspiration - to encourage sharing and imitation. For Alpha girls, participating in such trends becomes both a social activity and a mode of self-branding.

However, this dynamic raises concerns. The skincare needs of children differ significantly from those of adults, and the use of certain active ingredients at a young age can pose risks such as skin sensitisation or barrier damage (Hales et al., 2025; Haykal, 2022). Moreover, the emphasis on perfect skin and aesthetic improvement can lead to body image issues, performance anxiety, and premature commodification of the self (Yoo et al., 2025). As Kvardová et al. (2025) points out, early consumerism in the beauty sector is not merely a matter of preference but a reflection of deeper cultural narratives around worth, gender, and visibility.

Thus, the dynamic between BeautyTok culture and Generation Alpha's skincare habits needs critical examination, as our study set out to do in Portugal. Platforms like TikTok are highly powerful in shaping identity and consumption even before children reach adolescence, with commercial actors responding accordingly. The risks —physical, psychological, and social— are evidenced by emerging studies, specialist warnings, and industry responses. As Generation Alpha becomes an influential consumer cohort, researchers, regulators, and caregivers must engage with this phenomenon responsibly.

5. Materials and Methods

5.1. Research questions

This study explores the ways in which beauty-related content on TikTok influences the skincare routines and product preferences of girls from Generation Alpha, aged 10 to 12. It is guided by three main research questions: (1) How does TikTok beauty content shape young girls' perceptions of skincare? (2) What impact does it have on their skincare habits and routines? (3) How does this content influence their purchasing behaviour regarding skincare products?

5.2. Method and research design

The study adopts a qualitative research design, suitable for capturing detailed insights into the experiences and views of young girls engaging with social media content. Qualitative research enables a contextualised understanding of social phenomena by privileging depth over breadth (Creswell, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection due to their ability to uncover personal meanings and motivations through direct interaction (Gil, 2008; Taherdoost, 2022).

The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved structured interviews with seven adult professionals, including a cosmetologist, psychologist, influencer, L'Oréal executive, Sephora employee, parenting coach, and youth educator. These participants were selected for their relevance to the topic and were identified through LinkedIn. Their contributions offered valuable theoretical and practical insights, which helped shape the subsequent interview guide for the second phase. In the second phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 Portuguese girls aged between 10 and 12 years, enrolled in the 5th or 6th grades and identified as TikTok users. This age group was selected to ensure a consistent generational profile, avoiding overlap with Generation Z, as well as focusing on preteens that already use TikTok and have skincare routines, and who are more autonomous and influential as consumers.

5.3. First stage of data collection - interviews to experts

In the first phase of data collection, structured interviews were conducted with seven professionals selected through purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2013). The participants included a cosmetologist, a psychologist, a parenting coach, a TikTok influencer, a Sephora store associate, a marketing executive at L'Oréal, and a youth programme coordinator. Each was chosen

following LinkedIn searches, for their relevance to the topic and provided contextual insights into the intersection of TikTok, youth, and skincare (Bryman, 2012; Irwin & Johnson, 2005).

Personalised interview scripts were used to address key themes such as digital influence, early skincare practices, and consumer behaviour. These interviews helped refine the focus of the study and informed the design of the semi-structured guide used in the second phase with Generation Alpha participants.

5.4. Second stage of data collection - interviews to Alpha girls

The second research phase focused on a purposive sample of 20 girls who met specific inclusion criteria: gender (female), age (10–12), and regular TikTok use. This purposive sampling strategy ensured that participants were directly relevant to the research focus (Palinkas et al., 2013). Recruitment occurred through three channels: personal contacts, interactions near skincare retailers such as Sephora and Normal, and outreach through after-school learning centres in Lisbon.

The interview script included 24 questions and was based on findings from the first phase and grounded in existing literature. Language was adapted to suit the participants' age group. Questions included both characterisation items (e.g., school type, allowance) and open-ended inquiries into their experiences with skincare, perceived social influences, and trust in TikTok content. Interviews were conducted between 7 and 25 June 2024. Care was taken to ensure that participants felt at ease and able to speak freely, especially given their age and the subjective nature of the topic.

5.5. Data analysis techniques

All interviews were transcribed verbatim using the GoodTape.io platform. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was applied to both phases of interviews, using the MAXQDA software. The six-phase analytical procedure included familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, theme identification, review and refinement of themes, naming of themes, and final reporting. This process allowed for inductive coding and a data-driven emergence of themes (Guerra, 2006).

This approach made it possible to explore recurring patterns in participants' discourse, highlighting how TikTok content affects their views on beauty and influences their consumer behaviour. Thematic saturation was reached after the 20th interview, when no significant new insights emerged (Saunders et al., 2018; Saunders et al., 2018), reinforcing the credibility of the findings.

5.6. Ethical considerations

Ethical compliance was a key priority throughout the study. Informed consent forms were distributed to all participants and their legal guardians, outlining the study's aims, confidentiality terms, and the voluntary nature of participation, including the right to withdraw at any time (Creswell, 2014; Author, 2022). Given participants' age, dual consent (child and guardian) was required. Interviews were scheduled with prior notice, and participants were informed that discussions would last no more than 30 minutes. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used for all child participants, while experts were identified only by professional roles. All audio data were stored securely, with access restricted to the research team, and will be deleted after the project's completion (Wiles et al., 2008).

Special care was taken to create a relaxed and respectful interview atmosphere. Researchers emphasised that there were no correct or incorrect answers and that the participants' views were important and valid. This helped mitigate potential biases such as social desirability or the urge to please the interviewer (Furnham, 1986). The intention was to reduce adult–child power imbalances and promote authenticity in responses (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Hill, 2006).

6. Results

6.1. Contributions from experts

The interviews conducted with experts —a cosmetologist, a psychologist, a digital influencer, a Sephora store associate, a L'Oréal marketing executive, a youth educator, and a parenting coach— provided a comprehensive overview of how TikTok is perceived as influencing Generation Alpha girls' skincare routines. Despite their different professional backgrounds, a common thread emerged: TikTok is currently one of the main entry points into beauty consumption, acting simultaneously as a source of entertainment, a learning tool, and a marketplace.

All experts were questioned about the role played by TikTok in the precocious interest of Alpha girls in skincare products and routines. About this early onset of interest in skincare, all the experts highlighted that, until recently, skincare concerns only became relevant during adolescence, usually in connection with acne. Today, however, girls as young as 10 or 11 years old arrive at stores asking for products by name, often referring to TikTok videos. As the Sephora employee explained: "I sometimes have 11-year-olds coming in asking for Drunk Elephant serums as if they were influencers themselves. They know the names, they know the packaging, they even show me the TikTok on their phones". For the psychologist, this signals a cultural shift: skincare has become an identity practice, tied more to aesthetics and peer culture than to dermatological need.

The role of TikTok's algorithm in shaping desires and routines was also repeatedly mentioned. According to the L'Oréal executive: "What used to take months of advertising can now happen overnight. A product goes viral on TikTok, and suddenly it sells out worldwide. We see 12-year-old girls asking for products that were completely unknown before a video blew up". This logic of virality, amplified by the For You Page of the platform, was perceived as creating strong consumption pressures on Alpha girls. The influencer added: "The videos are short, fun, and very visual. You see a texture, a glow, a before-and-after transformation, and suddenly every girl wants to try it. It's almost irresistible".

Another key point explored in these interviews was the perceived authenticity of TikTok content creators. Unlike traditional advertising, most beauty content on TikTok is filmed in informal settings such as bedrooms or bathrooms, often in a conversational tone. The psychologist noted: "The girls feel they can trust these influencers more than a brand ad. It's like an older sister giving advice. But that's exactly what makes them more vulnerable, because they don't realize these are paid partnerships". Similarly, the influencer acknowledged this dual role: "I know my followers listen to me as if I were a friend, and that is a huge responsibility. Sometimes they forget I am being paid to show a product".

Consistently with existing literature, the experts also raised concerns about dermatological and psychological risks. The cosmetologist was particularly critical of the use of strong active ingredients: "I see young girls using retinol or chemical exfoliants, which can damage their skin barrier at that age. It's very worrying". In addition, the psychologist echoed these concerns from a mental health perspective: "When beauty becomes tied to self-worth so early, we are creating fragile identities. They start comparing themselves not only to friends but to an idealized version of beauty on TikTok". Furthermore, the parenting coach also highlighted family struggles: "Parents often feel powerless. When every girl in the class is using a certain brand, saying no becomes almost impossible".

Although the risks dominated the discussion, some potential benefits were also acknowledged by the experts. According to the cosmetologist: "At least they are talking about sunscreen, that's a positive shift compared to older generations". In addition, the educator pointed out: "If guided properly, this could actually be a chance to teach healthy habits. The problem is when education is replaced by commercial trends". These experts highlight that early exposure to skincare is not inherently negative but stressed that its value depends heavily on product suitability and adult guidance.

The theme of shared responsibility, which hasn't been explored in previous literature, emerged strongly from the experts' contributions. They agreed that while parental mediation is essential, it cannot stand alone. As the L'Oréal executive put it: "We, as brands, need to think about how we talk to such young audiences. There is an ethical line that should not be crossed". Furthermore, the influencer added: "Creators need to be transparent. If a product is sponsored, it should be crystal clear, especially when we know kids are watching".

Overall, the experts portrayed TikTok as both an engine of curiosity and learning, and a vector of risk and premature consumerism. The dominant perception was that this is not merely a question of cosmetics but a broader form of digital socialization that reshapes how children engage with beauty, consumption, and identity, and that all agents intertwined in this phenomenon share responsibility in shaping it.

6.2. The perspectives of Alpha girls

The second phase of the study focused on interviews with 20 Portuguese girls aged 10 to 12 years old, all regular TikTok users who engage with skincare products. Their voices provided direct insight into how BeautyTok content shapes pre-teens' perceptions, routines, and consumer choices. Several themes emerged from the girls' contributions, revealing both enthusiasm and critical tensions around their involvement with skincare.

For 18 participants, TikTok was described as the main entry point into skincare culture. Videos served not only as entertainment but also as tutorials and product discovery tools. As 11-year-old Participant 9 explained: "I learned how to do my skincare on TikTok. I didn't know what serums were until I saw them in a video". Participant 16, aged 12, recalled: "There was this cream that everyone was using on TikTok, so I asked my mom to buy it for me. It felt like I needed it too". The platform thus appeared as a playful and instructive space where Alpha girls encountered both basic routines (cleansing, moisturizing) and advanced products.

A recurring theme among all participants was the association between skincare and identity formation. The girls related skincare to maturity, beauty, and even social belonging. Participant 2, aged 11, explained: "When I do my skincare, I feel older, like a teenager already". Participant 7, aged 12, added: "If I don't take care of my skin, I feel I'm not pretty enough". These comments reflected how skincare was framed not just as a hygienic or health practice, but as a symbolic act of self-worth and growth. The influence of peers was also evident: "In my class, almost all the girls have skincare routines. If you don't, it's like you're the only one left out," said 10-year-old Participant 14.

The interviews also revealed a surprisingly sophisticated level of product knowledge and brand awareness among the girls. Several mentioned brands, such as The Ordinary, Drunk Elephant, and Cerave with ease, often reproducing terminology heard in TikTok videos. As 12 years-old, Participant 11 noted: "I know that niacinamide is good for the skin, because I saw it in a TikTok". In addition, Participant 2, aged 10, explained: "Everyone talks about Drunk Elephant, but it's expensive. I have a cheaper cream from Sephora that I like". These accounts underscore how platform-driven virality directly translates into consumer awareness, even when not always followed by purchase.

Among the girls, 16 emphasized positive outcomes from their skincare routines, such as feeling cleaner, more confident, or noticing improvements in their skin. The 12-year-old Participant 5 said: "I had little pimples, and after using my cream, they went away. It made me feel good". Participant 13, aged 10, explained: "I like washing my face at night; it makes me calm before going to bed". These accounts suggested that, for some, skincare had been integrated into everyday well-being practices, providing not only aesthetic but also emotional reassurance.

However, the narratives of 13 of the girls also highlighted risky practices and negative experiences. Among them, 11 described reactions to products that were clearly unsuitable for their age. As 11-year-old Participant 2 recalled: "I used an acid serum because I saw it on TikTok, but it made my skin red and burning, so I stopped". Furthermore, Participant 5, aged 12, shared: "I tried my sister's retinol, and my face started peeling. I didn't know it was not for kids". These

experiences illustrate the gap between aspirational content and dermatological appropriateness, reinforcing concerns raised by the experts.

On the topics of authenticity and trust regarding TikTok content creators, 13 of the participants reported high levels of trust in TikTok influencers, often blurring the line between personal testimony and advertising. "I follow a girl who is only a bit older than me, and she shows all her products. I believe her because she is like us," said 10-year-old Participant 6. In addition, 8 of the participants noted that social validation among peers reinforced these choices, as is the example of 12 years-old Participant's 16 account "When I saw that my best friend bought the same serum I wanted, I was sure it was good". These comments reflect how influencer credibility and peer endorsement intersect to shape consumption patterns.

Parental roles appeared ambivalent in the girls' accounts. Among them, 7 described supportive mediation: "My mom comes with me to Sephora, and she helps me choose what is right for my skin" explained 11-year-old Participant 8. Others revealed tensions, with parents resisting purchases: "I asked my dad for a serum, and he said it was nonsense, that I was too young", shared 10 years-old Participant 18. These accounts suggested that parental mediation varies widely, with some families negotiating skincare as a bonding activity and others experiencing conflict around perceived excess.

Overall, the interviews illustrated how skincare has become a normalized part of everyday life for many Alpha girls. As 12 years-old Participant 17 concluded: "Skincare is like brushing your teeth now, everyone does it". This normalization reflects the extent to which BeautyTok has reshaped beauty discourse for pre-teens, embedding skincare within daily routines, social identities, and consumer desires. In this study, the girls' voices reveal a powerful interplay between TikTok's content, peer dynamics, and personal aspirations. While they reported positive experiences such as increased confidence and self-care, they also accounted for harmful practices tied to inappropriate products. For them, skincare was less about dermatological need and more about belonging, visibility, and identity.

6.3. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

This study set out to examine how TikTok shapes skincare routines and consumption among Generation Alpha girls. By combining insights from experts with the lived experiences of Alpha girls, it has become clear that BeautyTok is not simply a space of entertainment but also a highly influential arena where identity, consumption, and social belonging converge. The findings point to a complex and ambivalent dynamic: TikTok introduces young girls to practices of self-care and social visibility, while simultaneously exposing them to risks related to health, identity formation, and premature consumerism.

The accounts collected in this study, both from experts and from Alpha girls, align with previous academic literature identifying TikTok as a cultural force in the everyday lives of children and adolescents. Scholars such as Abidin (2020) and Zulli and Zulli (2022) have shown how the platform's participatory culture fosters imitation, encouraging users to replicate viral trends. For Alpha girls, this means not only dancing to popular music but also reproducing beauty rituals that are framed as essential markers of belonging and growing up. The girls interviewed consistently reported discovering skincare through TikTok, mirroring the experts' recognition of the platform as a gateway to early consumer practices.

The mechanism through which TikTok drives these behaviours can be traced to its algorithmic design. As Kaye et al. (2022) argue, TikTok's recommendation system prioritises content discovery over follower hierarchies, enabling any user or product to become viral. The experts in this study echoed this, with the L'Oréal executive noting how a single viral video can turn obscure skincare products into global best-sellers. This logic of virality, paired with visual aesthetics of transformation and self-care, makes skincare a particularly powerful category for pre-teen consumers.

Our findings also highlight that skincare has become a ritual of identity for Generation Alpha. The girls' narratives revealed that skincare is not primarily about dermatological necessity but

about feeling older, prettier, and socially included. This resonates with Hales et al. (2025), who documented how skincare practices are increasingly linked to emotional well-being and self-worth in young users. Similarly, Kvardová et al. (2025) emphasise the risks of appearance-related activities on social media, showing their association with body dissatisfaction. In our study, some of the Alpha girls described feeling excluded when not engaging in skincare routines, reinforcing how consumption becomes a form of social capital in peer contexts.

For experts such as the psychologist, this link between skincare and self-esteem poses significant risks. The pressure to emulate influencers or peers reproduces what Yoo et al. (2025) describe as a pre-adolescent skincare pandemic, with social media normalizing adult beauty standards among children. Some experts' concerns about fragile identities and comparison pressures echo these scholarly warnings, suggesting that BeautyTok accelerates the internalisation of ideals of perfection at a developmentally sensitive stage.

Another central theme emerging from this study is the blurring of boundaries between authentic recommendation and commercial persuasion. Most of the interviewed girls described high levels of trust in TikTok influencers, often perceiving them as relatable peers rather than paid promoters. This confirms previous research on influencer culture, as Haenlein et al. (2020) showed how influencers' informality and intimacy strengthen their persuasive appeal, while Garg and Bakshi (2024) identified trust and parasocial interaction as key drivers of purchase intention. The danger here is that TikTok collapses the distance between interpersonal communication and covert advertising. For pre-teens, who may lack the critical skills to distinguish sponsored from organic content, this creates a particularly vulnerable context. The experts in this study emphasised that influencers themselves are not always transparent about partnerships, while brands profit from viral reach without addressing ethical implications.

From a dermatological perspective, our findings reaffirm medical concerns about inappropriate product use among young girls. The cosmetologist highlighted the dangers of retinols, acids, and exfoliants for immature skin, which was corroborated by girls' accounts of irritation, burning, and peeling. These findings align with Parikh and Lipner (2024), who raised ethical concerns about adolescent engagement with advanced skincare, and with Yoo et al. (2025), who warned against the health risks of social media-driven beauty routines in children.

At the same time, our results show how skincare has become normalized in daily routines, as 11-years old Participant 20 put it, "like brushing your teeth". Mintel's (2025) forecast of an expanding tween skincare market provides the commercial backdrop for this normalization. The early commodification of skincare practices reflects not only the strength of digital marketing but also what McCoy et al. (2024) described as the pervasive influence of social media on adolescent behaviours.

This study also underlines the ambivalent role of parents. While some girls reported supportive mediation, where parents guided purchases or encouraged sunscreen use, others described conflict when parents resisted expensive or unnecessary products. These findings resonate with Author (2022), who stress the importance of qualitative approaches to understanding how children's digital practices intersect with family contexts. The experts in this study insisted that parental mediation is necessary but insufficient, given the strength of peer and algorithmic pressures. This suggests that supporting young girls as they learn to become consumers requires a broader ecosystem of responsibility, involving not only families but also platforms and brands.

As a concluding remark, we stress that this study offers several contributions at different levels. For academia, it deepens understanding of how social media platforms intersect with childhood consumer culture. By combining expert insights with Alpha girls' voices, it highlights the complex interplay between platform design, influencer culture, and identity work in pre-adolescence. It also contributes to ongoing debates about how algorithmic media reconfigure childhood, echoing calls by Abidin (2020) and Zulli and Zulli (2022) for critical attention to participatory cultures of imitation and viral trends. For communication and marketing professionals, the study provides evidence of both opportunities and ethical challenges. On one hand, TikTok is shown to be

extraordinarily effective in generating product awareness among young consumers. On the other, the findings highlight the need for transparency, responsibility, and age-appropriate messaging. As the L'Oréal executive noted, there is an ethical line that brands must acknowledge when targeting such young audiences. For adults who support young girls as they become digital platform users and consumers, including parents, educators, and healthcare professionals, the findings underscore the importance of well-informed, active and empathic mediation. The study shows that children's skincare practices are not trivial, but tied to self-esteem, peer relations, and health outcomes. For the girls themselves, the research points to the importance of consumer literacy. Pre-teens are active participants in BeautyTok but often lack the tools to evaluate product claims or recognize advertising strategies. Building media and consumer literacy could help them navigate digital platforms more critically, fostering empowerment rather than vulnerability.

Looking ahead, future research should explore cross-cultural variations in how Generation Alpha engages with BeautyTok, given that cultural norms around beauty and parenting differ significantly. Longitudinal studies could also examine how early exposure to skincare practices impacts adolescent and adult identity, health, and consumer behaviour. Finally, more research is needed on how platforms and brands can be held accountable for age-appropriate communication, including policy interventions and industry self-regulation.

In conclusion, this study highlights TikTok as a powerful but ambivalent force in the lives of Alpha girls. BeautyTok promotes creativity, belonging, and early engagement with self-care, yet simultaneously exposes children to commercial, psychological, and health risks. The challenge lies in balancing curiosity and identity exploration with ethical safeguards, parental guidance, and literacy. By giving voice both to experts and to the girls themselves, this research contributes to academic debates, informs industry practice, and offers tools for families and educators to support children in navigating digital consumer cultures.

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8. Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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