

Micro-influencers and advertising. Transparency and ethics in content creation

Micro-influencers y publicidad. Transparencia y ética en la creación de contenido



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Abstract:

Due to the emergence of the influencer as a profession in which commercial content is created to the benefit of brands, and faced with the controversy of not always disclosing this collaboration to the public, the concern regarding the transparency and ethics of influencer activity has been addressed in this paper from the viewpoint

Resumen:

Atendiendo al auge de la profesión de influencer en la que se crean contenidos comerciales para marcas y ante el debate sobre cuya colaboración no es identificada ante los públicos, se abordan desde la perspectiva de este colectivo sus inquietudes en cuanto a transparencia y ética de su actividad. Para ello se ha preguntado a 290 micro-influencers, influen-

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of these prescribers. For this purpose, 290 micro-influencers, who are those with less than 100,000 followers, were surveyed. Their selection was based on the fact that despite not working exclusively in this profession, they have a higher level of engagement than influencer groups. According to these prescribers, their followers know the brands they work with, and their fans are aware that they are given these products as gifts free of charge. As such, they accept the advertising content offered. However, the influencers do not always divulge this commercial partnership openly, but rather clandestinely, such as by mentioning the brand rather than using a clear advertising label, the latter of which is a practice that is included in standard regulations. The influencers also complain of unethical practices by companies due to the lack of monetization of their activity, as well as the lack of training in transparency.

Keywords:

Micro-influencer; advertising; digital content; transparency; ethics.

1. Introduction

1.1. Influencer marketing

As opposed to more traditional advertising techniques used by conventional media, many brands have started to include influencers as key players in their advertising strategy in the online environment, giving rise to *influencer marketing*. This activity can be broadly defined as digital marketing in which opinion leaders, commonly known as influencers, identify themselves with brands and become part of a company's sales communication on social media platforms (Bakker, 2018). As such, in order for this technique to work, influencers must identify with a brand and be well-defined, and through their content on social networks, they are able to influence the opinion of their followers (Brito et al., 2021).

Initially, social media influencers were considered those who had built a large network of followers, and who were trend setters in one or more niches (De Veirman et al., 2017).

However, this concept has become more refined, and categories have now been developed that are usually related to the number of followers they have, or to the social network with which they are involved, as outlined in the following section. It bears mentioning that although the authors cited above classify influencers in this way, it is not a closed ranking system, and the numbers are flexible.

Following digital prescribers on social networks is continuously growing, especially among younger profiles. Currently, 51% of social network users follow influencers, with Instagram as the main network on which these followings take place (IAB Spain, 2023). Consequently, a lot of research on influencers focuses on this social network (Romero-Cantero et al., 2022; Casaló, et al., 2020; Sarmiento-Guede and Rodríguez-Terceño, 2020; Pérez-Curiel and Sanz-Marcos, 2019; Padilla-Castillo and Oliver-González, 2018; Segarra and Hidalgo, 2018).

ers de menos de 100.000 seguidores que sin dedicarse profesionalmente a esta actividad, registran mayor nivel de engagement. Según este prescriptor digital, los seguidores conocen las marcas con las que trabajan, son conscientes de que les obsequian con sus productos y aceptan los contenidos comerciales. Sin embargo, para identificar las colaboraciones recurren en mayor medida a fórmulas más ambiguas como mencionar a la marca frente a incorporar una etiqueta identificativa de publicidad, método recogido en las principales normativas. Denuncian asimismo prácticas poco éticas por parte de la industria ante la falta de monetización de su actividad, así como la ausencia de formación en materia de transparencia.

Palabras clave:

Micro-influencer; publicidad; contenido digital; transparencia; ética.

The involvement of influencers in current advertising strategies has been widely studied in the academic field from different perspectives, which have addressed both the characteristics of their profiles and their role as advertising content creators regarding the following aspects: credibility (Silva and Mendes-Filho, 2023; Brito et al., 2021); advertising effectiveness (Clemente-Ricolfe and Atienza-Sancho, 2019; Iniesta-Alemán, 2019); regulation and self-management (Ramos-Gutiérrez and Fernández-Blanco, 2021; Sixto-García and Álvarez-Vázquez, 2020; Vilajoana-Alejandre, Rom-Rodríguez and Miotto, 2019); and engagement (Ao et al., 2023; Oneto-González et al., 2019).

There are more than 50 million content creators in the world, and more than 2 million of these have made it their livelihood in Spain. Specifically, there are more than 134,000 creators with more than 1,000 followers on some of their social network accounts (ICMedia, 2021). Moreover, despite the fact that being an influencer is now a full-time profession for some, consumers often view them as relatively unqualified (Bratu, 2019; Cooley and Parks-Yancy, 2019), due to factors such as a lack of formal education.

1.2. Ethical implications of influencers as content creators.

Influencers are social media users who have built a sizeable network of followers by posting text and visual narratives of their daily lives, and who have influenced a group of viewers. As individuals, they become their own brands by presenting their ideas, images, and expertise, in addition to sponsoring products as well (Taillon et al., 2020).

Thus, they have the ability to influence the behaviour of people (Gómez-Nieto, 2018) by projecting their personality and personal brand in their messages (Fernández-Gómez et al., 2018). Like influencers, brands also have to be responsible for the sponsorships and collaborations they undertake in order to avoid clandestine advertising and encourage best practice in content creation (Feijoo and Fernández-Gómez, 2021; ICMedia, 2021).

As Núñez-Cansado et al. (2021) point out, the professional connections that occur in influencer marketing usually take two forms. The first is when the advertiser offers the promoted product or service as a gift to the influencer for including it in their content. The second is a service in which money is paid to the content creator to use different advertising techniques such as testimonials, events, sponsorships, etc.

As such, influencers often submit paid posts as opinion pieces or use carefully crafted photographs to capture a product in use. These strategies allow them to convince their followers to purchase a certain product by using what appears to be organic content. Moreover, in spite of regulations suggesting that sponsored content in the form of ad tags or collaborations should be identified, many digital prescribers still do not comply with the guidelines (Taillon et al., 2020).

The IAB Spain Social Media Study (2023) shows that only 16% of users state that they enjoy advertising on social networks, compared to 51% who say it bothers them a lot, or quite a lot. However, 20% of the users surveyed in this research enjoy advertising tailored to their interests. The youngest (12-17 and 18-24 years of age), along with women, are the ones who spend the most time following influencers. A total of 34% of social network users believe that publications created by prescribers are of an advertising nature.

Young audiences take a much more demanding approach toward digital advertising formats than other generations. This has created a huge dilemma, as the audience itself is the group demanding specific formats, which has blurred the boundaries

between advertising, entertainment, and information (Fernández-Gómez et al., 2021). Their way of creating content involves a combination of entertainment and persuasion (branded content), whose sales purpose is not always obvious; social networks tend to hybridize content by using formats and techniques that make it increasingly difficult to distinguish between advertising and entertainment (Feijoo and Fernández-Gómez, 2021). The very same sector has demanded more effective regulations that will allow users to distinguish between commercial content and the rest (IAB Spain, 2019).

According to a study by the Association of Communication Users [*la Asociación de Usuarios de Comunicación*] (AUC) and the National Commission of Markets and Competition [*La Comisión Nacional de los Mercados y la Competencia*] (CNMC), 84.6% of advertising and promotional videos published by influencers are sales messages in disguise (UTECA, 2022).

Consequently, although in 2020 the Spanish Association of Advertisers [*La Asociación Española de Anunciantes*] (AEA), as well as the Association for the Self-Regulation of Commercial Communications [*La Asociación para la Autorregulación de la Comunicación Comercial*] (*Autocontrol*), published the Code of Conduct for the use of influencers in advertising, the measure does not go far enough, as it only affects the influencers if they follow the rules of the Code. Furthermore, despite a proposal to use tags to identify content as advertising, as in the case of #ads, such content is highly persuasive, which makes it difficult for the most vulnerable audiences to discern whether it is advertising or not (Núñez-Cansado et al., 2021; Tur-Viñes et al., 2019).

In Spain, the regulation known as Law 13/2022, of July 7, General Law on Audio-visual Communication [*Ley 13/2022, de 7 de Julio, General de Comunicación Audiovisual*], encompasses only prominent influencers in this audio-visual directive. Thus, prescribers must comply with basic requirements regarding the general principles of audio-visual communication, the protection of minors, consumer protection, and their registration in the State Public Registry of Audio-visual Communication Service Providers [*Registro Público Estatal de Prestadores de Servicios de Comunicación Audiovisual*]. In addition, they must comply with another regulation known as Law 34/1988, of November 11, 1988, General Advertising Law [*Ley 34/1988, de 11 de noviembre, General de Publicidad*], as well as Law 34/2002, of July 11, 2002, on Information Society Services and Electronic Commerce [*Servicios de la sociedad de la información y de comercio electrónico*]

Another study conducted by De Frutos-Torres and Pastor-Rodríguez (2020), and addressed later by Martín-García (2021), aimed to determine the level of trust among university students toward influencers and their content, among other issues,

Some of the most insightful results indicate that university students appreciate and accept sales messages, as long as they coincide with their own interests, yet they reject influencers who publish advertising content without any personal consistency, or that they consider contrary to their own values. However, excessive advertising leads to mental fatigue and eventually the abandonment of certain influencers. In this regard, Sarmiento-Guede and Rodríguez-Terceño (2020) also assert that the persuasive impact exerted by *micro-influencers* is stronger when their personality coincides with that of their followers, which is essential and decisive.

Influencers are followed and watched by multitudes of people all over the world. They amuse, entertain, give opinions, and make comments, yet their followers know little about the inner workings of the business itself (The New York Times Editorial Staff, 2020). This lack of transparency in content is aggravated when the audience is vulnerable, as they are less able to differentiate between persuasive content and that which is not (Núñez-Cansado et al., 2021).

In short, there has been a need in recent years to regulate the activity of influencers due to the lack of transparency in their selling activity. Transparency implies clearly indicating when advertising and self-promotion techniques are used by digital influencers in their publications and, eventually, showing the presence of a contractual relationship between the brands promoted and the prescribers.

1.3. *The micro-influencer*

As mentioned above, influencers can be placed in different categories according, for example, to the number of followers they accumulate. Conde and Casais (2023) differentiate between mega-influencers (> 1,000,000 followers), macro-influencers (100,000 - 1,000,000 followers), and micro-influencers (1,000 - 100,000 followers), each of which are associated with a set of characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages. Mega-influencers are famous worldwide. Their status is similar to that of mainstream celebrities. As such, they are able to reach the masses, yet they charge higher fees and have less engagement. Macro-influencers have a large number of loyal followers, with more reach in specific markets, but their rates of engagement are lower than the last category, which are the micros. Finally, micro-influencers are ordinary people with a strong presence in the community. They have a loyal audience and higher levels of trust and engagement, but less reach and visibility, and it is more difficult to measure their return on investment. However, this category is growing in the online environment (Gupta and Mahajan, 2019).

Thus, a micro-influencer has up to 100,000 followers. The originality and uniqueness of their posts are key factors in the effectiveness of their content marketing (Silalahi, 2021). Another advantage is that they have a “genuine” two-way relationship with the audience.

The fact that followers identify with micro-influencers means that they take their advice (Rios-Marques, Casais and Camilleri, 2020). Thus, micro-influencers lead smaller virtual communities, yet with higher levels of interaction and identification (Sarmiento-Guede and Rodríguez-Terceño, 2020).

From an academic perspective, there is a lack of research into micro-influencers, with the exception of studies that have focused on specific sectors, such as tourism (Hernández-Méndez & Nisamar Baute-Díaz, 2024; Peres and Silva, 2021), the fashion industry (Sinha and Fung, 2021; Shen, 2021; Gupta and Mahajan, 2019), the field of health (Pérez-Ordóñez and Castro-Martínez, 2023), and even local brands in Indonesia, which was addressed by Silalahi (2021). On the other hand, prescribers with more than 100,000 followers have been considerably studied, an example of which is research conducted by Martínez-Sanz et al. (2023), who examined pharmaceutical influencers.

Peres and Silva (2021) have identified micro-influencers as mostly women with postgraduate studies who have other jobs, and who do not collaborate with influencer agencies. This highlights the lack of professionalism in this activity, which makes it important to study this group in Spain.

2. Objectives and methodology

Until now, both academic and professional research has focussed on understanding the relationship between influencers, brands, and consumers from the viewpoint of audience reception. As explained in the theoretical framework, there are a large number of studies that focus on the content analysis of social media posts, in order to see whether advertising content is clearly displayed, as well as consumer interviews. Likewise, other studies have focussed on advertising agencies (Sanz-Marcos et al., 2019), yet there is a lack of research on the influencer as the subject of the advertising message.

The White Paper on Responsible Influence [El *Libro Blanco de la Influencia Responsable*] (iCmedia, 2021) surveyed industry audiences by conducting 40 in-depth interviews. It provided a roadmap for improving this type of communication, yet the main considerations were approached from the viewpoint of followers. For this reason, the authors decided to carry out a study from the perspective of the issuer, which would focus on the phenomenon that has hardly been addressed in the academic literature until now: the micro-influencer.

Therefore, the overall objective of the present study is to identify the ethical concerns regarding the activity of micro-influencers, and to reflect on the specific need to regulate and encourage self-management of influencer marketing activity in order to ensure the protection of consumers and/or audiences.

To achieve the overall objective, the following specific objectives are set forth:

1. Discover whether or not consumers identify and accept the content created by micro-influencers, based on the opinions of the digital prescribers themselves.
2. Determine the role played by the advertising industry in promoting transparency in the content disseminated by micro-influencers, again based on the views of the digital prescribers.
3. Reveal the motivations of these content creators in working with a brand
4. Understand how micro-influencers feel about the work they carry out in collaboration with brands.

In considering the exploratory nature of this study, the following research questions are posed:

1. From the micro-influencer's point of view, is there a negative reaction from the audience toward inserting advertising in the content they produce?
2. From the viewpoint of micro-influencers, are followers able to identify advertising in the posted content?
3. Do brands ask micro-influencers not to indicate when content has an advertising purpose?
4. What motivates micro-influencers to collaborate with a brand?
5. What is the opinion of micro-influencers regarding their own activity as digital content creators for a brand?

The authors believe the use of a survey aimed at micro-influencers will provide answers to the research questions regarding their commitment to the audience in their role as content creators. A quantitative methodology was used, which was computer-based and self-administered. According to Sierra-Bravo (2001: 305), the basic instrument of observation by survey is the questionnaire, and in this case a simple questionnaire was chosen or, in other words, a list of standardised questions that allowed the responses to be gathered and compared. Moreover, it is considered the most suitable method in this phase

of research due to its capability of covering a wide range of issues in one single study, in addition to its appropriateness for obtaining diverse information from a wide range of individuals.

A survey was sent to users of a Spanish platform, which joins together influencers and brands, and which automates advertising campaign management: <https://fuelyourbrands.com/>. A total of 290 micro-influencers responded to the questionnaire between December 2022 and February 2023. A 95% confidence level and 6% margin of error was achieved. The survey received a positive assessment of ethical appropriateness from the Research Ethics Committee of Universidad Internacional de la Rioja (UNIR).

In order to reveal the ethical implications of the influencer activity carried out, the study measured the following four blocks:

- 1) Familiarity of the followers with the work of the influencer. The following five statements were made: They know the work I do because I explain the process used to create content; They know I work with platforms or agencies because I show this in my profile; They know the brands I work with because I give them this information; They know I receive gifts of products or services from the brands for which I create content; They accept and appreciate the advertising content. Next, the participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with these statements using a Likert scale (strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree nor disagree; agree; and completely agree).
- 2) Identifying content as advertising in the posts produced for the brand. As in the first block of variables, five statements were made, after which the participants had to rate their level of agreement, also using a Likert scale. The five statements were as follows: I always add a hashtag indicating a collaboration or advertisement (example: #collaboration#advertising); I always mention the brand in the post; (example: @brandname); If there is an indication that the post is an advertisement, it is not well received by the audience in terms of interaction; The platforms or agencies I work with inform me of the need to indicate when posts are based on partnerships with brands; The brands I work with remind me of the need to indicate when posts are advertisements.
- 3) Motivation for collaborating with brands. The following were the response options: The product or service I receive; The values of the brand; Briefing requirements; Re-launching the campaign for a client; Other (open-ended response).
- 4) Opinions regarding content creation for brands; open-ended question.

It bears recalling that due to its exploratory nature, the sample is comprised of micro-influencers who wanted to respond to the survey regarding their activity without any differentiation according to gender, age, or sector, as the objectives of this research are not related to the segmentation of these variables. However, the survey did include questions related to socio-demographic aspects of gender, age, the main sector in which they carry out their activity, and the social network used most by the prescribers, with the aim of discovering the socio-demographic characteristics of the micro-influencer profile. The sample consists of 81% women and 18% men, with the remaining 1% being binary. A total of 38% of the micro-influencers surveyed are aged 25-34; 36% are aged 35-44; 14% are 45-55; and 12% are aged 18-24. A clear majority of 85% of the participants are active on Instagram and belong to sectors such as lifestyle (63.8%), beauty (48.6%), food (37.6%), and fashion (36.2%).

Finally, the questionnaire was designed based on benchmark micro-influencer studies carried out by researchers such as Peres and Silva (2021), Villegas-Simón et al., (2022), Kay et al., Parkinson (2020), and Britt et al. (2020), as well as research on influencer disclosure of content as advertising (Núñez-Cansado et al., 2021; Feijoo and Fernández-Gómez, 2021; Fernández-Gómez et al., 2021).

The survey's design also relied on industry studies focussed on agencies conducted by Carpenter et al. (2018) in the United States, and by Sanz-Marcos et al. (2019) and Smolak and López (2020) in Spain. Lastly, with regard to Spain, the authors have also taken into account the White Paper on Responsible Influence [*El Libro Blanco de la Influencia Responsable*] (IcMedia, 2021), the Code of Conduct on the Use of Influencers in Advertising [*El Código de Conducta sobre el uso de influencers en la publicidad*] (AEA and *Autocontrol*, 2020), and the guidelines included in the following publications by the European Advertising Standards Alliance for the EU: EASA Digital Marketing Communications Best Practice Recommendation (2015); and the EASA Influencer Marketing Best Practice Recommendation (2023).

3. Results

3.1. Identifying and accepting advertising content

As seen in Table 1, the influencers analysed have the impression that their followers differentiate and accept commercial content. Thus, micro-influencers believe that the following is true: Their followers know the brands they work with because the prescribers report this information (86%); their online community understand that brands offer gifts to the influencers in the form of products (81%); Finally, their followers accept and appreciate advertising content (73%). Furthermore, 49% state that their community know they work with platforms and agencies because the influencers indicate this on their social media profiles. However, prescribers are not sure if their followers are familiar with the work they do as content creators, with 34% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Table 1. Micro-influencers' level of agreement regarding their followers' knowledge of their work

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Completely agree
They know the work I do because I explain the process I use to create content.	10%	22%	34%	25%	9%
They know I work with platforms and agencies because I show this on my account.	8%	17%	26%	35%	14%
They know the brands I work with because I give them this information.	3%	2%	9%	49%	37%
They know that brands give me free products or services when I create content for them.	1%	2%	16%	50%	31%
They accept and appreciate the advertising content.	1%	4%	22%	46%	27%

Source: prepared by the authors

In short, the prescribers suggest that they signpost content that has an advertising purpose so that their followers can recognise the brands. They also visibly indicate the fact that they work for an advertiser, and they believe their followers are aware of this and accept it. However, it is unclear whether the followers understand how this content is created and the work that goes into it.

3.2. Transparency in publishing advertising content

As seen in Table 2, 65% of the micro-influencers who took part in this study insert a label indicating *collaboration* or *advertisement* in the publications they post for a brand, so that their followers can see that this content is paid for by an advertiser. It also bears mentioning that 20% did not respond to this statement with a clear answer, saying they neither agree nor disagree with the assertion. Moreover, 15% of the content creators do not use this technique to identify commercial partnerships.

Another way that influencers give visibility to the brands they work for is by mentioning them in the publication. Thus, 97% of those surveyed said they always mention the brand using the label @brandname. In fact, this feature is used most often by prescribers to indicate commercial content.

When asked whether they fail to achieve strong engagement when they indicate that content is for advertising purposes, 38% agree with this assertion. However, 39% seem reluctant to confirm this statement, as they neither agree nor disagree, and 23% disagree with the assumption.

Table 2. Micro-influencers' level of agreement on indicating commercial content in brand publications

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Completely agree
I always add a hashtag indicating that the content is either a collaboration or an advertisement (Example: #collaboration#advertising).	6%	9%	20%	24%	41%
I always mention the brand in the publication (Example: @brandname).	0%	1%	2%	17%	80%
If it is clearly shown that the post is an advertisement, it is not well received by the target audience and there is less interaction.	6%	17%	39%	21%	17%
The platforms or agencies I work with inform us of the need to indicate that a publication is based on a collaboration with brands.	3%	5%	25%	39%	28%
The brands I work with remind me of the need to indicate which content is advertising.	6%	15%	24%	30%	25%

Source: prepared by the authors

Regarding whether the agencies or platforms they work for ask them to indicate advertising content, 67% of the micro-influencers say this is the case, and they are in favour of this commitment by the advertising industry. However, 25% do not

have a clear opinion, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Such transparency decreases in the case of advertisers, with 55% of influencers agreeing that brands remind them of the need to point out advertising publications, 15% disagreeing, and 24% taking no position. This indicates that advertising agencies and platforms are more engaged than advertisers in terms of transparency with followers.

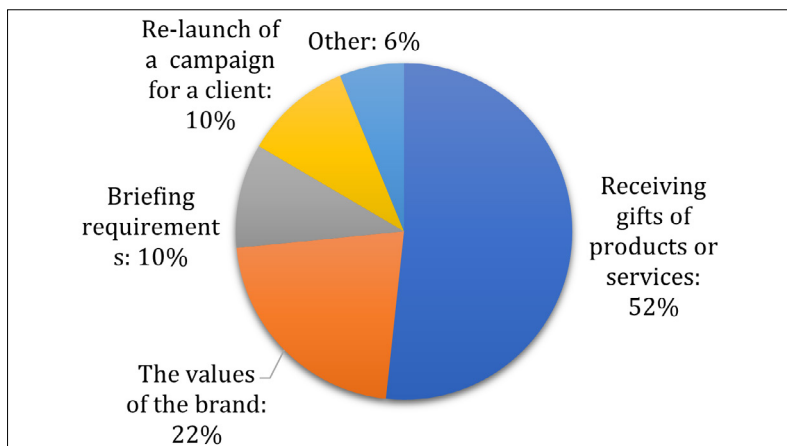
3.3. Incentives for creating advertising content

To understand micro-influencers' relationship with brands and how this affects their transparency with followers, they were asked about their main reasons for creating advertising content. As shown in Figure 1, 52% of the respondents highlighted the free products or services they receive as an incentive for generating content for advertisers. It also bears mentioning that 22% stated that the second motivation for producing commercial content is because they believe in the values of the brand.

When asked what other factors motivate them to collaborate with brands, they stated that when a company matches their personal profile, they feel motivated to work with that brand, and they also mentioned that they choose products that offer real benefits to their followers.

As such, the commitment they make to their community is expressed through the type of collaborations they undertake, while considering the values they communicate as well.

Graph 1. Motivations of micro-influencers to collaborate with brands



Source: prepared by the authors

Motivation resulting from the requirements set by the client through the briefing, or the fact that the influencers already know the brand's way of working and can easily re-launch a campaign, account for 10% of the participants. The briefing is a document containing the initial information for carrying out an advertising campaign. In the open response, the influencers specifically indicated the conditions of the campaign or the freedom offered by the brands as another motivating factor.

3.4. Creating advertising content and the ethical implications therein

Despite the fact that micro-influencers see themselves as people who are not professionally engaged in this activity full time, when asked how they feel about their work of creating sales content, several participants referred to the need to make this activity a real profession. Only three respondents indicated that they do it as a hobby.

Thus, on the one hand, the prescribers claim that the work of influencers with less than 100,000 followers should start making money from their activity, due to the fact that the creation of content involves work that is not sufficiently compensated by the brand's gifts alone. In other words, one of their demands is that they should be compensated with money. As advertising platforms and agencies charge brands to find prescribers to create sales content for these companies, the influencers feel that they should receive monetary compensation as well. On the other hand, they point out that the industry is not yet fully aware of the power of micro-influencers in connecting brands to consumers, due to the fact that their community of followers is much smaller, yet they are much more loyal and take the advice of the influencers.

For this reason, they are starting to reflect on the altruistic work they carry out for brands without being paid, and instead receive only a few gifts from the companies involved, while being obliged to work under the directives set forth by the advertisers. Moreover, regarding transparency, some respondents say it is not beneficial to indicate that influencers have obtained these products free of charge instead of buying them, as they believe that by displaying "paid collaboration" in the content, this reduces their credibility.

They also made it clear that the agencies themselves often request the removal of indications that the content is an advertisement. Finally, other comments mentioned the lack of training regarding how to advertise responsibly, as well as a shortage of information about content creators' rights.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This research addresses one of the least studied groups of influencers from an academic and professional point of view, yet this group displays higher levels of engagement with their followers, and even higher levels of effectiveness (Park et al., 2021). Given the concern nowadays regarding the growing importance of this profession, in which advertising content is created for brands, and that these commercial partnerships are often not indicated to the audience, we have addressed this issue from the perspective of micro-influencers and their unease regarding the transparency and ethics of their activity.

Thus, we first asked the influencers whether they believe the audience accepts and clearly recognises advertising in the content created by the prescribers, and whether the audience is aware that the influencers obtain free products in exchange for promoting brands. All three values obtained high scores, with 86% of the influencers believing that consumers are aware of the existence of certain brands due to the reports made by prescribers; 81% believe that their followers know that brands give the influencers gifts in the form of products. To a lesser extent, though still considerable, is the fact that 73% believe their followers accept and appreciate advertising content. Despite these strong indicators, with regard to the open question about their work as creators of sales content, it is clear that some respondents do not agree with this practice. Some believe that if they admit to a follower that the product is a gift that was not purchased and, for that reason, they have used labels such as

“paid advertisement”, this will reduce their credibility. However, if they do not divulge this information, they will breach the Code of Conduct on the Advertising Use of Influencers.

Accepting certain advertising formats would require, on the one hand, a commitment from micro-influencers to carry out their advertising activity with transparency. On the other hand, it would require sufficient advertising literacy on the part of audiences, especially minors, who tend to take an active role in the advertising they consume (Fernández-Gómez et al., 2023). Secondly, regarding the transparency of content disseminated by micro-influencers, 95% claim they mention the brand in their posts, yet only 65% include the tags “advertisement” or “collaboration”. This suggests that the first practice is more related to giving visibility to the brand than to being transparent with the audience. In fact, 39% do not know, or do not give an answer, to the statement as to whether pointing out that certain content is advertising lowers their credibility. However, we have already seen in the open question that some micro-influencers say this is the case, and 38% agree with the statement that if the publication is clearly signposted as an advertisement, it is not well received by the audience in terms of less interaction. Finally, the respondents believe there is more ethical involvement from advertising platforms and agencies than from the advertising brands themselves, as 67% stated that the former organisations ask them to indicate when a certain piece of content is an advertisement, compared to 55% who say that the brands make this request.

It should be noted that the Code of Conduct on the use of influencers in advertising recommends using clear generic indications such as “advertising”, “advert”, “collaboration”, “in collaboration with”, or “sponsored by”. Or, as an alternative, descriptive indications according to the specific collaboration in question, such as “Ambassador of [X brand]”, “Thanks to [X brand]”, “A gift from [X brand]”, “Sponsored trip”, etc. However, this code is voluntary, especially in the case of micro-influencers. Thus, the code states that it links all members of the AEA and AUTOCONTROL, and any other company in the sector, such as advertisers, agencies, representatives, and the media, as well as influencers who voluntarily comply with the guidelines.

Thirdly, regarding the motivations of these content creators for working with a brand, 52% state that the free products or services they receive is the reason why they create sales content for companies. This makes perfect sense, considering that this type of influencer does not receive money as a result of not working full time in the sector. Instead, their collaboration is compensated with gifts of the brand’s goods or discounts on purchases. As such, it would be useful to look more closely at the type of products or services they promote, and whether this might affect transparency. After all, the briefing provided by the brand or re-launching a campaign was stated as an incentive for collaboration by only 10% of the participants, among all the reasons for working with a brand.

Finally, the aim of this study is to understand how micro-influencers feel about the work they carry out with brands. This open-ended question resulted in several interesting comments, including the lack of monetary compensation for their activity, as well as the need for the industry to act ethically and responsibly not only toward consumers, but also toward the micro-influencers themselves. These responses coincide with a study conducted by Villegas Villegas-Simón et al. (2022), who also confirmed that nearly half the publications created by the micro-influencers analysed are not monetised, meaning that their hard work is not compensated. Platforms and agencies act as a link between influencers and brands. Content creators usually do the work according to the instructions provided by advertisers, but in many cases, the time and effort they spend on these publications is not compensated with goods or services. Furthermore, a lack of training in transparency has been observed,

as well as a shortage of responsible content. This could be remedied through training courses, which is the case in nearby countries such as France, who are pioneers in approving regulations governing the advertising activity of these individuals. In fact, influencers in France receive a certificate of Responsible Influence after passing a training course. Although most of the micro-influencers in the sample are not associated with fields such as medicine or finance, it would be highly useful for certain sectors to require a minimum level of training in order for prescribers to create responsible content for the public.

As usual, this study has certain limitations, one of which is the sample and methodology used. In spite of this, we believe the research provides an initial insight into this phenomenon, and once again points out the need to continue promoting transparency in commercial content in order to avoid advertising practices that do not guarantee consumer protection. This is especially important due to the fact that anyone can become an influencer, and this natural sincerity is exactly what brands are looking for. This raises the need to supplement this research with in-depth interviews in which micro-influencers can elaborate on the statements of this survey and freely address their work as content creators for brands.

Regarding the sample, one aspect should be kept in mind. As this is an exploratory study in which the nature of this type of influencer is unknown, due to the profile having not been segmented by gender or age, the purpose of the survey is to collect as many opinions as possible. Future research will be able to improve the representativeness of the selected sample. One finding of this study, like that of Peres and Silva (2021), is that micro-influencers are mostly women.

The authors believe it is necessary to ask the message senders themselves what the regulatory framework for influencer marketing activity should be, and how it can enforce responsible behaviour by agencies, brands, and influencers in providing truthful information and promoting transparency in their activity.

Such a framework should consider the need to identify the content as advertising, as well as to establish legal and ethical limits upon which influencer marketing should be founded.

It bears mentioning the recent approval of Royal Decree 444/2024, of 30 April, which regulates the requirements for being categorised as a user of special relevance of video exchange services through a platform, in accordance with the development of article 94 of Law 13/2022, of 7 July, General Law on Audio-visual Communication [*General de Comunicación Audiovisual*]. Although this legislation only applies to influencers with an income of more than 300,000 euros per year, and an audience of more than one million followers, at least it establishes a new, and necessary, legal framework to regulate their activity.

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6. Specific contributions of each author

	Name and surname
Conception and work design	Erika Fernández-Gómez
Methodology	Erika Fernández-Gómez
Data collection and analysis	Erika Fernández-Gómez and Natalia Quintas-Froufe
Discussion and conclusions	Erika Fernández-Gómez and Natalia Quintas-Froufe
Drafting, layout, review and version approval	Erika Fernández-Gómez and Natalia Quintas-Froufe

7. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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