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## Miscellaneous

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## Micro-Influencer platforms: A new intermediary model in influencer marketing

### Abstract

Micro-influencers—content creators with up to 100,000 followers—play a key role in influencer marketing. This qualitative study, based on 30 in-depth interviews with Spanish micro-influencers, examines their work processes and relationships with the three main actors in commercial collaborations: agencies, brands, and micro-influencer platforms. Findings show micro-influencers' strong motivation to engage in paid partnerships. Among the three actors, platforms emerge as crucial allies, providing broad opportunities to collaborate with brands across sectors. Yet, registration often requires follower and engagement thresholds unattainable for smaller creators. Platforms offer clear conditions on content, timelines, and compensation, but interactions tend to be impersonal, with rigid publication and content rules. By contrast, direct collaborations with brands are more flexible and personalized and often lead to repeat partnerships. For those with smaller audiences, they remain the main entry point into commercial activity, though many participants called for clearer collaboration terms.

### Keywords

**Micro-influencers, Influencer marketing, Advertising, Commercial actions, Micro-influencer platforms, Influencer marketing agencies.**

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. *The Rise of Influencer Marketing*

Influencer marketing has become a central tool in contemporary advertising, with global turnover projected to exceed 22 billion USD in 2025 (Statista, 2024). It builds connections between brands and individuals to foster trust and communication (Childers et al., 2018a), focusing on identifying influencers who appeal to potential buyers and directing commercial efforts toward them (Audrezet et al., 2018). Influencers attract audiences through compelling audiovisual and textual narratives about their lives and lifestyles (Abidin, 2021).

As Lou and Yuan (2019, p. 59) note, “a social media influencer is first and foremost a content creator ... who has cultivated a sizeable number of captive followers of marketing value to brands by regularly producing valuable content through social media.” Unlike traditional celebrities who gain fame through music, acting, or sports, influencers achieve recognition primarily via social media (Khamis et al., 2016; Primasiwi et al., 2021). Their effectiveness lies in establishing personal relationships that influence purchasing decisions (Tworzydło et al., 2019).

They operate similarly to Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) opinion leaders—individuals exerting interpersonal influence through everyday interactions (Weimann, 2008). Audiences perceive them as relatable and trustworthy, which enhances credibility (De Veirman et al., 2017; Abidin, 2021). Scholars have examined their effectiveness across fashion (Pérez-Curiel & Ortiz, 2018; Pérez-Curiel & Sanz-Marcos, 2019; Chetoui et al., 2020; Gomes et al., 2022), luxury (Pangarkar & Rathee, 2022), politics (Pérez-Curiel & Limón-Naharro, 2019; Harff & Schmuck, 2023), tourism (Magno & Cassia, 2018; Neuburger & Barbe, 2021; Madureira & Alturas, 2022), and sustainability (Minh Tung & Hoai Lan, 2024). Studies also highlight influencers' advantages over traditional celebrities in engaging audiences and building trust (Gräve, 2017; Jin et al., 2019; Paramita & Septianto, 2021; Schouten et al., 2021).

More recently, research on virtual influencers shows that computer-generated figures can be perceived as more trustworthy, credible, and relevant than human influencers, thereby enhancing purchase intention (Gerlich, 2023).

The success of campaigns is typically measured through key performance indicators (KPIs) such as engagement (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2022), reach (Primasiwi et al., 2021), and sentiment (Gräve, 2019). Regulatory studies examine disclosure practices and their impact on user perception (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019; Boerman, 2020; Karagür et al., 2022). Congruence is essential: follower count alone does not ensure positive endorsement outcomes; alignment between influencer and product is crucial for effective advertising and enhanced likeability (Janssen et al., 2021).

## **1.2. Micro-Influencers and Their Unique Value**

Researchers have proposed typologies based on community size, though thresholds vary. Abidin (2021) distinguishes four groups: mega- (over 1 million), macro- (500,000–1 million), influencers (10,000–500,000), and micro- (1,000–10,000). Borges-Tiago et al. (2023) similarly identify four but add a lower-tier segment—nano-influencers (fewer than 1,000). Park et al. (2021) expand to five: mega- (over 1 million), fame- (500,000–1 million), macro- (100,000–500,000), micro- (5,000–100,000), and nano- (2,000–5,000). Conde and Casais (2023) simplify the taxonomy to three: mega- (over 1 million), macro- (100,000–1 million), and micro- (1,000–100,000).

Micro-influencers attract attention for their higher engagement and identification with audiences (Sarmiento-Guede & Rodríguez-Terceño, 2020; Gross & von Wangenheim, 2022) and their persuasive capacity (Park et al., 2021; Janssen et al., 2021). They outperform mega-influencers in perceived trustworthiness, authenticity, and similarity, whereas the latter retain advantages in expertise and attractiveness (Walter et al., 2024). These smaller-scale influencers are seen as authentic and relatable, fostering stronger community ties than macro-influencers (Alampi, 2019).

While macro- and mega-influencers build brand awareness, micro-influencers drive engagement (Russell, 2020). They use features like direct messaging and comment replies, impractical for larger influencers (Silalahi, 2021). Despite smaller audiences, their precise targeting of niches makes them valuable for maximizing ROI (Amareesan, 2024).

## **1.3. Micro-influencer platforms: A New Player in the Advertising Industry**

Micro-influencers' advantages—persuasive ability, trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and authenticity—have received growing attention (Park et al., 2021; Janssen et al., 2021; Walter et al., 2024). Yet little is known about their lived experiences, particularly their own views on collaborations with brands and their participation in emerging models such as influencer marketing agencies and influencer digital platforms. These platforms have become key intermediaries connecting brands with influencers of varying audience sizes.

This study fills these gaps through 30 semi-structured interviews with Spanish micro-influencers (1,000–100,000 followers; Conde & Casais, 2023). It explores their interactions with three main stakeholders—brands, agencies, and platforms—highlighting the opportunities and tensions within these collaborations. The study foregrounds micro-influencers as an emerging force in advertising and critically examines how platforms are reshaping brand–influencer relationships.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. *The Digital Transformation of Advertising***

Back in 2009, Sheehan and Morrison coined the concept of cultural confluence to describe the changes that the advertising industry was beginning to experience due to the emergence of digital technology. For the first time, users were enabled to develop content. Their reflection emphasized that both advertisers and advertising agencies should embrace the profound transformation of the industry brought about by significant changes, including interactive content, social platforms as emerging media, and new forms of consumption and production.

The extraordinary ability of social platforms to gather users on a massive scale cannot be understated. In 2023, Facebook surpassed one billion registered accounts worldwide and more than 3 billion monthly users, followed by YouTube with 2.5 billion, Instagram and WhatsApp with 2 billion each, and TikTok with 1.5 billion users (Dixon, 2024). Brands can establish a presence on these platforms in three primary ways: through social ads (i.e., conventional advertising), by creating brand profiles, or by leveraging content generated by users and influencers (Mayrhofer et al., 2020).

### **2.2. *The Role of Influencers in the Advertising Ecosystem***

Determining the exact number of influencers worldwide remains challenging. Gagliese (2022) estimates that approximately 50 million people qualify as influencers. In Spain, as of 2022, there were approximately 1.56 million influencers, defined as content creators with more than 1,000 followers or subscribers (IAB Spain, 2022).

The advertising ecosystem has always been in flux, but the impact of digital technology has brought about more dramatic and rapid changes than any previous phenomenon. Traditional advertising agencies have had to undergo significant adaptation and develop an in-depth understanding of the digital medium. New professional roles have emerged, such as the 14 identified by Windels and Stuhlfaut (2018) in the US industry. Media agency planners have expanded their knowledge base, adopted new measurement tools specific to the digital medium, and collaborated with specialists in SEO, SEM, mobile platforms, and statistical analysis (Perlado Lamo de Espinosa et al., 2019). Public relations (PR) professionals have also embraced new tools to enhance their strategies, such as employing influencers, adopting advanced measurement tools, and using new channels for event broadcasting. These functionalities have partially replaced traditional tools (Tworzydło et al., 2019). Advances in digital technology have also influenced advertisers, who have strengthened their internal departments to reduce outsourcing and respond more quickly to customer needs (Hughes & Vafeas, 2019).

### **2.3. *Challenges and New Business Models in Influencer Marketing***

Despite the profound impact of influencer marketing, there is limited academic literature on how it has reshaped existing agency models or generated new business models. Sanz-Marcos et al. (2019) analyzed how advertisers in Spain mandate the inclusion of influencers in campaign strategies—a decision not always shared by creative agencies. Smolak and López (2020) argue that influencers have transformed the strategic planning of agencies. Further studies from the

agency perspective include research by Childers et al. (2018b) in the USA on digital integration, and on managing influencer marketing (Childers et al., 2018a).

Although there are many types of agencies that hire influencers for their clients (creative, media, social media, digital marketing agencies, etc.), the volume of business has grown so significantly that specialized companies have been created.

Influencer marketing agencies are dedicated to developing influencer marketing campaigns, primarily on social media. Their compensation model is typically based on charging a commission on the payment made to the influencer (Childers et al., 2018a). Their main functions include managing a database of influencers, identifying the most suitable influencer(s) for a brand, creating the campaign strategy, supervising the production of the content and overseeing its execution from start to finish (Guld, 2023; Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025a). In 2019 alone, 380 influencer marketing agencies were established worldwide (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). According to a study by the advertising consultancy Scopen (2023), conducted among 120 advertisers in Spain, 69.7% reported using macro-influencers (100,000–500,000 followers) in their influencer marketing strategies. However, they did not rely exclusively on this category; on average, each company used up to 3.5 different influencer types based on follower count across five possible categories (mega: over 1 million; fame: 500,000–1 million; macro: 100,000–500,000; micro: 10,000–100,000; nano: up to 10,000). In addition, 72.7% of professionals reported working with influencer marketing agencies.

Nevertheless, industry reports suggest that micro-influencer marketing is consolidating as an effective strategy for reaching niche audiences and, consequently, attracting greater brand investment in this segment (IAB Spain, 2025). Micro-influencer collaborations are increasingly managed through dedicated influencer platforms (Marchán-Sanz et al., 2025).

Influencer platforms have emerged to connect influencers, primarily micro-influencers, and brands directly. They operate as software-based solutions that enable brands to discover, collaborate with, and manage social media influencers throughout their marketing campaigns (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025b). They usually require minimum follower and engagement thresholds for registration (e.g., FuelYourBrands:  $\geq 3,000$  followers and engagement rate  $\geq 4\%$ ; Skeepers: Instagram  $>1,000$  followers; Heepsy:  $\geq 1,500$  followers on Instagram/TikTok). In summary, influencer marketing agencies provide comprehensive and personalized services that include campaign design, content strategy, and supervision, whereas influencer platforms automate and streamline the processes of influencer selection and campaign monitoring. According to IAB Spain's Top Digital Trends report (2022), the creation of new platforms and agencies focused on influencer marketing saw significant growth in 2021 in Spain.

The two main challenges for advertisers in influencer marketing are identifying the right influencers and measuring the outcomes of their campaigns, both of which are made difficult by the high fragmentation of the market across various social platforms (Gräve, 2019). The large number of influencers makes it challenging for advertisers to identify the most appropriate candidates for their needs (Wibowo et al., 2023). Searching for influencers consumes significant time and energy for internal marketing teams, leading certain advertisers to prefer using external solutions rather than relying solely on their own resources (Russell, 2020; Gold et al., 2021).

#### **2.4. From Macro-Influencers to Micro-Influencers**

Social networks allow advertisers the opportunity to establish direct contact with consumers without intermediaries. While creating engaging content remains a challenge for brands, influencers specialize in generating content that not only captures user attention but also amplifies the brand's visibility across networks (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Advancements in

technology have enabled the rise of social commerce, where social networks serve as not only sources of information and inspiration but also direct purchasing channels. Influencers can recommend products, include links to brand e-commerce websites, and even offer discount codes to incentivize purchases (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2022; Nadanyiova & Sujanska, 2023).

However, using influencers with large audiences is not always the optimal strategy. Micro-influencers are especially appealing due to their affordability and their ability to engage niche audiences. They achieve a certain level of recognition through their charisma and expertise in narrow domains of interest (Sinha & Fung, 2021). Advertisers with limited marketing budgets often rely on micro- and nano-influencers because of their cost-effectiveness and strong engagement rates (Silalahi, 2021; Abdullah & Ampauleng, 2024). Start-ups, in particular, increasingly incorporate groups of micro-influencers into their strategies to maximize impact within tight budgets (Hund, 2019; Wei & Liang, 2021).

### **2.5. Professionalization and Fair Compensation**

This work forms part of a project initiated in 2023 (Marchán-Sanz et al., 2024), which surveyed 290 micro-influencers to better understand their working methods and their need for professionalization and remuneration beyond free products or discounts. The survey revealed that a standardized work process exists. Brands typically provide clear and comprehensive briefings; however, micro-influencers often lack sufficient tools and training to execute collaborations effectively. As a result, while they enjoy creative freedom, they are not empowered to make strategic decisions. Although digital influencers offer numerous advantages to brands, they increasingly advocate for fair monetary compensation, moving beyond relationships based solely on product or service exchanges.

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1. Objectives and Methodology**

This qualitative study adopts a descriptive exploratory approach to understand the work processes and interactions between micro-influencers and the three key agents they typically collaborate with during commercial activities: brands, influencer platforms (companies that connect advertisers with influencers, particularly micro-influencers, for commercial collaborations), and influencer marketing agencies (specialized in orchestrating influencer marketing campaigns, particularly with influencers who have large communities). The study examines the value each relationship provides to micro-influencers, how the processes develop, and the associated positive and negative aspects. Finally, micro-influencers are asked to identify areas of the process they would like to improve.

The research is approached from the perspective of the micro-influencers themselves—a viewpoint that has been largely underrepresented in existing studies. The following research questions are posed:

- What is the nature of the relationship and the work process between micro-influencers and brands?
- What is the nature of the relationship and the work process between micro-influencers and platforms?
- What is the nature of the relationship and the work process between micro-influencers and influencer marketing agencies?
- What aspects of the relationships with brands, platforms, and influencer marketing agencies could be improved?

### 3.2. Methodology Overview

This study builds on an initial quantitative study conducted among 290 micro-influencers (Marchán-Sanz et al., 2024) registered on influencer platform FuelYourBrands. Participants completed a closed-ended questionnaire designed to examine their professional activities and relationships with other stakeholders in the sector. Influencer platform FuelYourBrands operates in Spain, Mexico, and Colombia, connecting influencers and brands. At the time of the study, its database included approximately 6,500 micro-influencers. To deepen these findings, in-depth interviews with open-ended questions were conducted. This qualitative approach is particularly suited to exploring participants' experiences, opinions, and perceptions (Milena et al., 2008). Semi-structured interviews were selected to allow flexibility in question sequencing based on participants' responses, thus generating richer and more nuanced insights.

### 3.3. Interview Process

The sample consisted of 30 micro-influencers registered on the platform mentioned above. Registration ensured that all participants had at least a minimal level of commercial activity—an essential criterion for achieving the study's objectives. Micro-influencers who had completed the initial online survey were invited via email to participate in a follow-up interview. Inclusion criteria required that participants have fewer than 100,000 followers. The sampling strategy sought diversity in age, gender, and content area (e.g., lifestyle, beauty, fitness, gastronomy). Data saturation was reached after 30 interviews. Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams between October and December 2023, each lasting approximately 40 minutes. The interview guide was tested during the initial sessions, and no modifications were required. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently coded through manual thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A mixed coding method was employed, combining deductive and inductive approaches:

- Deductive coding: based on the predefined interview scripts, a set of analytical categories and subcategories was established.
- Inductive coding: allowed for the identification of emerging patterns and unanticipated categories during data analysis.

The Universidad Internacional de la Rioja Research Ethics Committee reviewed and approved the study protocol and interview guide to ensure ethical compliance. The anonymized interview transcripts are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Table 1 outlines the variables considered in interview design, focusing on micro-influencers' work processes with brands, platforms, and influencer marketing agencies.

### 3.4. Questionnaire Structure

The interview questionnaire was divided into four thematic blocks designed to comprehensively explore the relationships and work processes of micro-influencers with various marketing agents. The first block included questions focused on their interactions with brands, platforms, and agencies, specifically addressing relationship initiation, the phases of collaboration, and evaluations of these partnerships. The second block examined the most positive and negative aspects of working with each type of agent, highlighting both challenges and opportunities. In the third block, participants were asked to identify critical areas for improvement in their professional interactions. Finally, the fourth block synthesized these insights by inviting participants to share overarching reflections on their experiences, offering a holistic perspective on their work as micro-influencers.

**Table 1.** Interview guide used in the in-depth interviews conducted with micro-influencers about work processes with different influencer marketing agents

| Specific objective                                                                                                                        | Guiding Questions                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Block 1</b><br>Evaluate the relationship and work processes between <i>micro-influencers</i> and brands/advertisers.                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who initiates the relationship?</li> <li>How is the work process developed?</li> <li>What are the positive and negative aspects of the relationship?</li> </ul>                         |
| <b>Block 2</b><br>Evaluate the relationship and work processes between <i>micro-influencers</i> and platforms.                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do you define platforms?</li> <li>How is the work process developed?</li> <li>What are the positive and negative aspects of the relationship?</li> </ul>                            |
| <b>Block 3</b><br>Evaluate the relationship and work processes between <i>micro-influencers</i> and <i>influencer</i> marketing agencies. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do you define <i>influencer</i> marketing agencies?</li> <li>How is the work process developed?</li> <li>What are the positive and negative aspects of the relationship?</li> </ul> |
| <b>Block 4</b><br>Identify key areas for improving relationships with all stakeholders.                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the main areas for improvement in these relationships?</li> </ul>                                                                                                              |

Source: Compiled by the authors.

### 3.5. Sample Characteristics

The study sample comprised 30 micro-influencers registered on X. Socio-demographic data collected at the start of each interview revealed that 24 of participants were women and 6 men. Within the sample, 9 of the participants were over 40 years old, and 21 under 40. Educational backgrounds varied: 12 had a university degree, 6 had vocational training, and another 6 had completed secondary education.

**Platform Usage:** Instagram was the dominant platform (22), followed by TikTok (6) and smaller representation on Twitch (1) and Facebook (1). Many participants used multiple platforms, with 14 active on two platforms (commonly Instagram and TikTok) and 9 active on three.

**Follower Count in main platform:** 11 had fewer than 10,000 followers, 14 between 10,000 and 30,000, 3 between 31,000 and 50,000, and 2 over 50,000.

**Content Niches:** Lifestyle topics were the most common focus (6), followed by beauty (7) and gastronomy (2), motherhood (2). Other topics included mental health, and motorhomes.

**Table 2.** Sociodemographic and Professional Profile of Micro-Influencers Interviewed

| Micro-influencers sample                        |                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Study sample                                    | 30 individuals                                                                      |
| Genre                                           | Women (24); Men (6)                                                                 |
| Age                                             | < 40 Years (21); >40 Years (9)                                                      |
| Educational background                          | University degree (12); Secondary education (6); Vocational training (6)            |
| Platforms usage                                 |                                                                                     |
| No of social platforms in which they are active | 1 platform (2); 2 platforms (14); 3 platforms (9); 4 platforms (4); 5 platforms (1) |
| Key social platform                             | IG (22); TIKTOK (6); TWICH (1); FB (1)                                              |
| No of follower's main platform                  | <10K (11); 10K-30K (14); 31K- 50K (3); + 50K (2)                                    |
| Content niches                                  | Lifestyle (6); Beauty (7); Gastronomy (2); Maternity (2)                            |

Source: Compiled by the authors.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. *Micro-influencers and brands/advertisers*

#### 4.1.1. Who initiates the relationship

In most cases, micro-influencers are the ones who initiate contact with brands to propose collaborations. According to the participants, during the initial stages of their careers, when their communities are small, they proactively approach brands to offer collaborations. This proactive approach is often necessary because influencer platforms typically impose minimum follower and engagement thresholds that many micro-influencers do not initially meet:

Let's see, in the end, everyone usually starts like this, talking directly to the brand, you know? Because also, to enter a platform or an agency, they ask you for certain requirements, such as a minimum number of followers or a minimum level of something. (Male, 21, lifestyle)

For the majority of interviewees, participating in commercial collaborations is a significant aspiration. Beyond receiving free products or occasional financial remuneration, many micro-influencers view their role as recommending products to their followers. Being selected by a brand is seen as validation of their content's quality and relevance. A minority of participants, particularly those focusing on less popular areas such as mental health or motorhomes, do not actively seek collaborations.

#### 4.1.2. Work process

After establishing contact, the collaboration process between micro-influencers and brands varies significantly. Some brands provide a detailed brief, including timelines for product delivery and content publication, while others adopt a more flexible approach to the entire process.

#### 4.1.3. Positive and negative aspects of the relationship.

Collaborating directly with brands was highly regarded by most respondents, as it signified that the brand recognized the quality and alignment of their content with its identity. Many respondents noted that brands allow them greater flexibility in both the type of content they create and the timing of publication compared to influencer platforms. For example: "Well, the brands, most of them... except for a few, usually have very few problems. They ask you, they give you [instructions], and if you are willing to collaborate, they send you the product, and you do it" (Female, 39, gastronomy). Collaborating directly with brands often involves more personalized interactions, typically with the brand's community manager. This fosters more efficient communication and a stronger working relationship. Positive experiences with brands frequently lead to long-term collaborations, providing micro-influencers with consistent opportunities to work on future projects.

As for the negative aspects, some interviewees highlighted unclear terms of agreement as a significant challenge in their collaborations with brands. This includes ambiguity regarding payment terms, such as the amount, method, and timing of remuneration. While a minority of participants reported taking the initiative to send contracts or letters of conditions to formalize agreements, this behavior is not common. Consequently, influencers are often required to negotiate directly with brands—a process some find empowering but others consider burdensome or risky.

When you work on your own, you run the risk of the brand telling you they're going to pay you... they don't tell you when or how they're going to pay you. Or they might say, 'I didn't like what you did, so I'll pass,' and you've spent a month uploading content. (Female, 45, Mental Health)



## **4.2. Micro-influencers and Influencer Platforms**

### **4.2.1. How they define influencers platforms**

Influencer platforms are described by interviewees as spaces where brands and influencers converge, serving as intermediaries that facilitate collaborations: “On the platforms you see the product there and then you, if you want, kind of opt for that collaboration and then that brand decides whether it wants your profile or not.” (Female, 29, photography). Some platforms focus exclusively on campaigns that involve product compensation, while others offer paid collaborations or a combination of both. These platforms tend to appeal more to influencers creating content related to fashion, beauty, lifestyle, than to those focusing on less popular topics (e.g., literature, mental health), as the latter face a more restricted range of opportunities for collaboration.

In addition, some influencer platforms provide opportunities for User-Generated Content (UGC). UGC involves hiring influencers to create content about a brand, which is then used on the brand’s own channels rather than the influencer’s profile. Interviewees noted that UGC is particularly popular in the United States, although it has yet to gain similar traction in Spain. UGC collaborations are often more lucrative than traditional campaigns, and influencers specializing in this type of work appreciate its authenticity and its effectiveness as a marketing tool. It also offers the advantage that it doesn’t matter how many followers the influencer has, but rather the quality of the content they produce.

There is a section for collaborations with brands you’ve worked with, so the more you have there, the better for you. And if that brand does well, you can then show the engagement that brand had—the impact your video has made—because it doesn’t matter how many followers you have; what matters is that the content you create works. (Female, 19, networking)

Furthermore, they value that it prevents their profiles from becoming oversaturated with promotional content.

I think influencer marketing is burned out. I think they no longer reach people like they used to. And what people want first is entertainment and real people. In other words, they look for that. In the United States, UGC works very well because it really is content created by the user. (Female, 27, beauty & fashion)

### **4.2.2. Who initiates the relationship**

Micro-influencers discover influencer platforms through three primary channels: internet searches, social media, and peers and events. In most cases, micro-influencers register themselves on the platform. Nearly all the interviewees reported being registered on multiple platforms. A small minority mentioned being directly invited by the platform to join.

### **4.2.3. Work process**

Advertisers post the campaigns they wish to execute on the platform, and registered influencers can apply for collaborations that interest them. Once selected, the platform provides influencers with all necessary details, including compensation, product delivery dates, the number and type of content pieces to be produced, specific instructions (briefs), and publication deadlines. The platform also supervises all phases of the process to ensure compliance.

### **4.2.4. Positive and negative aspects of the relationship**

Interviewees highlighted several positive aspects of working through influencer platforms. One of the most significant advantages is the access these platforms provide to a wide range of brands from various sectors, greatly expanding the opportunities for collaboration: “I also really

like working in that sense, —collaborating with the platforms— because I can access important campaigns” (Female, 40, fitness & maternity).

With the platform, they present you with a series of things and you choose. In other words, they tell you: ‘Look, I have this, this and this.’ You choose, you sign up and they either select you or not. That is also true, not all of them select you. But it’s true that they have a lot of variety. (Female, 46, family).

Additionally, platforms are valued for their transparency, as they clearly outline all the working conditions. This includes specifying when products will be delivered, what content needs to be created (such as the number of pieces), the duration of the collaboration, and the agreed-upon compensation.

Another notable benefit is the role of platforms as intermediaries. By facilitating the process and managing the terms of the collaboration, platforms spare influencers the need to negotiate directly with brands, which many find simplifies the overall experience. This structured and transparent approach makes platforms a preferred option for influencers seeking straightforward and organized commercial opportunities.

The platform already tells you upfront when it will pay you for a publication or a story. Also, if you’re overwhelmed with tasks and miss a deadline, someone from the platform might contact you via WhatsApp or Instagram to remind you—“There are two days left; see if you can finalize the content.’ With brands, this flexibility doesn’t exist. If you miss the deadline, the collaboration is over. (Female, 27, nutrition and sport)

Regarding less favorable aspects, interviewees first mentioned that platforms require a minimum number of followers and/or engagement levels to gain acceptance, which they found restrictive: “The engagement, you have to have it above such... it has a minimum, you know? It requires a minimum of participation and such” (Female, 51, literature).

In Skipper (a leading micro-influencers platform) they require a minimum of 1,000 followers. And you must have an engagement rate of 2. If not, you can’t. Because, for example, my twin sister: she has 640 followers, but, of course, her Instagram is empty. I mean, she has three posts. So, what they want to achieve on the platform is people who have activity. People to whom you can send the product, and, in those 25 days, you know they will post it because they post active people. If not, they will deactivate your account. (Female, 27, beauty & fashion)

They also complained about greater rigidity overall, particularly with publication dates, content formats, and tight campaign timelines. Many interviewees also reported that interactions with platforms often felt impersonal, as the same representative was not always available to respond to their inquiries. Another frequently mentioned concern, which participants stated affected them emotionally, was the lack of feedback when they were not selected for campaigns. This absence of communication left them feeling undervalued and uncertain about how to improve for future opportunities: “When you’re not chosen, they don’t tell you why. It’s like job applications—when you’re rejected, you’re not given an explanation. I think that would be a valuable improvement” (Female, 35, product tester).

#### **4.3. Micro-influencers and Influencer Marketing Agencies**

##### **4.3.1. How do you define Influencer Marketing Agencies?**

Interviewees generally describe these companies as similar to talent representation agencies for actors or models. However, very few of the interviewees are currently affiliated with such agencies or have been in the past. Only a small minority expressed an interest in joining one,

while most considered it unrealistic in the short to medium term or were indifferent to the prospect. Agencies are perceived as having stricter entry requirements than influencer platforms: “In the end, big agencies don’t take you because they want people with many followers” (Female, 23, lifestyle).

#### 4.3.2. Positive and negative aspects of the relationship

As noted, only one interviewee was in the process of joining an influencer marketing agency, and a few others had limited prior interactions with such agencies. This lack of experience limited insights into the detailed working processes of agencies. However, interviewees expressed polarized opinions about influencer marketing agencies, highlighting both benefits and drawbacks.

Regarding positive aspects, for a minority, joining one of these agencies was seen as desirable because it would provide access to higher-level brands. Additionally, jobs sourced through agencies were remunerated, as the agencies charged a commission on earnings. Two other positive aspects mentioned were that agencies offer guidance to influencers and provide greater stability: “For me, my short-term aspiration is to find an influencer agency because it also means stability” (Female, 20, beauty).

Some interviewees expressed concerns about the negative aspects of working with agencies. In addition to the strict entry requirements, which often include a high follower count or significant engagement levels that make it challenging for smaller influencers to join, some felt that agencies exploit influencers. These agencies are perceived as being overly focused on profit, taking a commission from each job that ultimately reduces the earnings influencers can make from their collaborations. As one interviewee explained:

There are agencies that only want to do business and don’t care what you’re promoting or what values you’re communicating—they just want to make money. So, yes, it’s easier to join agencies like that. But with agencies that uphold certain values, it’s more complicated. They pay closer attention not only to the number of followers but also to engagement and other factors. (Female, 19, lifestyle)

Working with influencer marketing agencies is also perceived as more demanding than other types of collaborations.

#### 4.4. General Aspects for Improving Relationships

After analyzing their relationships with brands, influencer platforms, and influencer marketing agencies, interviewees were asked what improvements could enhance work dynamics. The most common suggestion was to include monetary compensation alongside product-based exchanges: “I would start by considering the option of paying money for good content, not just offering products, right?” (Female, 32, product tester).

Another recurring suggestion was for brands to establish more reasonable demands, especially when no monetary payment is offered:

They’re asking me for much more work than what they’re actually offering in return. Because, in the end, everything has a price, and my time has a price. So, when they ask for more than I think is fair, I just don’t participate. (Female, 38, beauty)

They would also like to receive more feedback on the work they have done. Additionally, there is a residual complaint mentioned by several interviewees: sometimes the requirements for carrying out a commercial action are overly restrictive, to the point where even the writing style is imposed. This results in identical collaborations across all the influencers hired for the same

campaign. Such rigidity makes them feel uncomfortable, as they believe it undermines the credibility of their endorsements.

There are certain brands that want me, for example, my idea is to be myself, to be natural, to be who I truly am. But there are brands that, it's true, prefer a collaboration to be exactly the way they want it to be. (Female, 40, fitness and maternity)

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

The objective of this study was to analyze the work processes and relationships between micro-influencers and the three main actors in influencer marketing during commercial collaborations: brands, influencer platforms, and influencer marketing agencies. Interestingly, none of the 30 respondents mentioned working with any other type of advertising agencies (e.g., creative or media agencies) for commercial collaborations.

The findings underscore micro-influencers' eagerness to participate in commercial collaborations. Among the three actors, influencer platforms are identified as crucial allies, providing access to a wide array of campaigns across diverse sectors. This accessibility, coupled with the transparency these platforms offer regarding campaign processes, is perceived as their greatest advantage. However, registering on these platforms requires meeting minimum follower thresholds and engagement ratios, which are standard key performance indicators (KPIs) in influencer marketing (Gräve, 2019), but often unattainable for smaller influencers.

Despite their advantages, influencer platforms also present notable challenges. Interviewees highlighted the impersonal nature of interactions and the rigidity of publication schedules and content requirements. While the systematization inherent in platforms could theoretically contribute to the professionalization of influencer activities—an outcome many influencers desire (Marchán-Sanz et al., 2024)—it paradoxically generates complaints. Furthermore, the lack of feedback when influencers are not selected for campaigns causes frustration among participants.

When commercial collaborations are conducted directly with brands, interviewees expressed greater satisfaction due to the absence of intermediaries, allowing them to build long-term relationships. For brands, collaborating with influencers they have previously worked with—and who have therefore already been evaluated and approved—serves as a guarantee of obtaining content that meets their expectations and strategic objectives (McMullan, 2023). For influencers who are just starting out and have smaller communities, direct collaborations often represent the only viable entry point into commercial partnerships. Advertisers, in turn, tend to prioritize influencers whose values and audience profiles align closely with their brand ethos (McMullan, 2023).

According to the interviewees, direct collaboration with brands tends to be more flexible than those conducted through influencer platforms, particularly regarding publication timelines. However, many influencers stressed the need for greater clarity regarding collaboration terms. The absence of a standardized working methodology in influencer marketing remains a pressing issue. McMullan (2023) proposes a structured framework to guide advertisers in establishing effective relationships. This framework encompasses three critical phases that structure the collaboration process effectively. The first phase, Partner Planning and Influencer Selection, involves assessing whether to build long-term partnerships with trusted influencers or to seek new talent for each campaign, depending on the brand's goals. The second phase, Performance and Recruitment Management, focuses on setting clear expectations for the collaboration, including defining

the specific deliverables and outlining the incentives offered to influencers. The third phase, Reputation Management, emphasizes the importance of proactively establishing protocols to address any potential reputational challenges. These points, at least for the most part, would be guaranteed when advertisers work with platforms and influencer marketing agencies.

In terms of influencer marketing agencies, the interviewees' experiences were limited. Nevertheless, these companies elicit polarized opinions. Some interviewees expressed enthusiasm for agencies, citing benefits such as professional guidance and access to high-profile brands. Others were critical, viewing agencies as overly profit-driven and focused on commissions, which can reduce the earnings of micro-influencers. Most participants, however, consider influencer marketing agencies out of reach due to the relatively small size of their audiences—a practical limitation given the business models of these agencies. Guld's (2023) findings on the Hungarian market highlight the advantages that agency representation offers influencers, particularly in securing fairer remuneration and gaining access to legal and professional support. While many influencers view agency representation as a strategy to accelerate their professional development and diversify their income streams, most applications are rejected due to an insufficient follower base or the absence of a fully developed professional profile.

One of the most commonly cited areas for improvement is the call for monetary remuneration in addition to product-based compensation. According to Marchán-Sanz et al. (2024), micro-influencers increasingly advocate for payment that reflects the value they bring to brands. However, these content creators are often viewed as amateurs by advertisers and advertising agencies, leading to the absence of formal contractual agreements. These results are consistent with Villegas-Simón et al. (2022), who identify three primary sources of dissatisfaction among micro-influencers: the imbalance between time invested and compensation received, the pressure to publish intensively, and the sense of unfair comparison with macro-influencers—despite micro-influencers often achieving higher returns on investment for brands. The study also reports that, on average, respondents required eight years to build a community large enough to charge for their content. Many brands and agencies appear to perceive collaboration itself as a sufficient reward for micro-influencers, rather than acknowledging the commercial value of their work.

Micro-influencers also express frustration with brands that impose overly rigid briefs. Such restrictions are perceived as counterproductive, as they prevent influencers from creating content in their authentic voice—a quality they believe their followers value and expect. This tension over creative control is one of the central challenges in brand-influencer relationships, requiring a balance between influencers' creative freedom and the contractual demands set by brands (McMullan, et al., 2022). Excessive brand control not only diminishes the influencer's authenticity but also risks alienating audiences. This is particularly notable among Gen Z, who tend to react negatively to overtly controlled commercial content (Pradhan et al., 2023).

In summary, this research sheds light on micro-influencers' keen interest in commercial collaborations while exploring their interactions with the three key players in these processes: brands, influencer platforms, and influencer marketing agencies. The study's primary contributions lie in two areas: first, offering an analysis of work processes from the perspective of micro-influencers, and second, highlighting how the rise of influencers and micro-influencers has driven the development of new business models,

particularly influencer platforms—an emerging business model that has received little academic attention to date.

When it comes to commercial collaborations, micro-influencers generally have two most accessible options: working directly with brands or through influencer platforms. For those beginning with smaller communities, direct collaborations often serve as the initial point of entry. These relationships tend to be more personal and flexible, with the potential for repeated partnerships. Nevertheless, many interviewees emphasized the need for greater transparency regarding the financial terms of such agreements.

In contrast, influencer platforms broaden access to a wider range of brands—including higher-profile ones—and standardize many aspects of collaboration, ensuring clearer processes and payment conditions. However, this increased structure also introduces greater rigidity and a more impersonal dynamic. Finally, collaboration through influencer marketing agencies remains largely unattainable for most micro-influencers until they have built a community of sufficient size and professional visibility.

## **6. Limitations and Future Directions**

It is important to highlight the limitations of this study. This research provides valuable insights into how micro-influencers perceive and evaluate their work processes when engaging in commercial activities with different agents: directly with brands, through influencer platforms, or via influencer marketing agencies. However, as a qualitative study, its representativeness is inherently limited. The sample of interviewed influencers was limited to those registered on an influencer platform. This criterion may restrict the study's representativeness; however, given the study's objectives, it should not constitute a confounding factor. Furthermore, it focuses specifically on the Spanish context, which may differ significantly from the realities of other countries due to variations in market maturity, cultural practices, and regulatory frameworks. Future studies could further examine other dimensions of micro-influencers' work, particularly the legal aspects of their activity and the disclosure of advertising content. It would also be insightful to gather the perspectives of brands that incorporate micro-influencers into their marketing strategies. Understanding how brands perceive the contributions of micro-influencers, the nature of their work and contractual relationships would provide a more holistic view.

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