

Micro-influencers: perception on the relationship with followers and commercial actions that increase their involvement

Micro-influencers: percepción sobre la relación con sus seguidores y acciones comerciales que incrementan su participación

Micro-influenciadores: percepção da relação com os seus seguidores e ações comerciais que aumentam sua participação

Erika Fernández-Gómez, Universidad Internacional de la Rioja (UNIR), La Rioja, Spain (erika.fernandez@unir.net)

Jessica Fernández-Vázquez, Universidad Internacional de la Rioja (UNIR), La Rioja, Spain (jessica.fernandez@unir.net)

Begoña Gutiérrez-Martínez, Universidad Internacional de la Rioja (UNIR), La Rioja, Spain (begona.gutierrez@unir.net)

Alba López-Bolás, Universidad Internacional de la Rioja (UNIR), La Rioja, Spain (alba.lopezbolas@unir.net)

ABSTRACT | Influencers are a key part of the advertising industry. Among them, those with less than 100,000 followers achieve an excellent level of engagement by building a closer and more credible relationship with their audience. As part of this study, 290 micro-influencers were surveyed about their relationship with their followers, as well as the commercial actions they can take to increase interaction. The results show that small communities are indeed useful for brands. Thus, according to the surveyed opinion, micro-influencers' followers share their concerns and preferences; they accept and positively evaluate the commercial content they publish, and they are aware that brands give away the products or services they talk about in their content. Furthermore, there is no consensus that more followers make their work more complex, and they believe that there are areas where it is easier to create digital content. Finally, from their point of view, the commercial formats that achieve the best engagement are the audiovisual ones in which the product appears, as well as those that allow interaction, such as the question-answer formula.

KEYWORDS: Micro-influencers; influencer marketing; followers; involvement; commercial actions; advertising.

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RESUMEN | *Los influencers son una pieza clave de la industria publicitaria. Entre ellos, los que tienen menos de 100.000 seguidores consiguen excelentes niveles de engagement al establecer una relación más cercana y creíble con su audiencia. Esta investigación ha preguntado a 290 micro-influencers sobre su relación con sus seguidores y las acciones comerciales que permiten aumentar la interacción. Los resultados muestran que, efectivamente, las pequeñas comunidades son de utilidad para las marcas. Así, según los prescriptores encuestados, los seguidores de los micro-influencers comparten inquietudes y gustos; aceptan y valoran de forma positiva los contenidos comerciales que publican y son conscientes de que las marcas regalan los productos o servicios de los que hablan en sus contenidos. Asimismo, no existe consenso sobre el hecho de que más seguidores haga más complejo su trabajo y sí creen que hay sectores donde la labor de creación de contenidos digitales es más fácil. Finalmente, los formatos comerciales que mejor engagement consiguen –según su percepción– son los audiovisuales en los que aparece el producto, así como aquellos que permiten la interacción como la fórmula pregunta-respuesta.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Micro-influencers; marketing de influencia; seguidores; participación; acciones comerciales; publicidad.*

RESUMO | Os influenciadores são uma parte fundamental do setor da publicidade. Entre eles, os que têm menos de 100 000 seguidores conseguem excelentes níveis de interação, estabelecendo uma relação mais próxima e credível com o seu público. Esta investigação questionou 290 *micro-influenciadores* sobre a sua relação com os seus seguidores, bem como sobre as ações comerciais que lhes permitem aumentar a interação. Os resultados mostram que as pequenas comunidades são, de fato, úteis para as marcas. Assim, de acordo com as pessoas inquiridas, os seguidores dos *micro-influenciadores* compartilham preocupações e gostos; aceitam e valorizam positivamente os conteúdos comerciais que publicam e estão conscientes de que as marcas oferecem os produtos ou serviços de que falam nos seus conteúdos. Além disso, não é consensual que mais seguidores tornem o seu trabalho mais complexo e acreditem que há sectores onde é mais fácil criar conteúdo digital. Por último, os formatos comerciais que conseguem um melhor engajamento - segundo a sua percepção - são os formatos audiovisuais em que aparece o produto, bem como os que permitem a interação, como a fórmula pergunta-resposta.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Micro-influenciadores; marketing de influência; seguidores; participação; ações comerciais; publicidade.*

INTRODUCTION

Influence marketing has become an important tool in the field of advertising. In Spain, investment in advertising rose to 63.9 million euros in 2022, a significant increase of 22.8% compared to the previous year, as documented by Sánchez Eguinoa in 2023. A significant development can be observed in which influencers now represent a category of their own within the valued media landscape. Their rise has been unbroken since 2019 underpinned by changing consumer behavior. Around half of social media users actively follow influencers, with Instagram being a particularly popular platform, according to a report by IAB Spain and Elogia in 2023.

The influencer has become a central figure with the ability to bridge the gap between brands and consumers. However, it is the cohort of digital influencers with less than 100,000 followers, often referred to as 'micro-influencers', who are characterized by a higher level of engagement by building a closer relationship with their audience (Conde & Casais, 2023). By 'engagement' or 'involvement' is meant not only the impact on consumers, but also their ability to interact with a brand in the midst of a landscape flooded with messages (Fernández-Gómez & Díaz-Del Campo, 2014; Solanas García & Carreras Margineda, 2011).

According to the Top Digital Trends report (IAB Spain & Adevinta Spain, 2023), an important reference in the advertising industry, we are on the threshold of a new era characterized by the rise of micro-communities. In this evolving landscape, brands must adapt by learning how to target smaller niche audiences defined not only by age and gender, but also by their specific interests and preferences.

So far, academic and professional research has mainly focused on understanding the relationship between influencers, brands and consumers from a reception-oriented perspective. As a result, studies have proliferated, utilizing methods such as content analysis of social media posts and consumer interviews.

This article proposes a study focused on gaining a deeper understanding of the influencer industry, with a particular focus on prescribers. Our research will examine a segment that has received little attention in the academic literature: micro-influencers. The main objective is to explore the relationships between micro-influencers and their followers and the commercial strategies that effectively drive engagement, considering that these influencers often achieve exceptionally high levels of engagement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The interest of influencer marketing for the advertising industry

The consumer has moved to the center of digital marketing strategies and is taking on an active role, which is made possible above all by the interactive possibilities of social networks as communication channels. Consumers are no longer limited to a passive role as viewers or listeners, but have direct access to the social profiles of companies and brands, allowing them to express their opinions and ensure that their recommendations and suggestions are acknowledged. As Castells (2012) points out, in our information-centric society, individuals have the ability to instantly access and disseminate information from any location and through the means they prefer (Castells, 2012). This phenomenon underscores the transformative nature of consumer engagement in the digital age.

Brands are strategically adapting to the changing landscape of consumer behavior by using various communication channels to maintain a meaningful connection with their audience. Consequently, their social media profiles are no longer solely used to promote products and services. Instead, brands are actively seeking to engage in a two-way dialog with users to ensure they feel valued and heard (Matosas-López, 2020). Social networks play a central role in shaping the reputation and image of brands, fostering genuine and transparent relationships that in turn contribute to higher sales (Arklan & Tuzcu, 2019). This phenomenon is attributed to the direct correlation between user engagement on these platforms and the overall success of the brand (Ballesteros Herencia, 2019). Brands that have recognized the importance of this phenomenon are now using influencers as influential advocates (Ramos-Serrano, Herrero-Diz, 2016). These influencers act as prescribers, guiding consumers towards consumption while improving the social perception of the brand and its products.

Influencer marketing has become a significant and fast-growing phenomenon in today's marketing landscape. It is characterized by the involvement of people external to the brand who have a strong persuasive power and are able to influence the purchasing behavior of a specific consumer group (Gómez Nieto, 2018). These people, commonly referred to as influencers are authors of content that has gained great popularity on the internet. They have expertise in specific niches, have a significant following that is valuable for brand marketing, and continuously produce valuable content on social media platforms (Lou & Yuan, 2019, p. 59). Influencers act as opinion leaders in their fields and have the ability to influence specific audiences due to their online prominence and credibility (Oneto et al., 2020).

Influencer campaigns on social networks are primarily based on the endorsement of specific products and services, a practice known as brand advocacy. Influencers artfully narrate positive consumer experiences in the first person, skillfully promoting product consumption to their target audience (Suárez, 2021). These campaigns not only keep the messages alive, but also reinforce their memorability, which helps to increase purchase intent and strengthen the relationship between consumer and brand (De Veirman et al., 2017). To maintain their credibility, influencers seamlessly integrate advertising into their regular content while maintaining the authenticity of their personality and personal brand (Fernández Gómez et al., 2018). They achieve this through captivating storytelling techniques that simultaneously increase traffic to their channels. The use of familiar language, direct communication and the genuine attention they provide encourage the building of trusting relationships (Fernández de Bordóns & Niño, 2021) based on the authenticity, truthfulness and personal nature of the messages conveyed (Gonzalez-Carrion & Aguaded, 2020). The lure of credibility and notoriety is undeniable for brands. They actively cultivate relationships with influencers to get closer to their target groups (Ponce Alvarado, 2018).

With this in mind, influencers have the ability to significantly increase the reach of publications, as shown by Castelló-Martínez (2016). Their ability to increase reach often surpasses that of official brand profiles, as they exert great influence over the engaged community of followers they have built up over time.

The rise of micro-influencers: greater ability to generate engagement

Traditionally, the success of influencers has been measured primarily by metrics such as the number of followers, likes and comments on their posts. However, with the emergence of micro-influencers, who attract the attention of an audience that is very valuable to brands despite having smaller follower numbers, a remarkable change has taken place. Those with fewer than 100,000 followers are proving to be particularly effective in this regard (Kayser, 2022). Their effectiveness is obvious, because although they only have a modest number of followers, they are characterized by a high level of trust, authority and authenticity within their target group. This unique combination makes them an ideal formula to exert significant influence (Alampi, 2020).

In both academic literature and industry reports, the categorization of social media influencers often revolves around the number of followers they have, albeit with slight variations depending on the source and context. A number of researchers have proposed different classification criteria. Boerman (2020) defines micro-influencers as people who have fewer than 10,000 followers. Sarmiento-Guede and

Rodríguez-Terceño (2020) raise the bar by setting a threshold of 30,000 followers to classify micro-influencers.

Conde and Casais (2023) conducted a localized study, specifically in Portugal, and identified three main categories based on the consensus of previous studies, including those by Campbell and Farrell (2020), Moffitt and Azarfar (2021), Porteous (2018) and Sinkwitz (2020). Their categorization includes the following points:

- Micro-influencers: those who have between 1,000 and 100,000 followers.
- Macro-influencers: those who occupy the spectrum of follower numbers between 100,000 and 1,000,000.
- Mega-influencers: those who accumulate more than 1,000,000 followers.

While these classification systems have differences, overall they highlight the multifaceted realm of social media influencers and the subtleties associated with the delineation of follower thresholds.

Micro-influencers are characterized by the fact that they lead smaller virtual communities than macro-influencers, yet they have a higher percentage of interaction and identification with their followers (Sarmiento-Guede & Rodríguez-Terceño, 2020). Their status as small-scale leaders gives them considerable influence in shaping opinions and attitudes (Córdova Tapia & Rivera-Rogel, 2020, p. 378), as they are widely perceived as experts and as approachable, authentic individuals (Conde & Casais, 2023). In addition, they are seen as unbiased, non-profit sources of information and knowledge, which contributes to stronger loyalty to the brands they recommend.

In the study conducted by Conde and colleagues (2023), several potential disadvantages of a particular approach were highlighted. These disadvantages include: reduced reach and visibility, challenges associated with large-scale activation, limited control over production and difficulties in measuring return on investment (ROI) (p. 2).

State of the art regarding micro-influencer research

Recent research has focused on micro-influencers, particularly from the perspective of how their audience absorbs and interacts with their content. These studies aim to define and classify different levels of engagement and influence that exist between micro-influencers and their followers. Research in this area often uses a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics.

In the field of influencer marketing research, various research methods have been used to understand the influence of influencers in different areas. Content analysis has been used to gain initial insights into the publications of influencer experts in areas such as fashion (Martínez-Sanz & González Fernández, 2018; Sanz Marcos et al., 2020; Shen, 2021) and food (Navarro-Beltrá & Herrero Ruiz, 2020). Specific sectors, such as motherhood, have also been studied, as shown by the research of Tabilo Prieto and colleagues (2023).

Quantitative research methods such as surveys (Martínez-Sala et al., 2019; Sarmiento-Guede & Rodríguez-Terceño, 2019; Conde & Casais, 2023), sometimes in conjunction with manipulated stimuli (Kim & Kim, 2020), have been used to collect extensive data and implement various metrics (Arora et al., 2019). These studies aim to measure the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies by analyzing the data provided by users and evaluating the impact of influencers on consumer behavior and perceptions.

In the field of social psychology, experiments have been conducted to investigate how the personalities of micro-influencers influence perceptions of the brands presented in their profiles (Zwicker et al., 2023). In these experiments, specific groups of participants were presented with different micro-influencer profiles and then shown the same profiles alongside different brands. The results of the study revealed significant differences in the way micro-influencer personalities influence perceptions of emerging and established brands. For emerging brands, people tend to make a connection between the micro-influencer's personality and the brand. However, for established brands, the relationship becomes more complicated due to consumers' pre-existing perceptions, often leading to what is known as a ceiling effect (Zwicker et al., 2023).

In addition, the importance of qualitative research should be emphasized, which often uses a combination of interviews and observational methods (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Audrezet et al., 2020). These studies are dedicated to researching authenticity management in the field of influencer marketing and the extent to which consumers' purchasing decisions are influenced by the actions and content of influencers on social networks.

We also come across studies conducted from an agency perspective. For example, Carpenter Childers and colleagues (2018) conducted a study in the United States. In Spain, the study by Sanz-Marcos and colleagues (2019) is worth mentioning, which included twenty in-depth interviews with Spanish agencies and a Delphi panel with 15 experts. There is also the study by Smolak Lozano and López García (2020), which is based on surveys and content analysis in the context of advertising agencies.

Finally, there is an increasing number of scientific articles dedicated to the study and categorization of concepts, profiles and roles related to influencer marketing (Bakker, 2018; Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Rios Marquez et al., 2021). These studies often use bibliographic reviews as a methodology to explore different perspectives, identify academic gaps and lay the groundwork for future research and business opportunities.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Based on the assumption that micro-influencers in the advertising sector have a special ability to build close connections with their audience, our main objective is to investigate the complicated dynamics of the relationship between micro-influencers and their followers.

As discussed in the theoretical framework, both academic and professional research has predominantly focused on understanding the relationship between influencers, brands and consumers from the standpoint of audience reception. However, there is a notable gap in our current understanding, particularly in the study of influencers as active subjects within the advertising message.

To gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics between micro-influencers and their followers, the following research questions are posed:

1. Who makes up the followership of micro-influencers and how does the size of the follower base affect the tasks and challenges of influencers?
2. Which content formats have been observed to improve interaction with followers and what specific promotional strategies have proven effective in encouraging active follower engagement?
3. How do micro-influencers view their role as content creators in relation to their followers? Do they believe that their followers are aware of the effort they put into their work?

METHODOLOGY

We proposed an exploratory study to investigate the emerging phenomenon of micro-influencers in the advertising industry. These micro-influencers are individuals within small communities who exert influence despite not being traditional advertising professionals. This study aims to gain insights into their role and influence (Conde & Casais, 2023).

The online survey technique facilitates the collection of insights and perspectives from both users and communication professionals. It has been widely used in research in sectors such as tourism (Martínez-Sala et al., 2019; Peres & Silva, 2021) and the fashion industry (Sarmiento-Guede & Rodríguez-Terceño, 2019), which are among the most studied areas in relation to influencers and social networks. This method is considered less intrusive and is therefore an effective way to conduct initial interviews with micro-influencers.

To answer the research questions, we developed a customized online survey that was subsequently distributed among FuelYouBrands (<https://fuelyourbrands.com/>) users. FuelYouBrands is a Spanish platform that facilitates connections between influencers and brands and streamlines campaign management processes. The platform has expanded its reach to Mexico and, more recently, Colombia. The final data set includes responses from 290 micro-influencers who participated in the survey between December 2022 and February 2023.

The questionnaire underwent a thorough evaluation of its ethical suitability by the Research Ethics Committee at the university to which the researchers are affiliated. Various ethical criteria and standards were considered in this evaluation and the ethical compliance of the questionnaire was positively assessed.

The questionnaire used in this study draws on key variables identified in previous research on micro-influencers by Peres and Silva (2021). Their study used a mixed methods approach that included qualitative in-depth interviews with 16 micro-influencers and quantitative surveys with 166 consumers. This research was conducted specifically in the context of the hotel industry. In addition, the design of the questionnaire was informed by insights from industry-specific research, including that conducted by Carpenter Childers and her colleagues (2018) in the United States, Sanz-Marcos and colleagues (2019) and Smolak and López (2020) on Spanish agencies. In addition, we have taken into account the *White Paper on Responsible Influence*, a project co-funded by the European Union and supported by iCmedia (San Miguel et al., 2021). iCmedia is a coalition of associations working to uphold quality standards in the media. This work is a conversation across 40 in-depth interviews with various stakeholders within the influencer ecosystem.

Variables	
Sociodemographic characteristics	Age, sex, place of residence
	Field of influence
	Main social network for sharing content
	Number of followers
Relationship with followers	Types of influencer followers
	Work challenges based on the number of followers
	Understanding of the content creation process
	Familiarity with the processes of the cooperating agencies
	Familiarity with the brands for which the content is created
	Evaluation of commercial content
	Industries in which commercial content is better received
	Formats that facilitate interaction with followers
	Strategies to improve audience engagement with commercial campaigns

Table 1. Survey variables to investigate the relationship between micro-influencers and their followers

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 1 shows the variables used to analyze the dynamics within the relationship between micro-influencer and follower. The questionnaire contains a separate section that sheds light on the socio-demographic profiles of these micro-influencers and includes questions on age, gender, place of residence, number of followers, preferred social media platform and professional field of activity.

The second part of this research was dedicated to exploring the relationship between micro-influencers and their followers. In this section, we used a combination of question types, including open-ended questions, multiple-choice questions and Likert-scale questions. These different question formats allowed us to determine the level of agreement and disagreement of the micro-influencers on different aspects.

Sample description

The sample of micro-influencers analyzed includes women aged 25 to 44 residing in Spain, as shown in table 2. In this group, Instagram is the main social network for influencer activity; 85% of micro-influencers use it, while 13% prefer TikTok. The remaining 2% are spread across other social platforms.

In terms of number of followers, 84% of these influencers have between 3,000 and 50,000 followers, while 8% have over 80,000 followers. A further 5% have fewer than 13,000 followers and 3% are in the 50,000 to 80,000 follower range.

SEX	NO.	%	AGE	NO.	%	PLACE OF RESIDENCE	NO.	%
BINARY	3	1%	between 18 and 24 years	36	12%	Andorra	1	1%
MAN	51	18%	between 25 and 34 years	110	38%	Mexico	61	21%
WOMEN	236	81%	between 35 and 44 years	103	36%	USA	1	0%
			between 45 and 55 years	40	14%	Mexico and USA	1	0%
			I prefer not to answer	1	0%	Spain	226	78%
TOTAL							290	

Table 2. Demographic profile of the micro-influencers analyzed

Source: Own elaboration.

Furthermore, micro-influencers engage in various sectors, with lifestyle (19%), beauty (15%), food and fashion (11% each) leading the way. Leisure (8%) and travel (7%) also play an important role, and 6% engage with content related to family and household. Importantly, these sectors are not mutually exclusive, so micro-influencers can divide their activities into several areas.

RESULTS

Types of followers

Micro-influencers rated the types of followers on their social networks using a scale from 1 (least important) to 6 (most important), as shown in table 3. They see their primary followers as people who share similar concerns or interests. The second category includes followers who are attracted to their content because it addresses specific needs. Some micro-influencers also see themselves as influencers in their own right. They also believe that their audience includes brands, advertisers, platforms and advertising agencies.

No.	Who are your followers	Average
1	People with similar interests or concerns	5.07
2	People whose needs match my content	4.34
3	Like-minded influencers in my niche	4.22
4	Brands or advertisers	3.17
5	Platforms that create connections between influencers and advertisers	2.16
6	Advertising agencies	2.04

Table 3. Average importance of micro-influencers for each follower type (rated on a scale of 1 to 6)

Source: Own elaboration.

As far as the complexity of the work of micro-influencers is concerned, 44.1% of respondents believe that it increases with the number of followers. In contrast, 34.1% claim that the complexity of the work remains the same even with a larger audience. It is worth noting that only 8% of micro-influencers surveyed have more than 80,000 followers, while the majority, 84%, have less than 50,000 followers.

Perception of the work of micro-influencers

Regarding followers’ knowledge of micro-influencers’ work, 65.9% of respondents do not fully agree that their community knows their work based on the information they provide in their content. Instead, they assume it is because of what they present in their profile, with the majority pointing to collaborations with platforms or agencies (as shown in table 4).

Of the micro-influencers surveyed, a clear majority (72.7%) believe that their followers not only accept but also appreciate the commercial content they share. Furthermore, a significant proportion (81%) of respondents acknowledge that their audience is aware of brand partnerships where products or services are made available for mention in their content. Interestingly, this is not a problem for micro-influencers, as 86.5% are confident that their followers can identify the brands they work with from the information presented in their content.

Furthermore, a clear majority of micro-influencers (78.9%) believe that certain areas such as food, travel, fashion and more are better suited to commercial content creation. It’s worth noting that these influencers are active in various sectors, including lifestyle (19%), beauty (15%) and food or fashion (11% each), with each sector having notable representation.

Followers...	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Are aware of my content creation process because I report on it	8.9%	25.1%	34.1%	21.3%	10.3%
Are aware of my collaborations with platforms/agencies because I state it	13.4%	35.1%	26.2%	17.2%	7.9%
Are aware of my brand collaborations because I state it	37.5%	48.9%	8.6%	1.7%	3.1%
Understand there are product/service partnerships	31%	50%	15.8%	2.4%	0.6%
Accept and value commercial content positively	27.2%	45.5%	21.7%	4.4%	1%

Table 4. The perception of micro-influencers in relation to the attention of their followers: percentages of responses

Source: Own elaboration.

Commercial actions, formats and interaction

In terms of commercial actions that lead to more interaction on micro-influencer channels, respondents believe that audiovisual formats such as reels or videos in posts where products or services are featured prominently have the greatest impact. Tutorials or demonstrations in which these products or services are presented are in second place in their opinion. Photographic content is in third place, while unboxing videos are in fourth place. According to the respondents, raffles and challenges generate the least interaction (table 5).

To address the question of which additional commercial actions improve interaction, we have compiled the answers in 14 frequently mentioned formats as given by the respondents. The distribution of answers can be found in table 6.

To improve interaction with the user, 19.7% of respondents use question-and-answer formats and interactive tools. One notable tool they highlight is the interactive sticker available in Instagram stories. This feature allows you to invite your followers to ask questions, which you can then answer directly. The interactive sticker is particularly popular on Instagram, the preferred social network of 85% of micro-influencers surveyed, and plays an important role in encouraging engagement with their audience.

Similarly, micro-influencers often use Instagram Stories (16.4%) as a means of engaging with their audience. Instagram Stories is the creation of temporary, 24-hour audiovisual content that is often used by influencers to share their personal experiences.

Nº	Acciones comerciales que aumentan la interacción	Promedio
1	Formatos audiovisuales: <i>reels</i> , vídeos, etc. en lo que aparezca el producto o servicio	5,29
2	Tutoriales o demostraciones	5,13
3	Una buena fotografía en la que aparezca el producto o servicio	4,57
4	<i>Unboxing</i>	4,47
5	Sorteos	3,85
6	Reto o <i>challenge</i>	3,37
7	Otras acciones	1,32

Table 5. Average importance rating of micro-influencers for interactive advertising campaigns (rated on a scale of 1 to 6)

Source: Own elaboration.

Other commercial actions that increase interaction	Percentage of answers
Questions-answers and formats that enable interaction	19.7%
Stories	16.4%
Quality of content and consistency in publishing	13.1%
Discounts, raffles and gifts	9.8%
<i>Collaboration with other influencers</i>	9.3%
Direct	8.4%
Sincerity, honesty, naturalness	5.1%
Surveys	5.1%
<i>Hashtags</i>	3.7%
Show the use of the product before and after use	2.3%
Image carousel	1.8%
Advertising	1.8%
Featured events	1.8%
Games	0.9%

Table 6. Percentage of commercial actions in open responses

Source: Own elaboration.

In addition, a significant proportion (13.1%) of respondents emphasized the importance of consistently posting high-quality content. In this context, ‘high-quality content’ often refers to posts that authentically incorporate the advertised product or service into personal narratives and lifestyle experiences.

There are a number of strategies to increase engagement with followers, according to respondents. One effective approach, cited by 9.8% of respondents, is to promote products and services through discounts, offers or prize draws. This incentivizes followers to interact and participate in promotions. Another tactic mentioned by 9.3% of respondents is collaboration with other influencers. This includes actions such as commenting on each other’s content, interacting with each other’s posts or running promotions together. In addition, respondents emphasized the practice of sharing stories with other profiles as a means of encouraging engagement.

Micro-influencers use various strategies to encourage interaction with their followers. Live streaming on social networks, for example, is a popular format used by 8.4% of respondents. Micro-influencers emphasize the importance of authenticity when live demonstrating the products they are promoting. Followers appreciate live streams because they perceive them as unedited and unmanipulated, which contributes to a sense of sincerity and trust.

Furthermore, 5.1% of respondents emphasize the importance of sincerity, honesty and naturalness in their content. These qualities serve as mechanisms to encourage audience engagement. By expressing their sincere opinions about products or services, micro-influencers can build a deeper connection with their followers. To summarize, micro-influencers use live streaming and authenticity to improve interaction, knowing that these strategies meet their audience's desire for transparent and genuine content.

In terms of additional commercial action mechanisms, several other strategies were mentioned by respondents, albeit with less frequency. These include using the survey sticker (5.1%), demonstrating the before and after use of the product (2.3%), using image carousels (1.8%), incorporating advertising into posts (1.8%), event-based communications (1.8%) and running interactive games (0.9%).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The importance of this research lies primarily in shedding light on the dynamics of the relationship between micro-influencers and their followers as perceived by these influencers themselves. This is achieved through the use of an analytical model that allows us to gain insights into this phenomenon. Furthermore, this research provides a basis for future studies that could further enrich our understanding of this topic.

As outlined in the theoretical framework, academic and professional research to date has primarily focused on understanding the dynamics between influencers, brands and consumers, primarily through the lens of reception. Consequently, studies using content analysis of social media posts or consumer interviews have become increasingly prevalent. While some research has looked at the activities of advertising agencies, there remains a notable gap in our understanding of influencers as the key disseminators of advertising messages. This study addresses this gap by engaging micro-influencers in discussions about their relationship with their followers and identifying the formats that allow for increased interaction.

According to the insights gained from the interviews, the success of micro-influencers is due to their ability to capture the attention of users who share similar concerns and preferences on social networks. They can even reach individuals with specific needs that the micro-influencers have proven to fulfill (as documented in a 2023 study by Tabilo and colleagues in the field of motherhood). These users often become loyal followers and form the core of a loyal community cultivated by the micro-influencer. This in turn fosters a sense of belonging among followers.

The results of our empirical study suggest that the central axis of micro-influencers' strategy lies in their engagement with their followers. From their point of view, this commitment is expressed in the creation of high-quality content that reflects the lifestyle they share. The honesty, naturalness and clarity of their messages contribute to their credibility as a source of information for their followers (Conde & Casais, 2023).

To achieve this, not all content is considered appropriate. Instead, the relationship is strengthened through daily posts that tell personal or lifestyle stories. In cases where promotional content is present, it is seamlessly integrated into the posts without hiding it. This exercise in transparency shows that, according to respondents, followers are fully aware of the promotional content on the influencer's profile, the micro-influencer's commercial intentions and their collaborations with agencies and brands. Remarkably, followers accept and respect these aspects as an integral part of the influencer's profession. According to the micro-influencers themselves, their followers are receptive and trust both the micro-influencer and their messages.

In our study, participants highlighted that the most successful micro-influencer content revolves around everyday life and lifestyle topics, particularly travel, food and fashion. In addition, competitions and promotions in collaboration with other influencers are also very popular with audiences, presumably for similar reasons. This credibility and popularity is particularly attractive to brands, as micro-influencers are perceived as effective channels for promoting their products and services. Brands seek to connect with their audiences through non-invasive, user-generated storytelling strategies and deliver a more natural message that focuses on the overall experience (Barquero Cabrero et al., 2023). Micro-influencers play a central role in fulfilling this goal.

Micro-influencers believe that effective communication with their followers is based on trust and credibility. In their opinion, the most important formats to improve interaction and conversation with their audience are primarily audiovisual, e.g. reels, videos in posts and Instagram Stories. These formats are favored because they increase credibility when they show the use of specific products, often accompanied by tutorials or demonstrations. Live broadcasts are also highly valued as they offer transparency by giving viewers the opportunity to make sure the content has not been manipulated. Micro-influencers also use features such as Q&A tags and reaction stickers to strengthen their relationship with their followers.

This suggests that there is a close relationship between micro-influencers and their followers. The level of credibility of these influencers within their communities is evidenced by the results obtained. Due to their remarkable ability

to generate engagement and spread content virally through their followers, they are a valuable asset for brands from which companies can benefit. Furthermore, the relationship between an increase in followers and an increase in the amount of work involved in managing the profile is not clear. While a significant proportion of micro-influencers surveyed, more than 44%, claim that this is the case, an equally significant proportion, more than 34%, claim the opposite.

As a recommendation for future research, it is suggested that semi-structured interviews be conducted to expand on the insights gained from the questionnaires. These interviews would give micro-influencers the opportunity to openly express their thoughts, which would further enrich our understanding of their perspective.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ERIKA FERNÁNDEZ-GÓMEZ, Ph.D. in Communication, she also holds a degree in Advertising from the Universidad de Vigo. Academic coordinator of the degree in Advertising at the Faculty of Business and Communication of UNIR. Lead researcher of the R+D+i project ADKIDS MOBILE, funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Government of Spain. Tenured professor with two six-year research periods by the CNEAI.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7088-1814>

JESSICA FERNÁNDEZ-VÁZQUEZ, Ph.D. in Communication, she also holds a degree in Advertising and Public Relations from the Universidad de Vigo. Academic coordinator of the Master in Business Administration (MBA) at the Faculty of Business and Communication, where she also teaches. Previously, she was part of the teaching and research staff at the Universidad de Vigo, and published several articles and book chapters on issues related to advertising, journalism, and communication, and served as director of Communication in the corporate world.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8127-5839>

BEGOÑA GUTIÉRREZ-MARTÍNEZ, Ph.D. in Information Sciences from the UCM, she also holds a degree in Audiovisual Communication from the Universidad de Valencia. She teaches at the Faculty of Business and Communication at UNIR. She has taught at the Universidad Nebrija and at the Centro de Educación Superior Next, attached to the Universidad de Lleida. She has worked as a multimedia journalist in the International Department of Agencia EFE and has experience in corporate communication management and digital marketing at NexStreaming.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0046-9696>

ALBA LÓPEZ-BOLÁS, Ph.D. in Communication, she also holds a degree in Audiovisual Communication from the Universidad de Vigo. She is the coordinator of the university master's degree in Digital Marketing at the Faculty of Business and Communication, where she also teaches. She also worked as a teacher and researcher at the Universidad de Vigo and the Universidad de Santiago de Compostela. Author of several publications and scientific articles on advertising, communication, and social networks.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3885-4007>