

The Advertising Effectiveness of Influencer Marketing in the Fashion Industry

La eficacia publicitaria del marketing de *influencers*
en el sector de la moda

A eficácia publicitária do marketing de influência na
indústria da moda

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Abstract

The influencer phenomenon, a consequence of the profound change in communication and advertising brought about by technology, has been studied with increasing intensity since the beginning of the 21st century. The fashion industry in Spain is one of the biggest adopters of influencer marketing and, for this reason, this universe has been chosen to conduct this research. The main objective was to describe the elements that have an impact on the effectiveness of this strategy within this sector. The methodological design with a qualitative approach was developed in two sequential phases: a review of the state of the art followed by six in-depth interviews. The sample was selected at the discretion of the research team, with two conditions of inclusion: to be experts in communication and to be currently related to the Spanish fashion industry. Coinciding with previous research on influencers, the main conclusion indicates that the alignment of the values of the brand, the influencer and the client is essential for the success of the communication strategy through influencers. Specifically, experts indicate that 'you have to look for an influencer that really fits with your product', since it is essential that they coincide in the same target audience and the same values. The biggest difference found with respect to other sectors is that trust is not as relevant as a relatively accessible aesthetic universe to achieve a high level of engagement.

Keywords:

Communication; online advertising; social networks; influencers; fashion; active audience

Resumen

El fenómeno *influencers*, consecuencia del gran cambio en la comunicación y la publicidad que la tecnología ha propiciado, se está estudiando con intensidad creciente desde el inicio del siglo XXI. El sector de la moda en España es uno de los mayores adoptantes del marketing de *influencers* y, por ese motivo, se ha elegido este universo para efectuar esta investigación. El principal objetivo ha sido describir los elementos que repercuten en la eficacia de esta estrategia dentro de este sector. El diseño metodológico con enfoque cualitativo se desarrolla en dos fases secuenciales: una revisión del estado de la cuestión seguida por seis entrevistas en profundidad. La muestra fue seleccionada a criterio del equipo de investigadoras, con dos condiciones de inclusión: ser personas expertas en comunicación y estar actualmente relacionadas de forma directa con la industria de la moda española. Coincidiendo con anteriores investigaciones sobre *influencers*, la conclusión principal indica que el alineamiento de los valores de la marca, las personas *influencer* y del cliente es esencial para el éxito de la estrategia de comunicación mediante estas figuras. Concretamente, las personas expertas indican que “tienes que buscar un *influencer* que realmente encaje con tu producto”, ya que es esencial que coincidan en el mismo público objetivo y los mismos valores. La mayor diferencia encontrada respecto a otros sectores es que la confianza no es tan relevante como un universo estético relativamente cercano para conseguir un elevado nivel de *engagement*.

Palabras clave:

Comunicación; publicidad *online*; redes sociales; *influencers*; moda; audiencia activa

Resumo

O fenómeno do influencer, consequência da grande mudança na comunicação e na publicidade provocada pela tecnologia, tem sido estudado com intensidade crescente desde o início do século XXI. O sector da moda em Espanha é um dos que mais adopta o marketing de influência e, por esta razão, este universo foi escolhido para esta investigação. O objetivo principal foi descrever os elementos que afectam a eficácia desta estratégia neste sector. O desenho metodológico com abordagem qualitativa foi desenvolvido em duas fases sequenciais: uma revisão do estado da arte seguida de seis entrevistas em profundidade. A amostra foi seleccionada de acordo com o critério da equipa de investigação, com duas condições de inclusão: serem especialistas em comunicação e estarem atualmente diretamente relacionados com a indústria da moda espanhola. Coincidindo com pesquisas anteriores sobre influenciadores, a principal conclusão indica que o alinhamento dos valores da marca, do influenciador e do cliente é essencial para o sucesso da estratégia de comunicação do influenciador. Especificamente, os especialistas indicam que "é preciso procurar um influenciador que realmente se encaixe no seu produto", pois é essencial que eles coincidam no mesmo público-alvo e nos mesmos valores. A maior diferença encontrada em relação a outros sectores é que a confiança não é tão relevante como um universo estético relativamente simples.

Palavras-chave:

Comunicação; publicidade em linha; redes sociais; influenciadores; moda; público ativo

1. Introduction

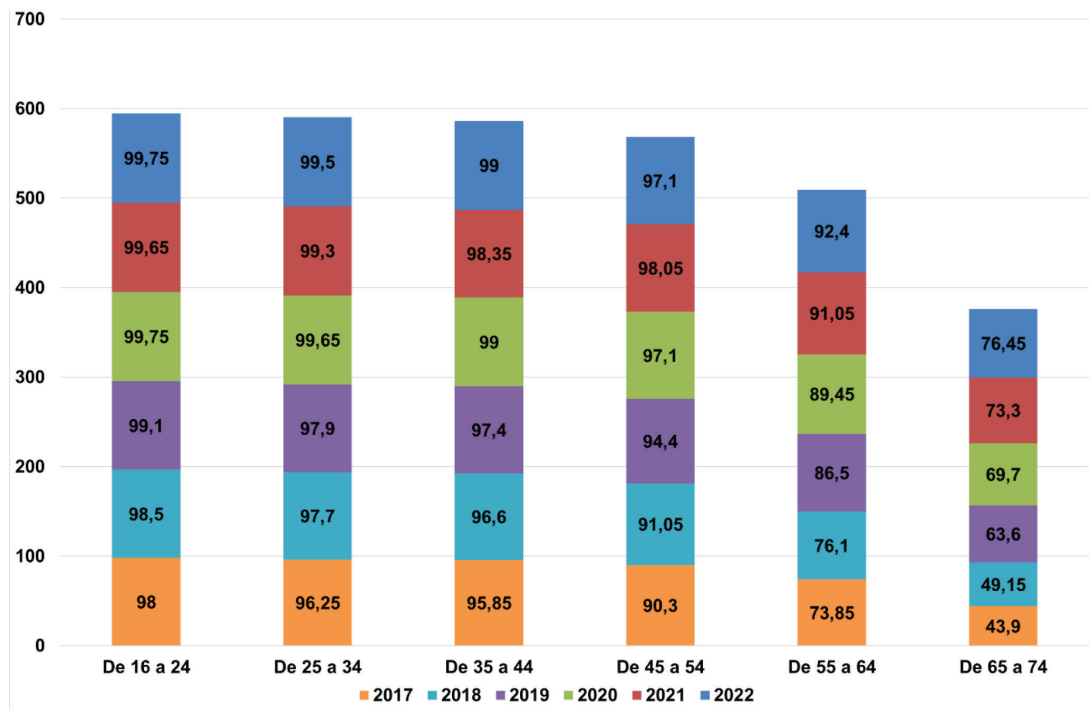
More than thirty years since the emergence of the internet in everyday life and, above all, following COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, most of the world's population can be considered to have well-developed digital skills. We learnt, albeit by force, how to feel close to our fellow human beings when it was not possible to meet in person. Thus, according to Dans (2017), many adults, particularly older persons, find themselves in a communicative environment that has little, or nothing, to do with the one in which they were brought up. As illustrated

in Figure 1 (INE, 2022), internet use has increased in all age groups, notably in people over 65 years of age. Indeed, 85% of internet users in Spain currently use social networks (IAB SPAIN, 2023).

Younger people, especially those born since 1990, have grown up in a rapidly changing technological environment. However, contrary to Prensky’s findings (2001), they cannot be classified as digital natives with fully developed technology skills. It seems more plausible, as posited by Lluna and Pedreira (2017), that it is technology that has adapted to people, making its use more straightforward – and even addictive.

Today’s focus on news and advertising is drastically different from how it was in the 1990s, before the advent of two-way communication (Levine et al., 1999; Guerrero-Navarro et al., 2022).

Figure 1. Internet Penetration in Spain



Source: own elaboration using data from the National Statistics Institute (INE, 2022)

Interactivity, defined as computer-mediated interpersonal communication (Rafaeli and Sudweeks, 1997) is the basis of what is currently defined as social audience (Iniesta-Alemán and Sidorenko, 2023). Furthermore, this type of active audience is spread across multiple media platforms (Sidorenko Bautista et al., 2018, p. 19) and social networks, creating a space for conversation, debate and even gossip. It encompasses news and advertising spaces that were previously covered by the traditional media.

2. The State of the Art

2.1. Interest of this Study

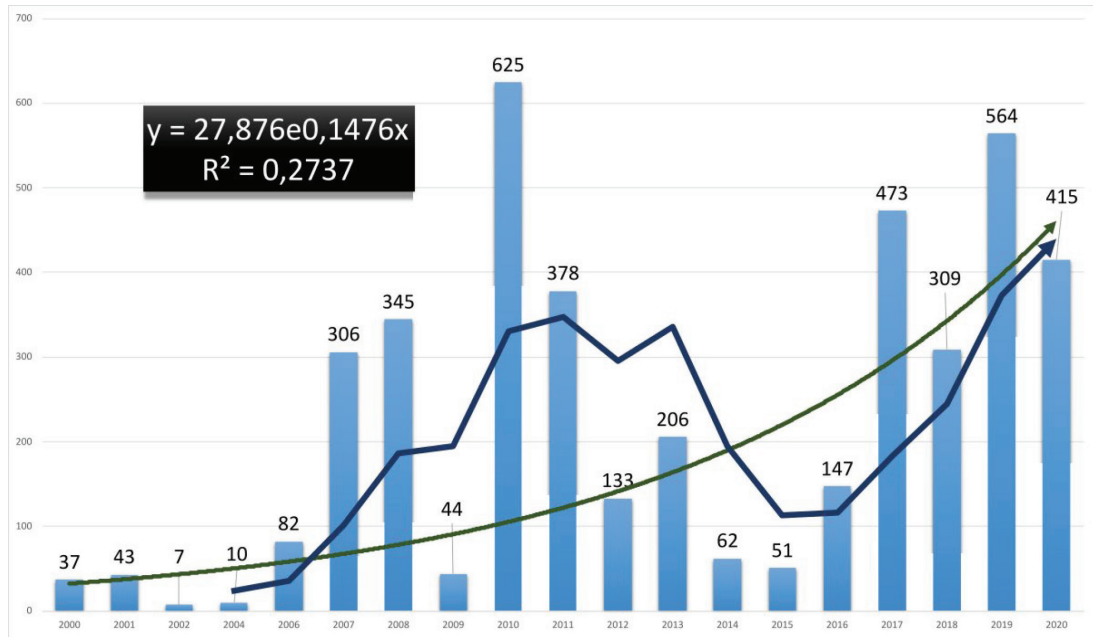
Understanding the behaviour of active social network audiences, from the perspective of marketing, and more particularly communication, is essential to be able to design strategies for these new digital contexts. Academic research has tended to focus on the characteristics of influencers and the content they post on social networks. However, there is a lack of studies focusing on the vital elements of what makes 'influencer's attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise effective in advertisings from the consumer's perspective' (Ata et al., 2022, p. 6).

Marketing managers are unsure about how to achieve maximum effectiveness from their influencer marketing investments (Renchen, 2020). Furthermore, the link between these new online communication professionals and the world of advertising has not yet been sufficiently studied in the scientific literature (Monge-Benito et al., 2021; Sanz et al., 2024). Figure 2 shows that during the period 2000–2020 in SCOPUS 4,237 articles were published and indexed about influencers and it is a topic with a clear upward trend.

2.2. Influencer Marketing as a Communication Strategy

Brand values create a bridge between the company and the segment of the market it wishes to persuade. To maintain this link, the company must choose its communication partners carefully. Their messages and the channels used to deliver these

Figure 2. Evolution of the Number of Articles Published About Influencers



Source: own elaboration using SCOPUS data

messages must also be considered. Companies are also aware of this powerful new concept: the influencer. This term is used to describe a basic and longstanding marketing concept: opinion leadership, referring to a person's capacity to persuade others, even if they have no knowledge or training about what they are talking about.

If this person has academic or professional authority on the topic, they are referred to, conceptually, as an expert endorser (Castello-Martinez and Pino Romero, 2015). Today, all kinds of companies have a wide range of possibilities to transmit their messages more effectively than with the so-called traditional media (Marín Dueñas and Simancas González, 2019, p. 95). The influence of these new opinion leaders has made it necessary for the marketing and communication plan model to be rethought (Montserrat-Gauchi and Sabater-Quinto, 2017). This need is illustrated by the fact that the most popular YouTube, TikTok and Instagram channels belong to influencers, not brands. In turn, influencer profiles encompass

those of celebrities with thousands of followers and others who are simply micro-influencers. The latter have a smaller community, but still exert significant influence over their followers. While authors such as Rios et al. (2020) maintain that micro-influencers generate a higher number of likes and comments on their posts, in the fashion sector it is macro-influences (Blanco Sánchez and Moreno Albarracín, 2024) who achieve more interactions. The fact that they have less training than authors who write about the same topics in specialised journals seems to be irrelevant; it is, instead, their ability to create content that allows them to build communities and maximise their visibility to the point of obtaining economic benefits (Monge-Benito et al., 2021).

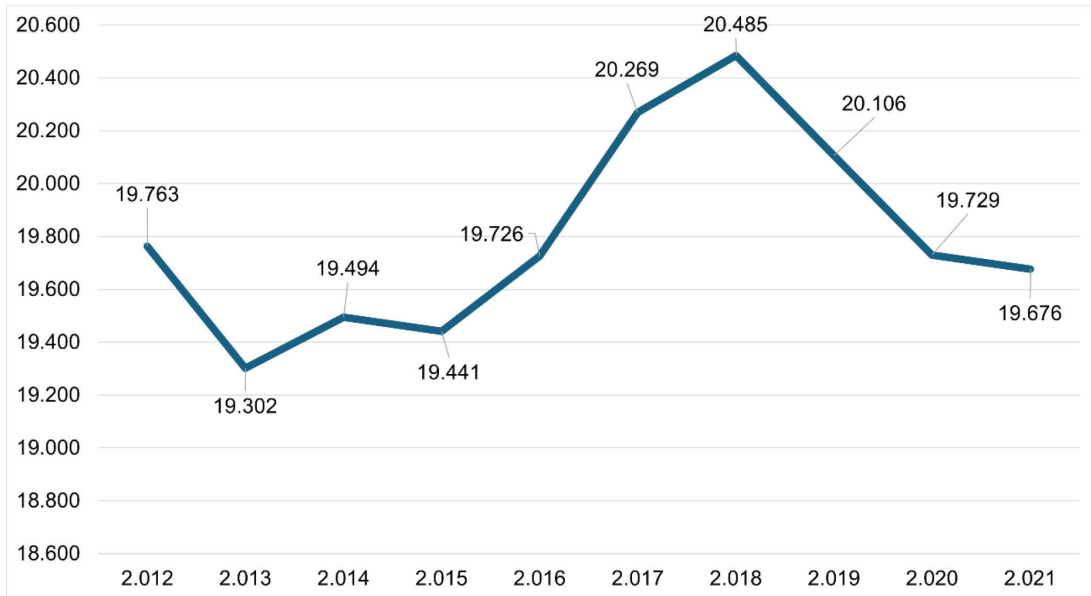
2.3. The Fashion Sector and Digital Environment

Fashion, as an expression of a consumer's taste and personality, and as a sign of social status, has enormous economic potential in both the real world and the Metaverse (Xiangyu, et al., 2024). Indeed, haute couture is already engaging with virtual worlds and augmented reality (Armitage, 2022). All this is due to the fact that the digital revolution has brought with it a more global market and a more informed and demanding consumer, leading to heightened competition between fashion brands (Merino-Cajaraville et al., 2022, p. 844).

The fashion industry, which accounts for 2.8% of Spanish GDP and which comprises some 19,799 companies (Figure 3), is one of the most competitive and dynamic markets when it comes to social networks (Quevedo-Espinoza and Vidal-Fernández, 2023).

Moreover, this sector is undergoing cultural recycling and re-evaluation of value association systems (Zurian et al., 2023, p. 23). A revisited masculinity, empowered femininity and trends such as body positivity (Cowles et al., 2023), sustainability and transparency are signs of the times. Certain legal and ethical limits to influencer marketing have gradually been introduced (Vilajoana et al., 2019; Sanz et al., 2024) particularly through self-monitoring by companies and influencers. The aim of such limits is to avoid the potential abuse or manipulation that could result from the trust placed in influencers by the general public.

Figure 3. Evolution of the Number of Companies in the Fashion Sector in Spain



Source: own elaboration using data from the INE

For social network users it is hard to distinguish whether the style of the person they follow is their own or has been suggested by a brand. This advantage over conventional advertising has been exploited by these new communicators. As such, most fashion instagrammers in Spain do not disclose the paid content in their posts (Sixto-García and Álvarez Vázquez, 2020; Agulleiro-Prats et al., 2020; Monge-Benito et al., 2021; Fernández-Blanco and Ramos Gutiérrez, 2022). The mere mention of a brand seems to be understood by audiences as sufficient disclosure that there is a quid pro quo (Monge-Benito et al., 2021, p. 1158).

2.4. The Role of Influencers in the Buying Process

The buying process, which is triggered by the potential customer becoming aware of their need, involves an initial phase of searching for possible solutions

to this problem. Therefore, it should be noted that those who follow such social network profiles are likely to be more knowledgeable about the influencers' area of expertise (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). That is, it is this prior interest in a topic that turns them into followers of a person who speaks about and shares interesting content on it. 'Therefore, when the influencer marketing action is congruent with the regular content published by the influencer, followers react more favourably, and look for information about the products advertised' (Belanche et al., 2020, p. 47).

In consequence, it is very likely that consumers, given the low cost of acquiring information digitally, will turn to a variety of sources to plan their purchases. Indeed, 'the ease of access to multiple influencers, ironically, may serve as an impediment to information gathering, as the proliferation of experts makes information search seem never truly complete' (Hamilton et al., 2021, p. 78).

For consumers to develop brand awareness and purchase intention, it is essential (Renchen, 2020) that the choice of influencers be appropriate for the specific target audience and that on their social networks they show both their motivation and engagement with the brand. The underlying processes explaining advertising effectiveness may depend on specific combinations of product-endorser and brand-influencer. 'Specifically, for an influencer endorsement to be more effective than a celebrity endorsement, an endorsed product must be able to enhance feelings of similarity' (Schouten et al., 2019, p. 276). Fashion communication through digital platforms and with influencers as intermediaries continues to be directly linked to taste rather than the message (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020, p. 1578).

2.5. The Importance of Content

In influencers' content 'we find meanings and signifiers, messages and contents that incorporate assessments about reality and that have a direct or indirect influence' on their followers (Renés et al., 2020, p. 288). Using these, in their social environment the 'post originality, uniqueness, and quality impact on influencers' opinion leadership which, in turn, impacts on the behavioural intentions' of their followers (Pérez-Cabañero et al., 2023, p. 8).

The value of content has a non-significant relationship with the purchasing decisions of millennials (born 1981–1999) as it has been demonstrated that this segment already has brand awareness about the products they buy (Chávez Zirena et al., 2020, p. 312). Similar results were highlighted in a study by Castillo-Abdul et al. (2020, p.1559), which concludes that ‘there is no direct correlation between the presence of environmentally sustainable clothing in the videos and their interaction index’.

Advertising by social media influencers strengthens the purchase decision by providing information in a pleasant and convincing way. In principle, they benefit from credibility and therefore have a large number of followers with whom they interact (Hidalgo-Marí and Segarra-Saavedra, 2019; González-Carrión and Aguaded, 2020). It has been demonstrated (Ata et al., 2022, p. 16) that ‘the credibility of the influencer has a positive effect on the advertisement but the credibility of the influencer has no effect on intention to purchase’. This is all due to the fact that ‘influencers’ taste leadership only influences the intention to interact with them’ (Pérez-Cabañero et al., 2023, p. 8).

‘If businesses relegate influencers’ freedom of contents and style too much, they risk that influencers lose in authenticity and in result in consumer effectiveness’ (Renchen, 2020). For businesses to include influencer marketing in their communication strategy, they must have a clear overall marketing guideline and a distinct advertising style. They ‘need to establish specific strategies for each network and be aware that not all products fit on all platforms’ (García Rivero et al., 2022, p. 26).

Influencers, on the other hand, should gain credibility through coherent behaviour and messages. For influencers to match this image with consumers’ personality, and thereby strengthen their credibility, they must consider that actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence (Zogaj et al., 2021) are two dimensions of credibility. On the one hand, actual self-congruence is associated more strongly with a closer psychological distance and, in turn, with trustworthy information, presenting a positive relationship on consumer behaviour. On the other hand, ideal self-congruence is more strongly related to ideal skills and, therefore, is related to perceived competence of these skills. ‘Consumers are motivated to follow the influencers due to his or her personality mainly but develop brand awareness

and purchase intention due to the authenticity and real-life character of posts (Renchen, 2020, p. 148).

3. Objectives, Materials and Methodology

The phenomenon of influencer marketing is, as seen above, of growing interest in both academic and business worlds. This is reflected in the abundance of scientific publications from very diverse areas of knowledge, most notably those by Fink et al. (2020), Renchen (2020), Wang and Lee (2021), Zogaj et al. (2021) and García Rivero et al. (2022).

This study starts from the premise that simply hiring an influencer is not sufficient to guarantee a highly effective advertising campaign. A number of specific circumstances must be met, and this does not always occur.

This research is part of efforts to close the gap that academic literature on social media brand management has identified in companies' knowledge (Marín Dueñas y Simancas González, 2019).

The main objective is to describe the elements that have an impact on the effectiveness of this strategy for companies in the fashion sector. Secondary objectives include identifying the variables that communication and advertising professionals prioritise when organising influencer campaigns; determining what fashion influencers' content trends are, if any; and ascertaining whether the gender variable has any influence on the perception of the phenomenon by professionals in the sector who design company strategies.

This study attempts to resolve these questions using a descriptive approach from a marketing perspective and with a qualitative focus that, in no case, 'seeks causality or consequences' (Puebla-Martínez and Gelado-Marcos, 2021, p. 96). The methodological design is based on in-depth interviews with experts in communication who are linked to the fashion sector. The choice of this methodology is justified by the fact that this is a qualitative technique that focuses on understanding opinions, perspectives, experiences and motivations (Wimmer and Dominick, 2000).

As a representative sample of the fashion sector, members of the teaching staff on the Fashion Management and Communication degree at the University of

Design, Innovation and Technology, Madrid (Spain), were selected. This selection is justified by the limited specialised teaching offer in fashion in Spain (Table 1), which is mostly concentrated in Madrid. There could have been a certain bias in not considering representatives from the other city that also has a significant number of large companies in the fashion sector: Barcelona.

Table 1. Higher-Level Teaching Positions Specialised in Fashion in Spain

University or Centre	Type	Province
Higher Fashion Design Centre in Madrid	Private Affiliated Centre	Madrid
UDIT- University of Design and Technology	Private University	Madrid
Nebrija University	Private University	Madrid
Rey Juan Carlos University	Public University	Madrid
University of A Coruña	Public University	A Coruña

Source: own elaboration

Subjects in the study sample (Table 2) were selected in a way that ensures gender balance and by consensus of the members of the research team. The sample is composed of six professionals, which represents 37.5% of the total number of staff. The sample size or sampling stopping criteria took into account Ortega-Bastidas' (2020, p. 296) proposal to identify the moment in which the collection process has made it possible to obtain a vast heterogeneity of meanings from the subjects participating in the study.

Fieldwork was conducted in July 2023 using semi-structured questionnaires, conducted by the lead researcher of the study via video call. The sessions were recorded and transcribed with the program Microsoft Teams. To assess the validity of the interviews, they were viewed and evaluated by two members of the Research Group on Digital Communication and Information (GICID) of the University of Zaragoza.

Transcriptions of the six in-depth interviews were analysed using the following lemmas (Table 3 – original Spanish lemmas provided in parenthesis): Influencers (Influencers), Professionalism (*Profesionalidad*), Audience (*Público*), Brand (*Marca*), Media (*Medio*), Trust (*Confianza*) and Content (*Contenido*).

Table 2. Interviewees

ID	Academic background	Profession	Gender
E1	Master's Degree in Journalism	Experience in fashion press.	Female
E2	PhD in Audiovisual Communication	Experience in a fashion communication agency.	Female
E3	PhD in Applied Creativity.	Experience as fashion accessories designer.	Female
E4	PhD in Audiovisual Communication	Experience in e-commerce and digital advertising	Male
E5	PhD in Information Science	Experience as Creative Director and Art Director in fashion magazines.	Male
E6	PhD in Finance and Commercial Research	Experience as a Market Research Consultant in the fashion sector.	Male

Source: own elaboration

Table 3. Coding of Texts

Code	Segments in which it appears	Words included
1 Influencers (influencers)	61	Influencers (influencers), fashion influencers (influencers <i>de moda</i>)
2 Audience (<i>público</i>)	95	Target audience (<i>público objetivo</i>), target (target) and followers (<i>seguidores</i>)
3 Brand (<i>marca</i>)	90	Brand (<i>marca</i>), company (<i>empresa</i>), product (<i>producto</i>)
4 Professionalism (<i>profesionalidad</i>)	11	Knowledge (<i>conocimiento</i>)
5 Media (<i>medio</i>)	24	Media of communication (<i>medio de comunicación</i>), channel (<i>canal</i>)
6 Trust (<i>confianza</i>)	12	Trust (<i>confianza</i>), credibility (<i>credibilidad</i>)
7 Content (<i>contenido</i>)	37	Content (<i>contenido</i>), post (<i>publicación</i>), advertisement (<i>anuncio</i>)

Source: own elaboration

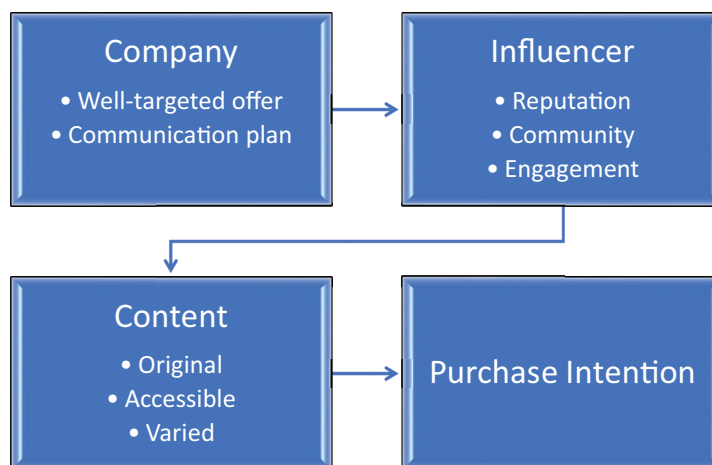
The choice of these codes is justified by the convenience of grouping the information obtained and looking for potential patterns and coincidences with the theoretical framework outlined above. Lastly, MAXQDA and Microsoft Excel were chosen as tools to carry out the analysis and visual representation of the data. This choice is based on the criterion of clarity (De la Cruz et al., 2017) for presenting the information for the final data visual representation and conclusions.

4. Results

Companies must have an effective marketing plan that can influence purchase intention through content published by influencers (Figure 4). Influencers, in turn, provide their reputation and a community of highly engaged followers who are of interest as the brand's target audience.

The influencers create original, accessible and varied content, which is credible due to the fact that they are free to make their own decisions about content. It is this alignment of interests between influencers, their audience and brands that can influence purchase intention.

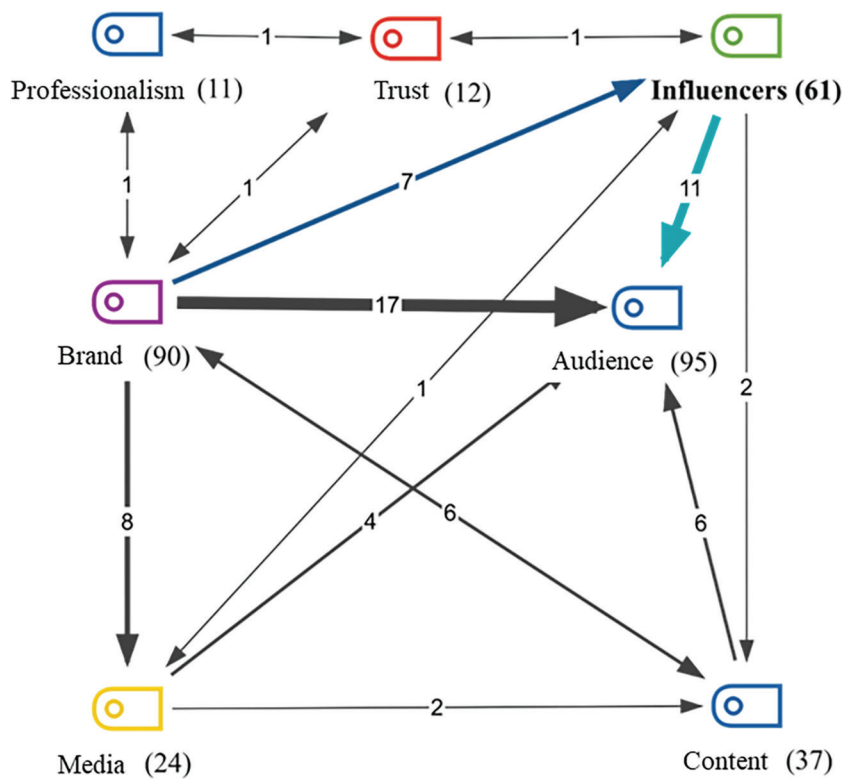
Figure 4. Summary Diagram of Research Results



Source: own elaboration

The concepts most frequently mentioned in the in-depth interviews were ‘audience’ (95), ‘brand’ (90) and ‘influencers’ (61). These three concepts were also the main words used in the conversation, with strong co-occurrences (Figure 5). It should be noted that credibility and professionalism are not directly related to the content posted. The interest of brands in reaching their audiences, be it directly or through influencers, can be seen.

Figure 5. Graph of Code Co-occurrence



Source: own elaboration with MaxQda

A lemmatised analysis of the most frequently used concepts was also carried out by gender. As can be seen in Figures 6 and 7, the results provide gender-differentiated patterns. With men mentioning the concepts ‘brand’ and ‘audience’

most, it is clear that they attach greater importance to communication and connecting with people. In contrast, women mentioned interesting content and work most.

Figure 6. Word Cloud of the Women's Interviews



Source: own elaboration with MaxQda

This could call for a differentiated approach in the design of influencer marketing strategies. While women would be more focussed on the creation of quality content, men would focus on the aim of communicating with the target audiences.

Figure 7. Word Cloud of the Men's Interviews



Source: own elaboration with MaxQda

4.1. Perception of the Influencer Phenomenon

In general, influencers are 'a great possibility for brands to connect more easily with audiences' (E4). 'Influencers are the communication medium of the new century' (E1). It is a new medium 'that is taking ground away from conventional media because it has a greater capacity to connect with new generations' (E5). These new generations are 'very influenced by fashion' (E6) and identify with the influencer because of their age. 'Paying someone who generates their own content is wonderful and you can make use of the engagement that already exists' (E2), although you have to do thorough research beforehand and ensure that the followers match the advertiser's target audience.

It's a transformation of something that has always existed (E3, E6). It's a new term, but 'they don't like to call themselves "influencers"; they prefer to call

themselves “talents” (E1). They are ‘a reflection of society because social networks are a perfect reflection of the generations’ (E2).

4.2. Specificities of Fashion Influencers

The first ‘bloggers received training on how to narrate from fashion magazines. From that point on, they started to develop their own discourse’ (E5). E2, E1 and E4 believe that the borderline between fashion and lifestyle influencers is blurred, yet that this fact makes the sector more effective.

Experts recommend giving the influencer freedom, because they ‘self-manage their own communication more effectively’ (E4) and the connection between the brand, influencer and audience is better and more instinctively aligned’. Influencers are particularly relevant (E6) for their ability to pick up on fashion trends and comment on them with authority.

Naturalness is essential, even if it is faked (E2) ‘because if you’re taking 12 photos and then choosing one, it’s not natural at all’. The challenge is to ‘create content that is of interest to your followers, so that they interact and you can keep growing’ (E3).

To this end ‘they have been creating models to suit almost anyone,’ (E5) ‘because diversity allows for inclusion’ and this has led to a highly atomised market. Huge efforts must be made to stand out and keep followers’ attention, because ‘in fashion, every day is a new look. It’s a race that everyone loses’ (E1).

‘There are three types of influencers. There are professional “talents” who are insiders with a deep knowledge of the fashion world, and their followers are true fashionistas’ (E1). It is notable that the community that has been generated between influencers and celebrities is very interesting for luxury brands (E1, E2) as they influence those who, in turn, influence others.

‘Then there are the great style leaders who aren’t fashion experts: they are shopping experts. Their followers are shopping fans who are looking for inspiration. These people aren’t fashion influencers as such, but rather consumer and style influencers.

Lastly, there are celebrities, who may have different degrees of taste and style, but who have a lot of followers. Their followers don’t want to miss out on any

gossip' (E1). Furthermore, these celebrities are not always celebrities in their own right, but rather associated with other celebrities.

Some of them 'started out as local fashion influencers and have evolved to become lifestyle influencers and even celebrities' (E3). 'There are people who are able to communicate with a broader range of people and then there are niches' (E5).

'I think micro-influencers are really interesting as they have a more specific audience and they work a lot on the content as they're experts in the field' (E2). 'Macro-influencers have a large audience, but you have to ask yourself how many of them match the advertiser's target audience' (E1). Among followers of fashion influencers there are many people who are merely curious and who do not have the slightest intention to buy. And 'specifically with female influencers, a large share of the followers are from a male audience that simply want to see photos of beautiful women' because 'we still live in a very patriarchal world' (E2).

4.3. Influencers' Trust and Credibility

It is young people who are most connected with fashion influencers and they 'have a high capacity to detect paid content, but they're also highly influenced by this paid content' (E4). In addition, 'there is a degree of mistrust towards advertising, and top-down messages' (E5), whereas a person you feel close to 'is far more credible'.

Trust in fashion influencers 'exists because they can't let you down' (E1) as it is the user who decides whether they like what they see, or not. For E4, 'the essential element that generates trust is the embodying of style in the influencer themselves'. They come across as an everyday person, but with the added 'fantasy and imagination that many fashion brands create'.

In terms of strategy, 80% of the content should be personal because 'there's a planned type of naturalness' (E2). 'The influencer first has to win over the user, telling them about their own life' (E5) and making them feel as though 'they're part of the fashion world'. To achieve credibility 'taste is key' (E1).

Therefore, the most recommended content strategy is to select influencers with a strong personality, and with their own distinct taste that fits with the company's brand.

4.4. The Advertising Brand's Perspective

When hiring an influencer, the issue is not sales conversion but rather generating trust in the brand, because 'in this cynical world in which nobody trusts brands any more, the influencer phenomenon is of great interest. The key is engagement' (E2, E3) and this is best found in micro-influencers. 'You have to look for an influencer who really fits your product' (E1, E3, E4 and E5) because it is vital that they have the same target audience, the same values and a relatively similar taste. They should also be aligned (E6) 'with the brand's mission, vision and, above all, values'.

Despite the fact that it may be a risk, the content, 'taste' or tone must not be imposed on the influencer because they will not destroy their 'fit for an advertisement' (E2).

4.5. Virtual Fashion Influencers

Regarding virtual influencers, 'style is key, but personality is also key, and so far I don't know of anyone who has stood out for their personality' (E1). 'For fashion I don't think they will work' (E2) because 'it's hard to believe that a woman is going to buy a dress because it looks good on an AI influencer'.

However (E3), 'we have to come to terms with the fact that this already exists. It's a growing trend because of its foresight and immediate response'. They can be of interest as long as they're coherent and instil empathy' (E4). The fact is that 'technology has a great capacity to surprise' (E5), but 'we're going to go back to the real thing, because in the end, we humans protect ourselves by seeking closeness with one another'.

5. Discussion

Elements that differentiate fashion influencers from other influencers include the fact that users seem to expect more static, window-display-type content (looks, styling, etc.) (Monge-Benito et al., 2021, p. 1158) and, therefore, they don't require particular credibility in the proposals they receive.

The interviewees agreed on the need for a perfect fit of values and styles between the brand, the fashion influencer, and their followers, some of whom will be the company's target audience. Thus, our results are in line with previous studies (Fink et al., 2020; Belanche et al., 2020, Wang and Lee, 2021; Zogaj et al., 2021) that state that the three aspects, 'topic, personality and client', must be aligned for this approach to be effective.

Post originality, which has been found to be essential in our research, has also been analysed by Pérez-Cabañero et al., (2023). Nevertheless, no direct impact of the influencers on attitudes towards the product or purchase intention have been found. In contrast, various mediating effects have been found through trust, credibility, affinity and personal identification.

In the fashion sector, influencer profiles with more followers achieve better results. This position was held both by the professionals interviewed in this research and authors such as Blanco Sánchez and Moreno Albarracín (2024); and Hwang and Zhang (2018).

However, effectiveness must be measured by engagement rather than the number of followers offered. Advertising companies should choose influencer profiles that already naturally use a tone that matches the one they are looking for. The product should be a natural fit with the influencer's content. It is not advisable to force a paid post which, besides having a minimal probability of influencing the purchase intention, may damage the influencer's credibility.

The fact that the term 'influencers' is interchangeable in professional language with other terms such as 'opinion leaders' or 'brand ambassadors' is a phenomenon that this research has not covered. This may be a limitation but, at the same time, it paves the way for future studies.

6. Conclusions

Given the 'scarcity of research on the brand-user link mediated by collaborations between these brands and social media influencers' (Blanco Sánchez and Moreno Albarracín, 2024, p. 5) it is of interest to contrast the knowledge of active professionals with academic research.

The main objective of this research study was to describe the elements that have an impact on the effectiveness of this strategy for advertisers in the fashion sector. We conclude that the followers' prior knowledge about the product that advertisers and influencers offer influences the perception of paid content. This content must be original, coherent and accessible.

In response to the first secondary objective, to identify the variables that communication and advertising professionals prioritise when launching a campaign with influencers, we conclude that it is the influencer's reputation that lends credibility to their content.

As for the second secondary objective, to determine the content trends, we determine that 80% of the content should be personal, so that followers feel a sense of closeness to the influencers.

In response to the third secondary objective, to determine whether the gender variable has any influence on the perception of the phenomenon by professionals in the sector, we conclude that there are differences depending on the gender of the strategy decision-maker. Women managers seek originality and novelty, with a constant effort to create content. While among men, the priority is to take care of the relationship with potential clients.

Communication in the digital environment is a phenomenon that is continually changing and, as such, the number of publications on it is clearly on the rise. The relationship between people and companies, the persuasion that a brand can exert on the general public in such a changing and dynamic context is, in short, a growing research trend.

The influencer world, which is configured as a new communication channel, with a very well-defined and loyal audience profile, allows a very personal and

accessible message to reach potential customers. Therefore, it seems reasonable, in view of the above, to use professional influencers in communication campaigns; after all, a true measure of a brand's vitality is their presence in social conversation.

Authors' Contribution

Isabel Iniesta-Alemán: conceptualization, resources, data curation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, visualization, methodology, writing-original draft, project administration, writing-review and editing.

Inmaculada Berlanga-Fernández: resources, data curation, investigation, formal analysis, validation, supervision, writing-review and editing.

Elena Bandrés-Goldáraz: investigation, formal analysis, validation, funding acquisition, writing- review and editing.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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