Research Article

Micro-influencers: An emerging profession not yet recognized, with a tarnished reputation

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Influencer marketing is a rapidly expanding industry. This qualitative study examines micro-influencers (those with up to 100,000 followers) through 30 in-depth interviews to understand their perceptions of their profession's reputation, potential improvements, and the level of professionalization within the field. Excessive commercialization and the mismatch between advertised products and the micro-influencer's profile are identified as the primary factors damaging their reputation. In terms of professionalization, it is common for compensation to be limited to products, which 60% of interviewees consider unfair. Despite these challenges, micro-influencers are eager learners, consistently striving to stay updated in various domains. **Keywords:** micro-influencers, influencer marketing, advertising, emerging profession, training, reputation, remuneration

INTRODUCTION

The precursor to influencer marketing can be traced back to blogs, which gained popularity around 2000–2005, introducing the concept of an influential person in the digital space. The rise and consolidation of social networks since 2010 have given birth to the first influencers. Influencer marketing is defined as the promotion of brands through specific individuals who influence potential buyers (Brown & Hayes, 2007). According to Gómez-Nieto (2018), an influencer is "a person with certain credibility on a specific topic whose presence and influence on social networks make them an ideal spokesperson for a particular brand" (p. 149). An influencer is someone who can affect and impact a specific group of people in a purely digital environment, thanks to the appeal and trust of their admirers (Pérez-Condes & Campillo-Alhama, 2016; Riccio et al., 2022; Um, 2013). Almahdi et al. (2022) note that the trust relationship established between followers and influencers transfers to the brands recommended.

Different figures are considered when evaluating the global business of influencer marketing, a still-nascent segment within the advertising ecosystem that continues to grow. According to Dencheva (2024), the business is expected to reach $24 billion by 2024, tripling the 2019 figure. Influencer Marketing Hub (2024) forecasts it to hit $222 billion by 2025. InfoAdex (2024) reports that investment in this discipline in Spain reached €63.9 million in 2023, a 22.8% increase from €52 million in 2021.

Influencer marketing achieves four major successes. First, it effectively reaches the target audience where they are, as consumers increasingly spend time on digital media. Second, it successfully engages younger

audiences, with 72% of Gen Z and Millennials following influencers and 56% having made a purchase after seeing a post from someone they follow. Third, it builds trust in endorsed products when influencers act authentically and consistently over time. Finally, it drives social e-commerce, which continues to grow at double-digit rates annually in the USA, projected to reach $79,6 billion by 2025 (Gold et al., 2021).

IAB Spain (2019) differentiates between two groups of influencers: digital natives, who gained fame through social media, and non-native influencers, who were already known for their professions (actors, athletes, singers, etc.) and have a large number of social media followers. Jin et al. (2018) argue that influencers have more consumer influence than traditional celebrities because they generate more trust and desire in the brands they promote. Gaenssle and Budzinski (2020) discuss two main dimensions explaining the success of "social media stars" (a term they use for influencers, creators, micro-celebrities, online stars): their perceived authenticity and the ability of followers to interact with them.

Different authors propose classifications based on community size, though follower ranges vary by source. Abidin (2021) suggests four categories: mega-influencers (over 1 million followers), macro-influencers (500,000 to 1 million followers), influencers (10,000 to 500,000 followers) and micro-influencers (1,000 to 10,000 followers). Borges-Tiago et al. (2023) identify four categories: mega-influencers (over 1 million), macro (40,000 to 100,000), micro (1,000 to 40,000), and nano (fewer than 1,000 followers). Park et al. (2021) considers five categories: mega-influencers (over 1million followers), fame-influencers (500,000 to 1 million followers), macro-influencers (100,000 to 500,000), micro-influencers (5,000 to 100,000) and nano-influencers (2,000 to 5,000). Conde and Casais (2023) list three groups: mega-influencers (over 1 million), macro-influencers (100,000 to 1 million), and micro-influencers (1,000 to 100,000 followers). Those authors also have adapted the categorization into micro (1,000 to 20,000), macro (20,000–100,000) and mega-influencers (over 100,000) to the context of small countries like Portugal.

Micro-influencers are a new figure within the advertising ecosystem, playing a significant role in any communication strategy. They are usually specialized in a specific area and tend to have a deep knowledge of it, often resulting in a more segmented follower base (Bernazzani, 2018). Influencer Marketing Hub (2024) highlights a trend for brands to collaborate with smaller influencers. Specifically, 44% of surveyed brands prefer to work with nano-influencers (1,000 to 10,000 followers), and 25% choose micro-influencers (10,000 to 100,000 followers). In contrast, only 17% of brands prefer macro-influencers (100,000 to 1 million followers), and 13% work with celebrity influencers. Four key reasons explain these preferences: the high cost of collaborating with macro or mega-influencers, the limited number of popular influencers, better engagement results with smaller influencers, and the ability to reach more segmented targets. This trend aligns with IAB Spain's (2024) assessment in their top trends in Spain report (p. 35), which notes that while many advertisers prefer influencers with over half a million followers, nano-influencers and micro-influencers achieve much higher engagement and significant impact on their audience due to their relevance, credibility, and connection with specific audiences. Gold et al. (2021) suggests that while micro-influencers offer better cost efficiency and segmentation, they require more management effort from marketing teams. Achieving the desired reach requires engaging a large number of micro-influencers, unlike the fewer mega or macro-influencers needed to reach similar numbers.

Despite the significant role this new form of advertising is taking in the industry, academic literature generally focuses on influencer marketing as a whole and predominantly on influencers with a large following. There is limited research on the reality of micro-influencers, particularly from their own perspective. Existing academic studies often address the effectiveness of micro-influencers in specific sectors and countries, but they rarely explore the benefits of these influencers in marketing plans for brands with low budgets, the working processes with brands, the evolution of contractual relationships between brands and micro-influencers, or their compensation. Given the advertising industry's growing trend of employing micro-influencers, this research presents the perspectives of these new sector agents. Through semi-structured interviews with micro-influencers, it explores their views on how their activity is perceived by users, how this perception could be improved, and the current level of professionalization of the activity in Spain.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Effectiveness of Macro-Influencers Versus Micro-Influencers in Marketing Strategies

The necessity of including influencer marketing in social media communication strategies for brands looks indisputable. According to GWI's (2023) global trend study, younger generations are more likely to trust influencer recommendations than Generation X and Baby Boomers, although the latter follow influencers 12% more than they did in 2022. Forty-five percent of Gen Z and Millennial respondents are likely to buy a product recommended by influencers, and 44% follow influencers who regularly promote products and brands. In Spain, social media users primarily follow accounts of people they know (96%), followed by influencer accounts (51%) and brand profiles (43%), which have seen a five-point decline since 2022 (IAB Spain, 2023). Instagram is the most popular platform for following influencers (70%), followed by YouTube (41%) and TikTok (29%). Notably, 82% of the Alpha generation follow at least one influencer, compared to 73% of Gen Z and 67% of Millennials, driven by trust, affinity, and perceived experience (Ahir et al., 2023).

Academic opinions on the effectiveness of macro versus micro-influencers vary. It is challenging to make a definitive statement, as comparisons often use different parameters such as popularity, engagement, authenticity, or credibility as Li et al. (2024) states. Neither group has advantages or disadvantages, nor is it ideal in every brand situation. De Veirman et al. (2017) suggest that mega and macro-influencers are generally more effective but advise brands seeking divergent positioning to avoid collaborating with influencers with many followers. Janssen et al. (2021) argue that influencers with many followers have more persuasive power, especially when the products they promote align with their profile. Conversely, other authors believe that while micro-influencers reach smaller communities, they achieve higher interaction and identification levels. Sarmiento-Guede and Rodríguez-Terceño (2020) highlight this in their research, and Conde and Casais (2023) demonstrate in the Portuguese market how micro-influencers, due to strong relationships with their community, can rival the persuasive power of influencers with more followers. Park et al. (2021) argue that micro-influencers are more effective because they convey greater authenticity. Marques et al. (2021) find that micro-influencers achieve higher engagement than celebrity endorsers through their posts and other content on brand profiles.

Studies have examined the effectiveness of micro-influencers in specific sectors, such as the hotel industry in Portugal (Peres & Silva, 2021), where they influence users with their hotel experiences due to a closer connection with their community, greater authenticity, and the perception that they do not receive payment for their content. Micro-influencers are also recognized as more effective in luxury categories compared to mega-celebrities (Jin et al., 2018). In Indonesia, Silalahi (2021) demonstrated that micro-influencers connect better with their followers than mega and macro-influencers, owing to their ability to interact with their community through platform tools (comments, Q&A, or private messages). According to a survey conducted in Spain with 290 micro-influencers (Marchán et al., 2024), most respondents believe they provide honesty, credibility, closeness, and naturalness–traits central to their role and distinguishing them from influencers whose actions are perceived as more akin to traditional advertising models.

Micro-influencers have opened up new possibilities for many small brands to generate awareness and product trials among specific targets. Brands with low advertising budgets can access this advertising channel (Abdullah & Ampauleng, 2024), as micro-influencers are often compensated with products. This activity has become so popular with brands and attractive to micro-influencers that platforms such as FuelYourBrands and Skeepers have been created to connect brands with micro-influencers in an automated way. IAB Spain's (2022) top digital trends report highlights the creation of 380 new platforms and agencies focused on influencer marketing in 2021.

The emergence of user-generated content (UGC) is also notable within influencer marketing. Initially, UGC referred to UGC on social platforms (Kaplan et al., 2010; Mayrhofer, 2019). However, in recent years, it has come to refer to brands hiring social media users to create content featuring their products, instead of using producers or agencies (Emplifi, 2024). This content is intended for use on the brand's own channels, not looking to appear on the micro-influencers profile, aiming for greater persuasion rather than reach. According to Emplifi (2024), users find this type of content more impactful than that produced by influencers.

Ethical and Economic Implications of This Profession

The exponential growth of influencer marketing and its increasing significance in marketing plans have led government regulatory bodies to develop new regulations and monitor their compliance.

On one hand, there is social concern about the content consumed by minors in the digital environment. Numerous authors have discussed the overexposure to social media and its psychological, educational, relational, nutritional, and other consequences (Feijoo Fernández & Fernández-Gómez, 2021; Fernández-Gómez et al., 2021; Balaban et al., 2022; Castelló-Martínez & Tur-Viñes, 2021; Tur-Viñes & Castelló-Martínez, 2021). Regulatory bodies for advertising have recognized the need to create new rules to ensure that commercial activities on social media are regulated similarly to advertising in traditional media. For example, France approved a bill in June 2023 outlining the rights and obligations of influencers, prohibiting them from advertising financial products, cosmetic surgery, medications, and more, and requiring them to register as professional influencers (Díaz, 2023). The scandal involving Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni in December 2023 prompted Italy to pass the so-called "Ferragni Law." Ferragni's collaboration with a brand of Christmas sweets implied that the product's sales would fund a children's hospital (Pacho, 2024). The new Italian law regulates influencers with over 1 million followers, treating them as media outlets to prevent misleading and harmful advertising for minors (Verdú, 2024). In Spain, in April 2024, the Council of Ministers approved, at the proposal of the Ministry for Digital Transformation and Public Function, a Royal Decree to regulate the activity of influencers and align it with the General Audiovisual Communication Law passed in 2022. It regulates influencers with more than 1 million followers and annual earnings over €300,000, now referred to as "users of special relevance" who use video exchange services through platforms. The new regulation establishes responsibilities and legal obligations for influencers and content creators regarding their publications and target audience. These include prohibitions on advertising tobacco products, compliance with gambling and alcohol laws, and protecting minors (Millán, 2024).

Although the cited regulations specifically concern influencers with high follower counts and substantial income, the commercial activity of micro-influencers is also significant. Hogsnes et al. (2024) conducted an analysis of influencer commercial activity on Instagram in Scandinavia, categorizing groups based on follower numbers according to Abidin's (2021) classification. The research indicates that in Scandinavia, micro-influencers are the second most commercially active group, with 56% of their posts being commercial. Influencers lead with 61% of their posts dedicated to advertising collaborations, followed by macro-influencers with 46%, and mega-influencers with 48%. The study also finds that micro-influencers' collaboration styles tend to be more subtle and include less product information compared to mega-influencers, whose collaborations are usually more direct and detailed.

Despite the high level of advertising activity, as highlighted by Taylor Lorenz, an American journalist from the Washington Post and a technology expert at the "Under the Brandfluence" event organized by Sprout Social (Smith, 2024), there is a long way to go in terms of payment transparency. One predicted trend is the collective call for greater payment transparency. This issue is particularly relevant among Spanish micro-influencers, according to Marchán et al. (2024). Lorenz also notes that the number of influencers will continue to grow, making it increasingly difficult to become a macro-influencer, a group that typically receives remuneration and establishes contracts for collaborations. This challenge particularly affects influencers whose main platforms are Instagram or TikTok. New channels like Substack, Discord, Patreon, and Twitch offer income generation models based on subscriptions rather than advertising collaborations with brands.

This work is part of a project initiated in 2023 (Marchán et al., 2024) that surveyed 290 micro-influencers to understand their work processes and their need for professionalization and compensation beyond products or discounts. The survey revealed a standardized work process: brands provide good briefings, but micro-influencers lack sufficient tools and training for collaborations. They have creative freedom but lack strategic decision-making power. While these digital prescribers offer many advantages to brands, they demand fair compensation for their work, not just a relationship based on product-service exchange.

Table 1. Variables comprising the in-depth interview on the micro-influencer's job reputation

Specific goals	Variables
BLOCK 1: Aspects that generate a good or bad corporate reputation in this profession	- Self-definition of their work on social media - Motivations for their work - Image of this profession - Negative dynamics in collaborations - Most challenging and easiest aspects of the profession - Comparison of their work with that of other influencers - Possible ways to improve the professional's image
BLOCK 2: Professionalization of the activity	- Activity compensation - Opinions on whether this activity should be compensated - Confirmation on whether they can live solely from their work as micro-influencers - Training - Micro-influencers' training needs - Most frequently mentioned knowledge areas

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Objectives

This qualitative study is an exploratory descriptive investigation into micro-influencers to understand the aspects that generate a good reputation in this profession, how users perceive them, and the level of professionalization in their activities. Specifically, it examines whether they are being compensated and can sustain themselves through this work. The ultimate goal of this research is to contribute to the professionalization of micro-influencers and understand their impact on the Spanish advertising sector, analyzing the transformation they are driving in its operation.

The research is approached from the micro-influencer's perspective, a viewpoint rarely addressed in other studies. Given the exploratory nature of this study, which aims to understand their opinions on generating a good corporate perception of micro-influencers, two research questions were posed:

1. What aspects generate a good or bad corporate reputation in this profession?
2. Is this a professional activity? (Should it be compensated? In what cases?)

Methodology

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the reality of micro-influencers, in-depth interviews were conducted. A discussion guide was designed to address the research questions posed. Following Gaitán Moya and Piñuel Raigada's (1998) guidelines, a semi-structured interview format was used, meaning it was based on a set of questions that organized the interaction, but allowed for the addition or removal of questions during the interview. This approach provides a different perspective on users' experiences compared to questionnaires, enabling a deeper analysis of the activities performed by these digital prescribers (Schrepp et al., 2017).

The interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 40 minutes. The final sample consisted of 30 micro-influencers registered on the FuelYouBrands platform, a Spanish platform that connects influencers and brands, automating campaign management and also operating in Mexico and Colombia. The platform has a database of 6,500 micro-influencers. FuelYouBrands sent an email to the 290 micro-influencers who had participated in the previously mentioned online survey (Marchán et al., 2024), asking if they would be interested in participating in an in-depth interview. Seventy-three responded affirmatively, but only 30 interviews could be conducted.

The interviews took place between October and December 2023. The questionnaire design received positive ethical suitability evaluation from the Universidad Internacional de La Rioja Research Ethics Committee. **Table 1** lists the variables used in designing the in-depth interview on the micro-influencer's job reputation and which have been tested in previous works (Feijoo Fernández & Fernández-Gómez, 2021; Fernández-Gómez et al., 2021; Fernández-Gómez et al., 2024; Marchán et al., 2024).

In the first block, which focuses on aspects that generate a good or bad corporate reputation in the profession, participants were asked about how they define their work on social media, the easiest and hardest

aspects of their job, and the most absurd and amusing collaboration requests they have received. They were also questioned about the image of micro-influencers, the factors contributing to this image, differences in their work compared to other influencers, and their ideas for improving the profession's image.

The second block includes questions to understand the degree of professionalization of the activity. These questions covered whether their work is compensated and if they can make a living as micro-influencers. Additionally, participants were asked for their opinions on whether the activity should always be compensated and if they feel they need more training to perform their activities effectively.

The Sample

Thirty interviews were conducted with micro-influencers registered on the FuelYourBrands platform. At the beginning of the interviews, participants were asked a series of questions regarding their sociodemographic characteristics. The majority of interviewees were female (80% women versus 20% men), with 56% aged between 25 and 40 years, and 20% aged between 41 and 50 years. Regarding educational background, 40% of the sample had a university degree, 20% had vocational training, and another 20% had completed high school. Instagram was the primary platform for most interviewees (80%), while only one person primarily used Twitch, one used Facebook, and six used TikTok. Additionally, 46% of the respondents were active on two platforms, with Instagram and TikTok being the most common combination, while 30% were active on three platforms, 13% on four platforms, and only one person was active on five platforms. In terms of followers, 40% had fewer than 10,000 followers, 43% had between 10,000 and 30,000, and 6.6% had over 50,000 followers. The content they predominantly created included lifestyle (20%), beauty and fashion (10%), beauty (13%), and gastronomy (6.6%). Other niche topics covered by micro-influencers included mental health, family, motherhood, and caravanning.

RESULTS

Defining This Job, Motivations, and Challenges of Content Creation

The interviewees used various terms to describe themselves, including content creator, communicator, digital communicator, informative worker, and a medium/channel for advertising or reaching an audience. Some disliked labeling themselves as influencers, finding the term devalued or embarrassing.

> I want to consider or would like to consider that my work is informative and educational in the end. Because although a large part of my work is promoting brands, I choose which brands to promote so that people can use them in their daily lives and learn things or techniques that they might not otherwise learn elsewhere.

Regarding their motivations, most interviewees stated that their dedication stems from a passion for communication and a specific topic or discipline they enjoy exploring. They all share a curiosity and willingness to constantly learn new things, such as opening profiles on new platforms, understanding new requirements, and learning to make videos. They are driven by the desire to share their knowledge and experiences about a subject or product. Some aim to help people going through similar circumstances, such as micro-influencers focusing on motherhood or hobbies like caravanning, technology use, and mental health.

Opinions varied widely regarding the most challenging and easiest aspects of their work. For many, the most difficult part is making and editing videos, followed by creating relevant or valuable content for followers. As one interviewee put it, "Touching people so that they interact." Less commonly mentioned challenges included securing collaborations with brands, finding time to post with sufficient frequency and quality, managing profiles according to platform requirements, growing their audience, and handling criticism. For most, the easiest parts were creating content, recording videos, using platforms, and deciding what content to make and communicate: The easiest part, I think, would be finding the topic. I mean, ideas come to me naturally because I chose a topic that I'm passionate about, makeup, and beauty in general. I use it daily.

Generally, they did not find the requests from brands too strange, although two issues were noted. Some brands approach influencers indiscriminately, resulting in content misalignment with the products they are asked to promote. Less frequently mentioned was the issue of brands' demands regarding the number of

videos/posts and specific content design elements (e.g., framing, time of day, location). These demands can be excessive, especially when the compensation is merely receiving the product for free.

Image of This Profession and Possible Ways to Improve It

Almost unanimously, the interviewees believe that this profession does not have a good image. Three main reasons were highlighted to explain this perception. First, the profession is new and not yet widely recognized as a legitimate occupation. Those unfamiliar with it often think it is an easy, quick task that anyone can do. However, those involved emphasize that it requires significant time, effort, and communication skills that not everyone possesses. As one interviewee noted, "It's a job that's very poorly viewed, really. People don't consider it a job because they don't know how many hours are behind it."

A significant number of interviewees also mentioned the excessive number of commercial actions as a reason why this activity's image is penalized. Lastly, certain practices by both brands and influencers undermine the credibility of this work, particularly promoting products that don't align with the influencer's content or profile.

Two common suggestions were made to improve the professional's image. First, raising awareness about the work involved and the skills required. Second, greater professionalization by both brands and micro-influencers, particularly in managing collaborations. Brands should approach micro-influencers with profiles aligned with their products, and micro-influencers should not accept misaligned collaborations. Additionally, brands should provide proper compensation for their work.

> I think in this case, brands have more power to dignify this profession than the profiles themselves. Because if you, as a brand, hire a profile that you see uploads wipes one day and chocolates the next, your brand will be seen as just another one. However, if you make a good selection, choose a good profile that is very focused on your niche market and see that the content they create is of quality and coherent with what you're saying, you'll see that we are all product promotion machines, but each with our authenticity and each with brands that align with us.

Differences Between Macro-Influencers and Micro-Influencers in Their Work

Most interviewees indicated that the main difference in work is that macro-influencers have an extensive team of specialists assisting them with content creation (filming videos and taking photos), legal matters, negotiations with brands/agreements, and platform-related issues (e.g., when to post).

> They have a huge team, with photographers, makeup artists, content creators, ideas, etc. They might upload the content themselves. So, I think we're totally different. We work much harder, uploading and giving things, etc., than they do. They've already made it, they've reached that point, that's it.

They also believe that for macro-influencers, this is their profession, so they can dedicate all the necessary time to it. In contrast, for most interviewees, it is a hobby they balance with studies or another job. Some also noted that macro-influencers take the easy route, as they have many collaborations and "have already made it," while micro-influencers need to work harder to grow and establish themselves. For example, a gastronomic micro-influencer who visits restaurants to recommend their cuisine, price, experience, etc., commented on their beginnings:

> I think if a micro really takes it seriously, they give a much more personalized service to clients, and do things beyond what is expected, which is how I started. I started going to restaurants, paying my bill, and, well, you have to lay the groundwork to reap the rewards later.

Professionalization of the Activity

Compensation

For the sample interviewed, none of the micro-influencers live off their collaborations, as most are compensated only with products. Opinions vary on whether this work should always be compensated. Sixty

percent of the interviewees firmly believe that collaborations should always include monetary compensation. Some of these interviewees suggest that even minimal financial compensation, in addition to the product, should be provided.

> I think, ideally, besides the product that you have to promote, there should also be an economic supplement. Obviously, because with the product, with how small I am on social media, I consider myself compensated. But in the end, the product is sent not to pay me but for me to have it, try it, promote it, and give it to my followers, so to speak. So, the product is the tool.

The remaining 40% believe that under certain circumstances, product compensation is acceptable. Four situations were mentioned where some interviewees consider product compensation fair: when it is a high-cost product, a product they like and would buy themselves, if the brand is local and/or small, or if high-value gifts are given (e.g., a trip). Less commonly mentioned was the case of not being too demanding in what the brand requests.

Regarding how they handle the lack of monetary compensation, some accept it with resignation, believing that since they are just starting, they must accept it: "I think it should be compensated. Even though I agree to collaborate for products because, for now, this is just starting, I'm playing, I'm living, enjoying… I think it really should be compensated." Some say that if not compensated, they negotiate how much content to create based on the product's value.

Three groups of micro-influencers

From the 30 interviewees, three distinct groups emerged:

1. Enhancing their professional work: This group uses their social media activities to enhance their professional work. For example, a couple involved in nutrition and personal training or a micro-influencer engaged in gastronomic criticism.

    > I create content. That allows me not only to create content for myself but also to work for some shopping centers creating gastronomic content. I've worked for fairs in Valencia, Barcelona, creating corporate videos for the fair itself, even for the stands. And for wineries and everything.

2. Hobbyists: This group considers their social media activities a hobby. They have a primary profession and do not intend to pursue social media full-time. This group includes an interviewee focused on caravan travel and several individuals passionate about beauty and cosmetics.

3. Aspiring professionals: This group wishes to live off their social media activities. Notably, this includes individuals interested in UGC, creating content for brands. These brands post the content on their profiles, using the micro-influencer for content creation rather than amplification.

Training

The interviewees emphasized the importance of keeping themselves updated. The areas they feel the need to learn about vary and depend on their previous education. Many see the need for training in marketing, video editing, text writing, social media courses, personal branding, and negotiation skills (to negotiate better fees for collaborations). Almost all regularly attend courses to stay updated.

> The economic aspect, right? Maybe you don't know how to manage it, and maybe friends tell you, 'Hey, your work is worth this much,' but you don't really know what your work is worth. That's why influencers with many followers have someone behind them telling them, 'This is worth this much, that much,' etc., right?
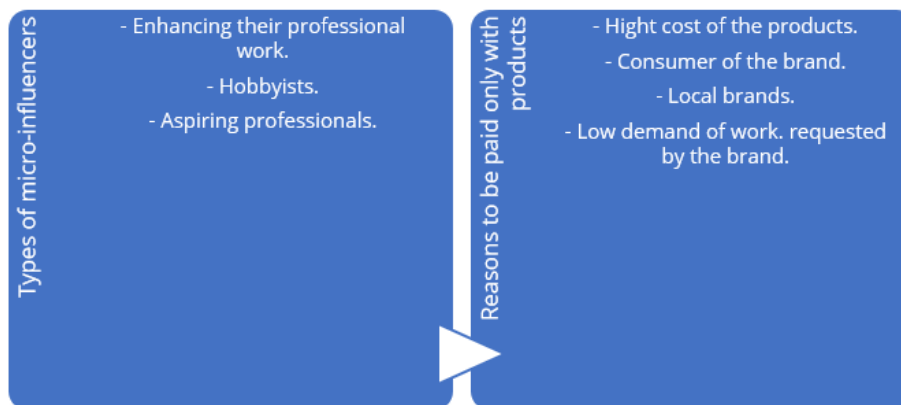
Figure 1 shows the main findings on the reputation and professionalization of micro-influencers.

Figure 2 depicts the main findings on professionalization of micro-influencers.
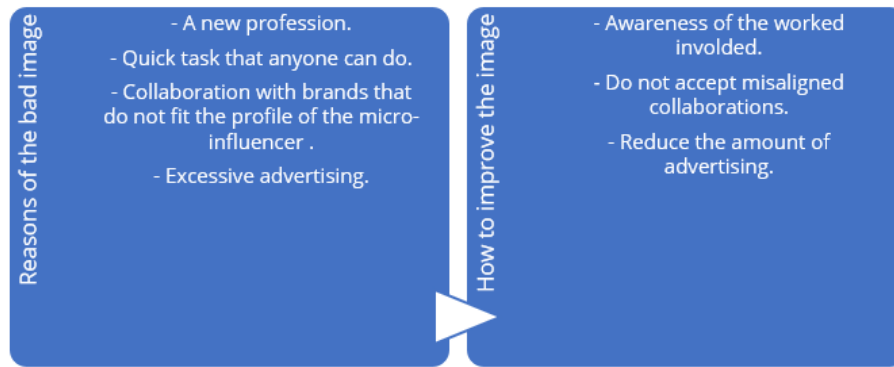
Figure 1. Main findings on reputation and professionalization of micro-influencers (Source: Data compiled by the authors)

Figure 2. Main findings on professionalization of micro-influencers (Source: Data compiled by the authors)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study highlight that according to the interviewees, the micro-influencer profession is still new and largely unknown, which partly explains its poor image. Only those who understand what it entails are aware of the many hours it takes to create good content. Interviewees consider there are two critical points for improving the reputation: first, micro-influencers should avoid excessive collaborations to prevent their profiles from appearing like a "home shopping network"; second, there should be coherence between the micro-influencer's profile and the advertised brand.

Regarding the level of commercial activity, the challenge is understanding what constitutes excess. Collaborations with brands could threaten the perception of influencers' authenticity (Audrezet, 2020). In a previous study (Marchán et al., 2024) conducted among micro-influencers in Spain, 72.7% believed their followers positively accept and value the commercial content they post. According to Hogsnes et al.'s (2024) study in Scandinavia, micro-influencers are even more active in commercial activities than influencers with more followers, with more than 50% of their posts being commercial. The study also concluded that micro-influencers work with a greater variety of brands and sectors. According to GWI (2023), younger generations do not seem to have an issue with the high commercial activity of influencers. When asked if they are comfortable with the level of advertising activity of influencers, 44% of Gen Z, 41% of Millennials, 32% of Baby Boomers, and 19% of Gen X responded affirmatively.

Concerning the congruence of the advertised brand with the micro-influencer's profile, this is seen as a shared responsibility between the influencers and the brands. Influencers chosen for brand collaborations should align with the type of content they publish. Janssen et al. (2021) note that macro and mega-influencers have more persuasive power over their followers than micro-influencers, and this influence is even greater when the products they promote are consistent with their profiles. Choosing aligned products leads to more effective advertising and improves the influencer's image. Belanche et al. (2021) conclude that congruence

between influencer and product leads to higher purchase intent and better campaign results. However, Janssen et al.'s (2021) study indicated that congruence does not seem as necessary for smaller influencers.

Regarding compensation, a significant number of interviewees (60%) demand financial remuneration, even minimal, since their work is amplified through the micro-influencer's profiles. However, a considerable proportion of the interviewees feel compensated if certain conditions are met, such as receiving high-value products, facing low brand demands, or working with new brands. Nilsson et al. (2023) recall how, at the start of blogging, it was common for brands to send products to bloggers without expecting anything in return, similar to how PR departments have traditionally dealt with media. This practice has evolved, with product shipments now considered payment in exchange for a specific number of posts and reels. Additionally, while interviewees did not mention it, one reason some are okay with not receiving payment is the potential need to regularize their tax status to legally receive payments or the possibility of incompatibility with their current job, as concluded in a previous study (Marchán et al., 2024).

UGC appears to be of interest to some interviewees, especially those who consider themselves more content creators than influencers. This type of work tends to be compensated. This specialty within influencer marketing is beginning to be included in marketing plans and seems to be highly effective. According to Emplifi (2024), 87% of advertisers using UGC reported increased sales, and 92% reported increased brand awareness.

Regarding training, the interviewees are keen learners and regularly take courses and seminars to stay updated. The training topics are diverse (marketing, video editing, social media, etc.) and depend partly on the interviewee's previous education. According to Fernández-Gómez et al. (2024), when micro-influencers were asked about training, nearly 75% responded they had not received formal training, but 40% expressed a desire to receive it.

In summary, this research highlights the need to regularize the activity of micro-influencers concerning compensation to establish a more balanced economic relationship between brands seeking their services and micro-influencers. Additionally, there should be more rigor from both brands and micro-influencers in selecting and accepting commercial collaborations, ensuring that brands align with their profiles, which would improve the profession's reputation.

Limitations and Future Research

It is important to highlight the limitations of this study. While this research provides valuable insights into how micro-influencers perceive their profession and suggests measures to improve this perception, it is a qualitative study with limited representativeness. The findings indicate that achieving a positive transformation in the profession's image is a shared responsibility between micro-influencers and brands.

Future research could further explore other aspects of the work of micro-influencers, such as their working processes, relationships with brands and influencer platforms, and the legal aspects of the activity. Additionally, obtaining the opinions of brands that use micro-influencers' services would be beneficial. Understanding brands' perceptions of micro-influencers' contributions to their marketing strategies, the benefits of using them, and the structure of their working relationships and contractual terms could provide a more comprehensive view of the industry.

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