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Dilemmas Faced by Micro-influencers in Commercial Collaborations: Ethical Responsibility and Personal Gain

Abstract

Influencer marketing continues to expand, intensifying debates about compliance with advertising regulations and the distribution of responsibility among influencers, brands, and other stakeholders. This qualitative study draws on 30 in-depth interviews with micro-influencers in Spain to examine how they interpret and manage legal requirements and ethical considerations in the context of commercial collaborations. The findings indicate a high level of awareness of disclosure obligations, with most participants reporting regular identification of sponsored content. While interviewees generally attribute primary responsibility for product-related information to brands, they also acknowledge shared accountability and describe practices aimed at ensuring accuracy and maintaining credibility. Although participants recognize significant pressure to increase follower numbers, they largely reject the practice of purchasing followers. Instead, they emphasize authenticity, thematic coherence, and trust as central to sustaining their professional legitimacy. Overall, micro-influencers conceptualize ethical responsibility less as strict adherence to formal rules and more as an ongoing communicative practice oriented toward credibility, audience expectations, and long-term professional sustainability.

Keywords

Micro-influencers; influencer marketing; advertising; transparency; ethics; regulation; disclosure, dilemmas.

1. Introduction

Influencer marketing continues to expand at a sustained pace, drawing increasing scholarly and regulatory attention to its communicative, legal, and ethical implications. Global revenue from influencer marketing is projected to exceed 30 billion USD by 2025 (Statista, 2025), while in Spain alone the sector attracted 125 million euros in investment in 2024, representing a 58.0% increase compared to the previous year (Infoadex, 2025). This growth reflects the consolidation of influencer marketing as a strategic form of business communication that enables brands to engage diverse audiences on social media in an effective and cost-efficient way (Jayasinghe, 2021; Ye et al., 2021). Influencers are commonly perceived as capable of producing content that audiences regard as more authentic, organic, and effective than traditional brand-generated advertising (Landgrebe, 2024), making influencer marketing a particularly salient communicative practice among younger generations (Calçada, 2019).

Despite these advantages, influencer marketing also entails significant challenges. The profession of digital influencer is relatively recent and remains only partially professionalised, resulting in blurred boundaries between personal expression, commercial communication, and regulatory compliance. Influencers frequently encounter situations in which economic incentives, ethical considerations, and legal obligations are difficult to reconcile. For example, maintaining a relatively small community may limit access to commercial collaborations, whereas artificially increasing follower numbers through practices such as purchasing followers undermines credibility. Similarly,

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transparent disclosure of sponsored content is both ethically and legally required, yet influencers often perceive that such disclosure may negatively affect audience engagement. In this context, the articulation of clear legal frameworks and the establishment of shared professional standards remain ongoing challenges.

In Spain, the regulatory landscape combines general advertising legislation with self-regulatory mechanisms developed by the industry. Notably, the *Code of Advertising Conduct through Influencers*, first introduced in 2020 and updated in 2025 (Autocontrol, 2025), seeks to clarify good practices in influencer marketing. Nevertheless, despite these regulatory advances, substantial difficulties persist, particularly regarding the clear identification of advertising content—an issue that continues to raise concern among regulators, advertisers, and the wider public.

Within the broad spectrum of influencer profiles, micro-influencers—commonly defined as content creators with fewer than 100,000 followers—deserve particular analytical attention (Conde & Casais, 2023; Park et al., 2021). Although they typically command smaller audiences, micro-influencers often report comparatively high levels of engagement and credibility, even when content creation does not constitute their primary professional activity (Fernández-Gómez & Quintas-Froufe, 2025). Moreover, while many micro-influencers hold university degrees, they frequently lack formal training in digital content production, advertising regulation, or ethical standards related to commercial communication (Fernández-Gómez et al., 2024). Despite their growing relevance in brand strategies, micro-influencers remain comparatively underexplored in academic research.

Existing literature on ethics in influencer marketing has largely focused on issues of transparency, compensation, and authenticity, with Borchers and Enke (2022) identifying up to ten distinct ethical dimensions within the field. Other studies have examined ethical considerations from influencers' own perspectives, often within specific content niches such as travel (Wellman et al., 2020) or parenting blogs (Archer, 2019). However, relatively little attention has been paid to how micro-influencers understand, interpret, and negotiate legal and ethical obligations in their everyday commercial practices, particularly as part of their professional communication with audiences and brands. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the dilemmas faced by micro-influencers in the context of commercial collaborations, with particular attention to issues such as the identification of advertising, the accuracy of product-related information, and the rejection of questionable practices such as purchasing followers. Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews with micro-influencers in Spain, the study explores how these digital prescribers navigate tensions between legal compliance, ethical responsibility, and personal or economic gain, as understood from their own perspectives. This research contributes to ongoing discussions on professional responsibility and ethical decision-making in contemporary business communication.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Influencer Marketing as a Strategic Communication Tool: Responsibility and Influence

Influencer marketing refers to a communication process in which opinion leaders on social media—commonly referred to as influencers—are incorporated into advertisers' strategies by recommending products or services on behalf of brands (Bakker, 2018). Influencers generate content designed to encourage interaction and engagement among their audiences (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), often integrating sponsored messages seamlessly into editorial-style posts (Hudders & Lou, 2022). This blending of commercial and non-commercial content contributes significantly to the persuasive power of influencer communication (Kim & Kim, 2021).

Followers tend to perceive influencers less as traditional celebrities and more as relatable peers (Hudders et al., 2020), which enhances perceptions of authenticity and credibility. As a result, influencer recommendations are often considered more authentic and accessible than conventional

brand-generated advertising (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Zhou et al., 2021). Empirical research has demonstrated the effectiveness of influencer marketing across a wide range of sectors (Leung et al., 2022), including fashion (Chetioui et al., 2020; Gomes et al., 2022), luxury branding (Pangarkar & Rathee, 2022), and beauty (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Influencers also play a relevant role in the dissemination of knowledge and norms in socially sensitive domains such as sustainability (Yıldırım, 2021), neurosurgery (Riccio et al., 2022), mental health (Bauer & Sappenfield, 2024), and education (Carpenter et al., 2021). However, the difficulty audiences face in distinguishing between editorial and advertising content, combined with influencers' capacity to shape attitudes and purchasing decisions, underscores the responsibility influencers hold toward their followers and society more broadly (Mackay, 2021). This responsibility forms the foundation for ethical and regulatory debates surrounding influencer marketing practices.

2.2. Emerging Regulatory Landscape in Influencer Marketing

In Spain, influencer marketing operates within a fragmented yet expanding regulatory environment that encompasses more than 300 national, regional, and European legal provisions (Villajoana, 2016). Of particular relevance are regulations addressing misleading and disguised advertising, primarily governed by the Unfair Competition Law (1991) and Law 34/2002 on Information Society Services. Disguised advertising—defined as commercial content that is not clearly identified as such—has emerged as the central concern for regulators and self-regulatory bodies alike, as it undermines consumers' ability to critically evaluate persuasive messages (Núñez-Cansado et al., 2021).

In response to these concerns, the Spanish Association of Advertisers (AEA) and AUTOCONTROL introduced the Code of Conduct on the Use of Influencers in Advertising in 2020 (Autocontrol de la Publicidad, 2020), later updated in 2025. This self-regulatory framework complements existing legislation and seeks to clarify best practices in influencer advertising. Specifically, the Code establishes guidelines for the correct identification of commercial content (Lázaro, 2020), affirms that disclosure obligations apply to all influencers regardless of audience size, and stipulates that content constitutes advertising of whether compensation is monetary or in kind (IAB Spain, 2022, p. 47).

A significant regulatory development occurred with the approval of Royal Decree 444/2024, approved on April 30 and published in Spain's Official State Bulletin (BOE). It specifically regulates which introduced specific obligations for so-called "users of special relevance." Influencers meeting thresholds of more than one million followers, annual revenues exceeding €300,000, and high levels of audiovisual output are now required to register in the State Register of Audiovisual Providers, aligning them with traditional audiovisual actors. Similar regulatory approaches have already been adopted in France (Díaz, 2023) and are under discussion in Italy (Verdú, 2024).

Non-compliance with these regulations carries tangible consequences. In July 2023, the Spanish Ministry of Consumer Affairs warned major influencers of potential fines exceeding €100,000 for failing to properly disclose sponsored content, following findings that more than 77% of analyzed posts violated transparency requirements (Ministry of Consumer Affairs, 2023). Despite these enforcement efforts, compliance remains uneven. A pan-European investigation by the Consumer Protection Cooperation Network revealed that only 20% of influencer posts were correctly labeled as advertising (Reuters, 2024), a trend mirrored in Spain, where only one in four posts included adequate disclosure (Viña, 2024). These data illustrate the persistent gap between regulatory frameworks and actual industry practices.

2.3. Toward Professionalization: Regulatory Fragmentation and Diffuse Accountability

The advertising industry is still learning how to manage influencer marketing activities (Borchers & Enke, 2021). It involves multiple stakeholders—including influencers, brands, social platforms, users

and intermediary agencies—often resulting in fragmented accountability for regulatory compliance and ethical governance.

Two factors contribute to the slower pace of professionalization in influencer marketing. First, many brands without advertising experience are entering space, drawn by the affordability of working with micro-influencers (Hund, 2019; Silalahi, 2021; Wei & Liang, 2021; Abdullah, & Ampauleng, 2024). It is common for collaborations to involve only free products, rather than formal contracts or monetary compensation (Villegas-Simón et al., 2022). Second, many micro-influencers—often described as amateurs (ICMEDIA, 2021)—lack awareness of how the advertising industry operates or what legal and professional standards apply (Fernández-Gómez et al., 2024).

In response to these challenges, industry bodies and self-regulatory organizations have intensified efforts to promote ethical awareness and regulatory literacy. AUTOCONTROL, together with stakeholders such as IAB Spain, keeps working to establish the ethical principles governing influencer marketing by revising the *Code of Advertising Conduct through Influencers* (2025). The revised code introduces clearer definitions of advertising content, broadens its scope of application, strengthens identifiability requirements, reinforces protections for minors, incorporates provisions related to artificial intelligence, and emphasizes shared responsibility among industry actors. Complementing these regulatory developments, the launch of the *Basic Training Course for Influencers on AUTOCONTROL Advertising Regulations* in June 2025 signals an effort to build regulatory literacy and professional capacity within the sector.

However, improving regulation enforcement will require more efforts. Experts also call for increased brand commitment to self-regulation through awareness campaigns (Caro, 2021) and stronger enforcement mechanisms to penalize noncompliance (Hudders et al., 2020). A previous study on micro-influencers points to the prevalence of bad practices in the industry—driven by lack of financial return and transparency training (Fernández-Gómez & Quintas-Froufe, 2025).

2.4. The Influencer’s Dilemma: Authenticity, Transparency, and Ethical Persuasion

Beyond regulatory compliance, influencer marketing raises broader ethical questions concerning responsibility, transparency, and the persuasive effects of commercial communication. Ethical responsibility does not lend itself to a single, universally accepted definition but is commonly understood as the obligation to consider the foreseeable consequences of one’s actions when these affect others or collective goods. Nihlén Fahlquist (2018) emphasizes the prospective dimension of responsibility, oriented toward harm prevention and informed decision-making, while Schicktanz and Schweda (2012) highlight its relational and context-dependent nature within specific social and technological settings. In applied ethics, responsibility is enacted through the navigation of dilemmas and value conflicts, requiring context-sensitive judgment rather than a purely rule-based application of abstract norms (Wellman et al., 2020).

Initial research on ethics in influencer marketing focused primarily on three themes: transparency, remuneration, and authenticity. Transparency concerns the clear identification of sponsored content, while remuneration addresses the ethical implications of financial or material compensation, particularly from a public relations perspective (Archer et al., 2014). Authenticity, in turn, relates to whether influencers engage in brand collaborations based on shared values or primarily financial gain. Expanding this framework, Borchers and Enke (2022) identify ten ethical dimensions, including autonomy, sincerity, truthfulness, professionalism, loyalty, and social responsibility.

Authenticity has subsequently been identified as a core ethical principle in influencer practice (Wellman et al., 2020). Authenticity rests on two key principles, being true to oneself and brand (personal brand) and being true to one’s audience. Ethical influencer collaborations therefore require alignment between sponsored content, influencer identity, and audience expectations, rather than the avoidance of commercial activity per se. Influencers frequently report rejecting collaborations

motivated solely by financial gain when such partnerships conflict with their values or audience interests, as these practices risk undermining credibility and long-term trust.

To preserve authenticity, influencers typically adopt one of two strategies: *passionate authenticity*, whereby brand values align closely with personal beliefs, or *transparent authenticity*, which emphasizes explicit disclosure of sponsorships (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Research grounded in congruence theory suggests that alignment between influencer and brand enhances perceived credibility and campaign effectiveness (Belanche et al., 2021; Gaied & Rached, 2017; Han & Chen, 2022; Hudders et al., 2020; Torres et al., 2019). Alignment between influencer and follower values further reinforces trust and shapes purchasing behavior (Venciute et al., 2023).

The effects of transparency on audience perceptions remain mixed. While some studies suggest that sponsorship disclosure may reduce persuasive effectiveness by activating persuasion knowledge (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019), others indicate that inadequate or ambiguous labeling undermines perceived authenticity and trust (Ardley et al., 2022). Audience expectations also vary considerably. Hwang et al. (2021) identified four types of consumers based on their expectations of influencer marketing: “Advertising tool,” “Entertainer,” “Information source” and “Tastemaker”. Those who primarily seek informational content from influencers demand particularly clear and explicit disclosures. Empirical evidence further demonstrates that ambiguous disclosure significantly reduces perceived transparency (Woodroof et al., 2020), whereas clear sponsorship labeling enhances trust, engagement, continued following, and, in some cases, purchase intention (De Cicco et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2025).

3. Objectives and Methodology

This qualitative study aims to examine the dilemmas faced by micro-influencers—defined as individuals with fewer than 100,000 followers (Park et al., 2021; Conde & Casais, 2023)—in relation to the legal and ethical responsibilities arising from their commercial collaborations. Rather than testing hypotheses, the study adopts an exploratory and interpretive approach designed to capture how these emerging actors within the advertising ecosystem understand, experience, and negotiate legally and ethically sensitive aspects of their professional practice.

Specifically, the study is guided by five research questions:

1. To what extent are micro-influencers aware of their obligation to disclose commercial content?
This question examines whether micro-influencers recognize the legal and ethical requirement to identify sponsored content and how consistently they apply this in practice.
2. How do micro-influencers perceive their followers’ reactions to commercial collaborations?
The goal is to understand whether influencers believe their audiences are receptive to sponsored content and capable of recognizing it as such.
3. Do micro-influencers consider current regulations sufficient, and do they perceive a need for further regulation?
This question explores their stance on the adequacy of legal and ethical guidelines and whether they identify specific risks for certain audiences or sectors.
4. Who do micro-influencers believe should be responsible for ensuring the accuracy of information shared in commercial content?
This question seeks to clarify perceptions of shared or delegated accountability in influencer-brand collaborations
5. Are micro-influencers aware of the practice of purchasing followers, and have they ever engaged in it?
The aim is to assess both awareness of and engagement in follower purchasing, a behavior widely regarded as ethically questionable within digital marketing.

By addressing these questions through in-depth interviews, the study contributes to a better understanding of how micro-influencers navigate the intersection of personal authenticity, audience trust, and compliance with advertising standards.

3.1 Methodology

This research builds on a prior exploratory survey (Marchán-Sanz et al., 2024) conducted with 290 micro-influencers using a structured questionnaire to examine their commercial practices and relationships within the influencer marketing ecosystem. To deepen and contextualize those findings, the present study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews. An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted, as such designs are particularly appropriate for investigating phenomena that have received limited systematic empirical attention (Stebbins, 2001).

The sample consisted of 30 micro-influencers registered on a digital platform operating in Spain, Mexico, and Colombia, which connects influencers with brands. At the time of the study, the platform's database contained approximately 6,500 micro-influencers. Registration on the platform ensured that all participants had at least minimal commercial activity—an essential criterion for meeting 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 influencers have fewer than 100,000 followers. The sampling strategy aimed for diversity in age, gender, and content areas (e.g., lifestyle, beauty, fitness, gastronomy). Sampling reached saturation after 30 micro-influencers had been interviewed.

Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams between October and December 2023 and lasted approximately 40 minutes each. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim). The interview transcripts were analysed using a qualitative content analysis approach, combining deductive and inductive coding procedures:

- Deductive coding: based on the scripts designed for the interviews, a series of previously defined analysis categories and subcategories were created.
- Inductive coding: allowed the identification of emerging patterns and unforeseen categories that arose during the data review.

The coding process was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for systematic qualitative coding, while the overall analytical logic followed a content analysis framework focused on organizing findings into analytically relevant categories rather than developing interpretative themes (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

The interview protocol and data collection procedures received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Universidad Internacional de la Rioja.

Specific Objective	Guiding Questions
Section 1 Assess awareness of disclosure obligations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you aware of the requirement to disclose advertising content? • Do you consistently disclose it?
Section 2 Explore perceptions of audience recognition and acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do social media users in general—and your followers specifically—recognize when content is commercial? • How do you believe they typically react to sponsored content?
Section 3 Examine perceptions of regulatory adequacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think the regulatory framework for micro-influencer activity should entail? • Are there specific sectors or vulnerable audiences that require special protection?
Section 4 Clarify perceived responsibility for information accuracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who do you believe is responsible for ensuring accuracy in sponsored content, and why: the brand, the platform and/or influencer marketing agency, the micro-influencer?

Specific Objective	Guiding Questions
Section 5 Investigate awareness of unethical practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you find it difficult to grow your follower base organically? • Is there a follower count you consider a career turning point? • Are you aware that followers can be purchased? • Have you ever engaged in this practice?

Table 1: Alignment Between Research Questions and Interview Guide. Source: Compiled by the authors.

3.2. Participant Profile

The majority of interviewees were female (80%), while 20% were male. In terms of age, 16.7% were between 19 and 24 years old, 56.7% between 25 and 40, 20% between 41 and 50, and 6.6% were over 51 years old. Regarding educational background, 40% held a university degree, 20% had completed vocational training, and 20% had completed secondary education.

Instagram was the primary platform for most participants (80%). One participant primarily used Twitch, one Facebook, and six TikTok. Additionally, 46% of respondents were active on two platforms, most commonly Instagram and TikTok, while 30% were active on three platforms, 13% on four platforms, and one participant on five platforms.

With respect to audience size, 40% had fewer than 10,000 followers, 43% had between 10,000 and 30,000 followers, and 6.6% had more than 50,000 followers. The most common content categories were lifestyle (20%), beauty and fashion (10%), beauty (13%), and gastronomy (6.6%). Other niches included mental health, family, motherhood, and caravanning.

4. Results

4.1 Disclosure of Commercial Partnerships

Nearly all participants (29 out of 30) demonstrated awareness of the legal obligation to disclose commercial collaborations in their content. Among these, approximately 80% reported that they consistently label branded content, even when such disclosure is not explicitly requested by the collaborating brand. As one participant explained: “By law, which many people do not do, and this is by law, you have to notify that you are advertising... I mean, I do it” (Female, 26, Lifestyle). This account illustrates a proactive orientation toward regulatory compliance and ethical transparency.

In fact, several interviewees spontaneously emphasized that beyond legal requirements, they feel a personal responsibility to maintain transparency with their audiences. In contrast, the remaining 20% disclosed collaborations only when specifically instructed to do so by the Brand. Participants also noted that most brands typically request explicit disclosure of collaborations, indicating an emerging norm of transparency within the industry. However, a minority of respondents recalled having worked with brands that preferred not to have promotional content labeled as advertising. The reasons for this preference were not disclosed, and no consistent traits—such as company size or locality—were observed among these brands. Some interviewees further expressed concern about the negative impact of disclosure on content visibility. Specifically, they believed that including Instagram’s “Paid Partnership” tag could lead to reduced reach and engagement, as the platform may deprioritize such content in users’ feeds. One participant explained:

I’ve personally observed that when I upload a video and include the paid partnership tag, the video receives almost no views. This is because the platform interprets it as branded content, which it believes should be subject to paid promotion, and consequently reduces its visibility. (Female, 34, Beauty)

4.2. Audience Recognition and Perception of Sponsored Content

Interviewees generally believed that their followers are capable of recognizing sponsored content, particularly because legal regulations require influencers to identify commercial collaborations.

Beyond formal labeling, several participants noted that followers can often detect promotional intent when a product does not align with the influencer's usual content or personal brand: "When it's something out of the ordinary, different from what the profile is usually about, I think that the follower will surely notice" (Female, 39, Gastronomy)

Although some influencers initially expressed concern about audience perceptions, many reported that followers understand such collaborations as a normal part of the influencer's profession. They acknowledged that advertising serves as a primary source of income and that followers are generally aware of this reality. As one participant explained:

Whoever wants to understand understands it and knows that this is your profession, and they know that you are an advertising medium. So in the end, you have to upload advertising content, collaborations, products, services, and so on. (Male, 21, Lifestyle)

Despite this general acceptance, two practices were identified as damaging to followers' perceptions. First, excessive promotional content was viewed as fatiguing or off-putting. One respondent noted: "People get very tired if you turn into a home shopping channel" (Female, 46, Family content). Second, participants emphasized the importance of congruence between the brand being promoted and the influencer's established thematic focus. Collaborations perceived as inconsistent with the influencer's usual messaging or values were more likely to be rejected by followers. Many interviewees, therefore, reported a deliberate effort to partner only with brands that align with their identity and content. One participant expressed this commitment as follows: "When you create content that is genuine, that aligns with what you talk about and believe in, even if it's a collaboration, if it's coherent, your followers won't reject it" (Female, 27, Nutrition).

In summary, while transparency and authenticity are generally appreciated by audiences, credibility can be undermined by over-commercialization or a lack of thematic consistency. These findings highlight the importance of alignment and moderation in fostering trust and sustaining the perceived integrity of micro-influencers' work.

4.3 Attitudes Toward Regulation: Ambivalence, Enforcement, and Selective Concern

Participants expressed diverse and often ambivalent views on the legal regulation of influencer marketing. Overall, the topic did not emerge as a major concern for most respondents, and no clear consensus was observed regarding how regulation should be approached.

A minority of participants—particularly those with professional backgrounds in advertising or formal training in marketing—advocated for a regulatory framework equivalent to that of traditional media. These respondents emphasized that, just as conventional advertising is subject to numerous laws and standards, social media content should be held to the same level of accountability: "Just as television has rules that you cannot break, I think that here (in influencer marketing), it is becoming quite necessary, don't you think?" (Female, 34, Entrepreneurship). For these participants, the issue was not so much the absence of regulation, but rather the lack of enforcement mechanisms.

The law is there and you have to put it in by law, but there is no follow-up to ensure compliance, because very often it is not complied with, even with girls who work with platforms where the platform itself tells you that you have to state that it is a free product. (Female, 27, Beauty)

When prompted to consider whether certain audiences or product categories require greater regulatory oversight, some interviewees pointed to especially vulnerable groups, such as children and adolescents, as well as sectors related to health, pharmaceuticals, and nutrition. One participant remarked: "I would regulate content a lot more for girls between 8... pay attention to what I'm saying—8 years old and 19, 20. I mean, we need to protect that audience because it is highly

impressionable” (Female, 23, Lifestyle). However, for most interviewees the extension and/or tightening of regulations does not seem to be a priority.

4.4 Responsibility for Product Information: Brands, Visibility, and Credibility

Most interviewees believe that brands bear the primary responsibility for providing accurate information about their products in the context of commercial collaborations.

As one participant explained:

Look, I think that in the end, if you're the one speaking about a product, and there's a brand behind it, the responsibility lies with the brand. You're basically a communication channel. As long as you don't cross certain boundaries—because you are still yourself, and you should know when to say, 'I won't say that'. That responsibility lies with the brand, not even with the agency, but the brand directly. (Female, 20, Beauty)

Nonetheless, most participants acknowledged a shared responsibility between brands and influencers. They noted that influencers are “the ones showing their face,” and if they promote a product that turns out to be ineffective or causes adverse effects—such as a cream that leads to a reaction—it is the influencer, not the brand, who is directly exposed to audience feedback and criticism.

For many, this is ultimately a matter of credibility and honesty. According to participants, when a product performs poorly, it is the influencer's image and trustworthiness that are most at risk. As one interviewee put it:

Whether you have 200, 500, 1,000, or even 10,000 or 20,000 followers, you're influencing those people. So, it's important that what you say is accurate and beneficial to everyone. In the end, you lose followers, and the brand just gets negative comments. (Female, 27, Nutrition)

In response to these perceived risks, many micro-influencers reported engaging in self-regulatory practices aimed at safeguarding their credibility. These included verifying brand-provided information, researching ingredients, testing products, and carefully framing promotional claims. One participant described this approach as follows: “I read and research the products—where they come from, what the ingredients are. I want to be fully informed. So, when I speak about them, it's based on real knowledge. What I say is the truth” (Female, 45, Product reviewer).

Overall, while formal responsibility was widely attributed to the brands, many micro-influencers demonstrated a strong awareness of the ethical and reputational risks associated with product endorsements and took steps to uphold their credibility.

4.5. Audience Growth Strategies: Organic Expansion and the Rejection of Purchased Followers

4.5.1. Challenges of Organic Audience Growth

Most interviewees reported that organic growth on Instagram has become increasingly difficult, particularly in comparison with TikTok, which was perceived as enabling faster audience expansion. Participants frequently expressed frustration with the opacity and unpredictability of Instagram's algorithm, as illustrated by the following account: “It's very hard to understand Instagram's algorithm. Some videos get lots of views and others barely any—we just don't get it anymore” (Female, 39, Camper lifestyle).

Interviewees also emphasized the importance of follower count as a gatekeeping mechanism shaping access to influencer platforms and monetization tools. In this regard, reaching 10,000 followers was widely described as a critical threshold:

The magic number is 10,000. That's what opens the door—to platforms, to features on Instagram that you wouldn't have access to otherwise. If you have 5,000 to 7,000 followers, it doesn't change much. But 8,000 to 10,000—there's a difference. Once you hit 10,000, Instagram also lets you do other things, like use tools that someone with just 5,000 followers wouldn't have. (Female, 27, Nutrition)

4.5.2. Attitudes Toward Purchased Followers

All participants indicated awareness of follower-buying schemes and reported receiving frequent offers via private messages or email. With two exceptions, interviewees stated that they had never purchased followers. The two participants who had done so characterized it as a one-time experiment motivated by curiosity and highlighted the absence of meaningful engagement:

For a while, I tried out one of those apps that gives you users. You watch two or three videos and suddenly you get 100 or 200 users. The worst thing is that they're just there, dead. They don't do anything, they don't interact. (Female, 45, Mental health)

Despite pressures to increase audience size, participants overwhelmingly rejected follower purchasing on ethical grounds and emphasized the value of authentic engagement and community building. As one interviewee explained: “We want to build a real community. Buying followers won't help us in any meaningful way—it just gives you a number that doesn't actually offer any benefit” (Female, 19, Lifestyle).

5. Discussion

This study examined the legal and ethical dilemmas faced by micro-influencers in the development of commercial collaborations, with particular attention to disclosure practices, audience perceptions, responsibility for product claims, regulatory attitudes, and growth strategies. Overall, the findings indicate that ethics in influencer marketing is not primarily understood by micro-influencers as a matter of deliberate rule-breaking, but rather as an ongoing process of negotiation between legal obligations, credibility concerns, economic pressures, and platform dynamics.

This balancing process emerges across multiple dimensions of micro-influencers' professional practice, including compliance with disclosure requirements, the preservation of credibility and audience trust, responses to economic and platform pressures, and attitudes toward regulatory oversight. Rather than privileging a single ethical criterion, participants described navigating trade-offs among these competing demands in their everyday decision-making.

Taken together, the findings suggest a generally high level of legal awareness among micro-influencers with respect to advertising disclosure. Participants demonstrated familiarity with existing disclosure requirements and frequently expressed an intention to comply with them, even in cases where brands did not explicitly request labeling. This pattern is consistent with prior survey-based research conducted with Spanish micro-influencers (Fernández-Gómez & Quintas-Froufe, 2025).

At the same time, broader industry reports indicate that disclosure practices remain inconsistently implemented across influencer content (Reuters, 2024; Viña, 2024). This divergence between declared compliance and observed practices may partly reflect the well-documented “interviewer effect” (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 239), whereby respondents present socially desirable behaviors. More broadly, it points to a persistent gap between regulatory awareness and routine implementation, underscoring the need for more effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

The findings also reveal tensions surrounding disclosure that extend beyond individual influencers. Several participants reported that some brands actively discourage explicit labeling in order to preserve an appearance of organic content. This practice stands in contrast to a growing body of research demonstrating that transparency can benefit both influencers and brands by fostering trust, enhancing engagement, and increasing purchase intention (Balaban et al., 2022; Karagür et al.,

2022; Kay et al., 2020; Mahadevan & Gayen, 2024). Consumers tend to value authentic product recommendations, regardless of whether they are sponsored, so long as they appear genuine (Wellman et al., 2020). While micro-influencers believe their audiences can detect sponsored content, existing research provides a more nuanced perspective. De Cicco et al. (2020) showed that when brand–influencer congruence is high, sponsored content may not be recognized as advertising even when disclosure is present. This finding complicates common assumptions about audience awareness and reinforces the importance of clear and standardized disclosure practices.

Participants further framed commercial collaborations as an accepted and normalized component of influencers’ professional activity, reflecting the broader institutionalization of influencer marketing as a legitimate form of commercial communication. This perception aligns with previous research indicating that audiences often view branded content positively when it aligns with influencers’ established identity (Fernández-Gómez & Quintas-Froufe, 2025).

Nevertheless, interviewees consistently identified two practices that undermine credibility: promoting brands unrelated to their personal niche and engaging in excessive sponsored content. These “red lines” mirror earlier findings highlighting the importance of brand–content congruence for advertising effectiveness and persuasiveness (Belanche et al., 2021; Janssen et al., 2021). In particular, excessive commercial activity was described as creating a tension between income generation and the risk of being perceived as a “tele-shop,” thereby eroding audience trust (Marchán-Sanz et al., 2025). This concern is supported by evidence indicating that audiences tend to distrust influencer content when they perceive an overload of advertising (Ki et al., 2023).

Responsibility for the accuracy of product claims constitutes one of the most salient ethical tensions identified in the study. Although participants generally attributed formal responsibility to brands, they simultaneously emphasized the reputational risks they personally face when promoting inaccurate or misleading information. This asymmetry between legal accountability and reputational exposure places micro-influencers in a particularly vulnerable position, as their credibility and audience trust are directly implicated. These findings echo research showing that Gen Z audiences expect honesty from both brands and influencers, even if influencers are sometimes judged more leniently for missteps (Pradhan et al., 2023). Participants also perceived that brands tend to attract harsher public criticism than influencers when problematic practices occur, and that macro-influencers are subject to stricter ethical scrutiny than micro-influencers. Nonetheless, the interviews suggest that micro-influencers remain acutely aware that their professional sustainability depends on maintaining credibility, irrespective of formal accountability structures.

With regard to regulation, most participants expressed limited concern, suggesting that formal legal oversight is not perceived as central to everyday professional practice unless shaped by prior experience in marketing or advertising. Only a small group advocated for stricter regulation, particularly in relation to content aimed at minors or involving sensitive product categories such as food and health. Rather than viewing regulation as the primary mechanism for professionalization, participants consistently emphasized authenticity—being true to oneself—and credibility—being honest with one’s audience—as the core ethical principles guiding their practice. This emphasis aligns closely with the framework proposed by Wellman et al. (2020), which highlights authenticity as a key driver of trust in influencer–audience relationships.

Finally, the findings reveal a persistent ethical tension surrounding audience growth. Although micro-influencers acknowledged strong pressure to increase follower counts in order to access brand collaborations, platform tools, and monetization opportunities, they overwhelmingly rejected the practice of buying followers. This rejection was grounded in concerns about authenticity, community building, and reputational risk. Participants believed that brands and platforms, including Meta, are increasingly capable of detecting artificial growth and penalizing inauthentic practices.

At the same time, they openly recognized the strategic importance of reaching certain numerical thresholds, which unlock access to influencer networks and higher-value collaborations. This pressure can be understood both from the perspective of followers—who may associate higher follower counts with greater influence and popularity, the so-called “mere number effect” (Zhou et al., 2023; De Veirman et al., 2017)—and from advertisers seeking broader reach and higher returns on investment (Conde & Casais, 2023).

In sum, the ethical challenges faced by micro-influencers do not primarily stem from intentional non-compliance with regulations, but from a set of structural dilemmas shaped by market expectations, platform algorithms, economic incentives, and reputational concerns. Navigating these tensions requires continuous ethical judgment and self-regulation rather than simple rule adherence, highlighting the need for shared responsibility among influencers, brands, platforms, and regulators.

6. Conclusions

This study sheds light on how micro-influencers in Spain navigate the legal and ethical frameworks governing their commercial activities. Particular attention was given to advertising disclosure practices, which currently constitute the primary focus of regulatory scrutiny in influencer marketing. The study’s main contribution lies in its qualitative, micro-level perspective, which reveals the strong sense of responsibility micro-influencers feel toward both their professional identity and their online communities. Participants expressed greater concern about reputational damage and the potential loss of audience trust than about formal compliance with disclosure regulations. While they generally believed that users understand the implicit rules of social media platforms and do not perceive sponsorship disclosure as problematic, they were deeply concerned about appearing dishonest or inauthentic. For these content creators, long-term credibility and trust were viewed as far more critical to professional sustainability than short-term economic gains.

The findings further suggest that ethical responsibility in influencer marketing cannot rest solely on individual influencers. Greater accountability is required from all stakeholders involved, particularly brands and platforms. Collaborative efforts among influencers, brands, agencies, and platforms are essential to ensure that commercial communication remains transparent, fair, and trustworthy. The implementation of new regulations and the broader adoption of instruments such as the Influencer Code of Conduct may contribute to improving ethical standards; however, such measures must be accompanied by more effective enforcement mechanisms if they are to meaningfully reduce non-compliance.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. As a qualitative investigation focused on the Spanish context, its findings are not statistically generalizable and may not reflect practices in other cultural or regulatory environments. Future research could broaden the scope by including the perspectives of brands that engage in collaborations with micro-influencers. This would help explore the perceived strategic value of micro-influencers in marketing, how collaborations are operationalized, and how legal and ethical issues are addressed from the brand’s perspective.

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