


## Who is Accountable for the Negative Effects of Influencer Marketing? Voices of the Influencer Ecosystem

¿Quién responde de los efectos negativos del marketing de influencers? Voces desde su ecosistema

Quem é responsável pelos efeitos negativos do marketing de influenciadores? Vozes do seu ecossistema

Patricia Sanmiguel<sup>1\*</sup> 

Teresa Sádaba<sup>1\*\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> University of Navarra, Spain

\* Associate Professor of Digital Marketing at the School of Communication and ISEM-University of Navarra, Spain

\*\* Professor of Strategic Communication and Dean at ISEM-University of Navarra, Spain

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## Abstract

Research regarding influencer marketing (IM) highlights the influencer's benefits for brands in terms of visibility, engagement and sales. Studies in the field of psychology and health indicate certain negative forms of behavior demonstrated by influencers that affect their audiences, especially children. However, the influencer advertising sector is complex and requires a deeper understanding of the environment and contexts in which influencers work and their consequent interactions. This paper aims to delve deeper into the IM business by highlighting all the players involved and assessing their influence capacity. The study presents an exploratory analysis of the players involved in the IM industry, based on a qualitative methodology featuring 42 in-depth interviews and five focus groups. The results enable us to progress in terms of both IM research and practice, offering a series of deeper insights regarding its potential negative effects, not only with regard to audiences, but also with regard to the entire influencer environment.

**Keywords:** influencer marketing; influencer ecosystem; influencers; social media; negative effects; accountability

## Resumen

La investigación sobre el *marketing* de *influencers* (IM) destaca los beneficios de los *influencer* para las marcas en términos de visibilidad, compromiso y ventas. No obstante, estudios en el campo de la psicología y de la salud señalan algunos comportamientos negativos de los *influencers* que afectan a sus audiencias, especialmente entre los niños. Entender estos efectos requiere de una comprensión más profunda de las interacciones, el entorno y los comportamientos en los que trabajan los *influencers*. Este artículo pretende profundizar en el negocio del IM destacando a todos los actores involucrados (consumidores, *influencers*, medios, marcas, plataformas, agencias, reguladores, instituciones) y evaluando su capacidad de influencia. El estudio muestra un análisis exploratorio de los actores involucrados en la industria del IM, basado en una metodología cualitativa que incluye 42 entrevistas en profundidad y 5 *focus groups*. Los resultados nos permiten avanzar tanto en la investigación como en la práctica del IM, con una visión más profunda de los posibles efectos negativos, no sólo con respecto a las audiencias, sino también con respecto a todo el entorno de influencia.

**Palabras clave:** *marketing* de influencia; ecosistema del *influencer*. *influencers*; redes sociales; efectos negativos; responsabilidad

## Resumo

A pesquisa sobre marketing de influenciadores (IM) destaca os benefícios dos influenciadores para as marcas em termos de visibilidade, engajamento e vendas. No entanto, estudos na área da psicologia e da saúde apontam alguns comportamentos negativos dos influenciadores que afetam os seus públicos, especialmente entre as crianças. Compreender esses efeitos requer uma compreensão mais profunda das interações, do ambiente e dos comportamentos em que os influenciadores trabalham. Este artigo pretende aprofundar o negócio das mensagens instantâneas, destacando todos os atores envolvidos (consumidores, influenciadores, meios de comunicação,

marcas, plataformas, agências, reguladores, instituições) e avaliando a sua capacidade de influência. O estudo apresenta uma análise exploratória dos atores envolvidos na indústria de MI, baseada em uma metodologia qualitativa que inclui 42 entrevistas em profundidade e 5 grupos focais. Os resultados permitem-nos avançar tanto na investigação como na prática do MI, permitindo-nos obter uma visão mais profunda sobre os possíveis efeitos negativos, não só no que diz respeito às audiências, mas também no que diz respeito a todo o ambiente de influência.

**Palavras-chave:** marketing influenciador; ecossistema de influenciadores; influenciadores; mídia social; efeitos negativos; responsabilidade

## 1. Introduction

Over the last 10 years, research relating to the influencer marketing (IM) sector has been increasing (Bishop, 2021; Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2021; Tanwar et al., 2022). Both academics and professionals undoubtedly recognize the positive economic impact of IM and communication actions for brands in various sectors (Ye et al., 2021). In recent times, the ongoing growth of social media platforms such as TikTok has demonstrated the increasing demand for influencer-driven content creation among consumers and its effectiveness (Chu et al., 2022; De Veirman et al., 2019). Academic literature has shown that consumers trust influencers more than brand communications (Gomes et al., 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021), that influencers are seen as friends (Miguel et al., 2022; SanMiguel & Sádaba, 2017; Schiniotakis & Divini, 2020), that sometimes their credibility is higher than that of celebrities (Jin et al., 2019; Martínez-López et al., 2020), and that their posts help when it comes to making purchasing decisions (Renchen, 2020; Sweeney et al., 2022).

In addition, the lives of influencers have become increasingly interesting for both the traditional press, newspapers and magazines (Gillin, 2008) and for the new audiovisual digital content platforms such as Amazon Prime and Netflix (Brooks et al., 2021). In recent years, these media have warned society of the adverse effects of IM, such as mental health issues, frustrations or marketing of misleading content. In short, the public debate underlines the absence of fair play within the context of IM and the lack of accountability of those involved.

However, almost no studies exist that actually analyze the potential negative effects of influencers, except for a small number that focus on the impact on children (Feijoo & Sádaba, 2021), on the lack of transparency regarding business content (Ye et al., 2021), and an original article on commercial content and consumer effects (Elorriaga et al., 2022). It is also worth mentioning that at least four literature reviews focusing on IM and social media influencers were published in 2021. All of them mentioned ethical aspects of influencer marketing, such as unhealthy forms of behavior (Alves de Castro et al., 2021), comparison

processes (Hudders et al., 2021), the idealization of influencers (Vrontis et al., 2021), covert advertising by influencers, and the lack of an ethical framework (Ye et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, a larger amount of literature exists regarding the negative effects of social media, including increasing distractions in educational settings, the lack of protection regarding users' personal information (Dias & Brito, 2020) and the loss of face-to-face relationship skills (Siddiqui & Singh, 2016). Likewise, the negative impact of the abusive use of social media regarding the mental health of the youngest members of society and increased feelings of loneliness have been highlighted (Bashir & Bhat, 2017).

Thus, a more comprehensive examination of the influencer's role is required. Influencers do not operate alone or in isolation within the context of the social media, but as part of an ecosystem of multiple influences (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Schram, 2020). Talent agencies, media, brands and regulators have been building a structure in which responsibilities seem to be diluted. However, there is no study that analyzes the relationship between the different players that make up the IM sector. In an environment where interest in responsible social impact is growing (Carter et al., 2017), it seems appropriate to address this issue.

Therefore, with the aim of contributing to the study and practice of IM, this research seeks to break new ground by presenting an exploratory study on the accountability of all the players or agents involved in the IM sector. We seek to identify the negative aspects of IM and understand whether the influence is exerted solely by influencers on their followers or whether the followers also impact the influencers, and how. In addition, the comments and analysis of all the players involved makes it possible to identify the degree of awareness of the impact of this influence, as well as its drawbacks and possible solutions. Specifically, and based on a qualitative methodology featuring in-depth interviews and focus groups, this paper focuses on analyzing: 1) the awareness of influencer power on the part of players operating within the IM industry; 2) the perceived risks; 3) the causes of these risks.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

In order to contextualize the results of this study, based on a review of the existing literature, we first explain the meaning of 'power of influence' and how it has come about. Then we describe all the players involved in the IM industry and review the literature regarding certain negative effects of this environment.

## 2.1 The Power of Influence

Thanks to social media, it can be stated that the power of influence is no longer an exclusive attribute of just a few individuals (Goodrich & de Mooij, 2014). There are an increasing number of content creators on the Internet (Schram, 2020). In fact, influencers are people who enjoy social recognition on the Internet by means of their large community of followers on social media. They are opinion leaders or influential persons in the digital environment, where they share content—photos, videos, comments, etc.—on specific topics for which they have credibility; they very often also share content on their personal lives (Schram, 2020). Influencers have the power to influence the opinions, attitudes and behaviors of their followers, affecting people or the course of events (SanMiguel et al., 2019).

Academic literature has analyzed and described the power of influence from multiple perspectives, such as the creation of buzz and virality (Wang et al., 2019), and product endorsement (Weinlich & Semerádová, 2022) or brand engagement (Chopra et al., 2021). However, on the basis of more traditional influence studies, six descriptions of how power of influence manifests itself can be found (SanMiguel & Sádaba, 2017; Weimann et al., 2007). These are described below and are corroborated by recent IM literature:

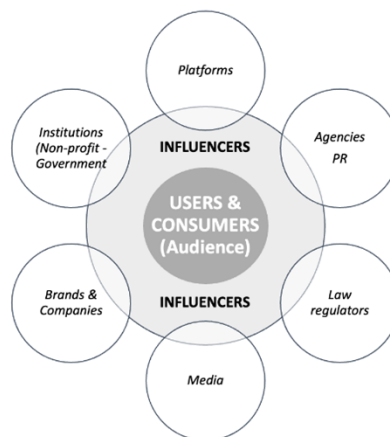
- (1) *Sources of information*. Through influencers we can learn about all kinds of information depending on their area of interest—politics, communication, sports, e-sports, art, fashion, cuisine/restaurants, beauty, decoration, education, entertainment, etc. (Azim & Nair, 2021).
- (2) *Sources of advice*. Influencers help their communities by providing advice on various topics, influencing the decision-making and opinions of their followers. Their followers turn to them in order to get their decisions right (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Hudders et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020).
- (3) *Sources of security*. Influencers are sources of security for their followers, thanks to their credibility and authenticity (naturalness and spontaneity) (Pöyry et al., 2019), by relating face-to-face with their followers and by appearing in the guise of a next-door neighbor (Filiari et al., 2023; Moraes et al., 2019).
- (4) *Role models*. Influencers become role models for their communities. They arouse a desire for imitation based on the aspirational world they present. Their influence is not limited to consumption; they influence on a social and personal level, promoting social causes (Filiari et al., 2023; SanMiguel et al., 2019).
- (5) *Disseminators of innovations*. Influencers act as innovators or early adopters. That is to say, they have the ability to disseminate their opinions and behaviors to the entire net and generate new trends (Childers et al., 2019; Tanwar et al., 2022).
- (6) *Measurers of culture and social values*. Through influencers we can understand the culture, trends or society of a specific time or place. Likewise, we can know about their musical or artistic interests, and even the values that shape their lifestyle (Casaló et al., 2018; Vrontis et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2021).

Influencer power thus manifests itself in a variety of ways. However, in order to detect its potential consequences it will be critical to understand whether it is a conscious power on the part of the various players in the IM industry, as early analyses of self-designation of influence attempted to elucidate (Weimann et al., 2007). This is an aspect that will be explored in this study.

## 2.2 The Influencer Marketing Industry: Players Involved

Although the literature mostly focuses on the power of influence of influencers, based on the conceptualization of IM by Hudders et al. (2020), six major players in this industry have been detected. This study adds two others —media and regulators— that are worth taking into account in order to understand how the IM industry works.

Figure 1. Players in the influencer marketing industry



Source: the authors

- (1) *The Public/Users/Consumers*: all people who interact on social media. Through social media they communicate, entertain themselves, seek information or opinions on a wide range of topics, share their experiences and interact with influencers (Azim & Nair, 2021).
- (2) *Influencers* (as defined above): they are often analyzed in the academic literature as Social Media Influencers (Vrontis et al., 2021). Content creators provide visibility for brands and institutions by contributing their personal and creative vision, with the aim of improving awareness, engagement and results —sales, subscriptions, etc.— for all.
- (3) *Platforms*. Social media become the channels of communication and interaction amongst all their social media users, whether they are individuals, influencers, companies or institutions, media or the platforms themselves (Casaló et al., 2018; Zeren & Gökdağlı, 2020). At the very least we must mention Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitch, Twitter, YouTube and Discord (Zhang et al., 2020).



(4) *Brands*. All companies that create and share content develop a community and interact with users through their social media profiles; they collaborate with influencers in order to promote their ideas, values, products and services (Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2021; Renchen, 2020).

(5) *Agencies and Representatives*. Agencies represent the interests of their clients—influencers, brands, etc.—in different media and other channels. They set different strategies, elaborate communication schemes, create marketing plans, develop information and disseminate it through different formats (Stoldt et al., 2019). By representatives or talent agencies we mean the person or company that facilitates influencer collaborations with brands, secures sponsorships or advertising collaborations or offers recommendations in this field (Backaler, 2019; Ye et al., 2021).

(6) *Media*. Traditional media (press, radio, television, magazines...) that—in their physical or online versions—collaborate with influencers and report on the life and actions of influencers or the place where influencers participate by making content for them (Wilkins & Emik, 2021). There has been speculation regarding competition amongst the different communication players (Perreault & Hanusch, 2022). However, collaborations between media and influencers are becoming more and more frequent (Pedroni, 2022).

(7) *Institutions and organizations*. Public or private bodies that provide services of interest that affect social media users and/or influencers. They also collaborate with influencers to convey their messages (Cartwright et al., 2022) through official campaigns and advertising (Pöyry et al., 2022).

(8) *Regulators*. Authorities, generally independent from governments, in charge of monitoring and controlling compliance with regulations by the different players, as well as sanctioning in case of non-compliance. Within the framework of their attributions—with the aim of improving competition and protecting users more effectively on social media—they encourage supplementary models for self-regulation and co-regulation. (Ramos & Fernández-Blanco, 2021; González, 2020).

## 2.3 Risks of Influencer Marketing

The scarce literature on the risks associated with IM does not explore the entire influence environment and only focuses on certain specific issues, such as the perverse effects for minors and the impact on influencers themselves (Hudders & Lou, 2023).

Regarding minors, research has emphasized the number of underage users who use social media, individuals who have not yet developed their own criteria (Ahn, 2022; Feijoo & Sádaba, 2021). One concern is the vulnerability of children (Jiménez-Iglesias et al., 2022) who imitate influencer behavior and their way of thinking and speaking, adopting their ideas as their own (Martínez-López et al., 2020). If the messages disseminated by influencers are not appropriate for their audiences, they can generate confusion or negative or age-inappropriate behaviors (Kubler, 2023). Child and adolescent influencers exist who lack professionalization and training regarding the legal framework or are unaware of the implications derived from collaborations with brands. At the same time,

they are unable to distinguish content that may be harmful to the community (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Sweeney et al., 2022). Other critical risks include: uncontrolled and excessive use of social media (Gómez-Burns, 2017), minors following influencers who demonstrate harmful behavior (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Hogan, 2021), and anxiety about keeping up to date with content posted by influencers (Fumagalli et al., 2021).

Furthermore, it is worth noting that risks not only exist for users of social media, but also for the influencers themselves. Although very little literature can be found regarding this point, some of the risks faced by influencers include: the anxiety suffered by influencers as a consequence of the constant need to publish content and be up to date (Lehto, 2022); bullying and discussions about the work of influencers and their bodies (Thelwall & Cash, 2021); and more general perspectives concerning the vulnerability of influencers (González-Larrea et al., 2021).

Therefore, it seems appropriate to complete this overview of risks associated with IM with a broader approach focused on the eight players involved in IM that are linked to influencers' influencing capacity.

### **3. Methodology**

The methodology employed consisted of qualitative research featuring two research tools, focus groups and in-depth interviews. The academic literature confirms the convenience of this methodology and these tools for the exploratory analysis of the study (Cho et al., 2022; Chopra et al., 2021; Morton, 2020). The scope of the study consisted of the IM sector in Spain.

The first approach to the topic was carried out through focus groups, based on the participation of the two main players: influencers and social media users (followers). Four focus groups were conducted with influencers and one focus group took place with young consumers. The focus groups with influencers featured the participation of 25 influencers, divided into four groups. Each focus group lasted an hour and a half. The main objective of these focus groups was to gather insights about influencers and their main tensions and problems today and in the future, as well as possible solutions. The specific objectives were as follows: to identify whether they were aware of their power of influence and the impact that their actions and shared content had on their community of followers; to determine how the fame they had achieved affected them; to identify the issues of most concern relating to the increase of influencers on the net and collaborations with brands; and to specify those actions that would help the professionalization of IM and the development of a more responsible influencer environment.

Influencers were contacted via e-mail. We explained the objectives of the study and their collaboration with it (without financial compensation in order to avoid conflicts of interest).



Likewise, anonymous participation was agreed upon to ensure freedom of expression during the focus groups. A sample was obtained according to convenience in order to achieve the broadest possible representation in relation to the topics of influence and the number of followers on the net. Both the main topic they talk about and over which they exert an influence, as well as their number of followers, have a direct impact on their power of influence, their relationship with their followers and their collaborations with brands or institutions.

Subsequently, a single focus group was conducted with seven young consumers, ages from 12 to 17 years old. Many studies with young consumer´s focus groups analyze the perception of consumers in relation to the influence exerted by influencers on their purchasing behavior (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; SanMiguel et al., 2018). Thus, in this case, the goal was to expand this literature just narrowing the research on the negative effects of IM. Therefore, the focus group focused on the potential influence of influencers regarding negative consumer behaviors. Consumers were contacted through the Spanish Consumers Association, which ensured the confidentiality of the consumers' personal data, as well as resolving the legality/consent issue regarding the participation of minors in the study.

The five focus groups were conducted through a chaired debate in which participants were allowed to speak freely and interact with other group members in order to exchange experiences and opinions. The focus groups began with an introduction to the study and the research topic and then continued with three thematic blocks: perception of influence; relationship with brands and followers; and problems and future perspectives. These were presented at intervals of 15-20 minutes. The focus groups were recorded for later transcription and analysis.

The interviews were conducted with representatives of the eight influential players. In the end, some 42 interviews were conducted, with the breakdown being as follows: Influencers (6), Brands (9), Consumer and User Associations (7), Communication and IM Agencies (5), Digital Platforms (2), Media (5), Institutions (6) and Regulators (2)<sup>1</sup>.

These were semi-structured interviews (Knott et al., 2022), consisting of 15 open-ended questions and organized according to three thematic blocks corresponding to the research objectives: general perception of influence and its awareness; dangers and risks; and potential improvements to overcome these dangers and risks. Structuring of the interview and protocol are recommended when samples exceed 30 interviewees, as was the case in our research (Deterding & Waters, 2021).

The questions asked were descriptive, as recommended when it comes to obtaining information about situations, experiences, lists of ideas or consequences (Taylor & Bogdan, 2008). Similarly, the respondents were asked to describe the issues analyzed with examples. The interviewers made no judgments about the topics or the answers offered. The interviews were always conducted by two interviewers, in order to facilitate cross-checking and the gathering of data and perceptions about the interviewees. After the

interviews, a content analysis of the responses obtained, as well as of the information obtained in the focus groups, was carried out. The analysis was carried out to identify the most important topics and summarize the contributions of all the participants (Canales, 2006; Deterding & Waters, 2021).

## 4. Results

Consumers, especially younger ones, consider influencers to be their peers, people with whom they relate through social media and who in many cases they tag "as if they were friends" or "mates." This closeness strengthens relationships of trust, where they seek and obtain advice on all kinds of topics and areas.

The more followers they have and the more adult they become, the more influencers are aware of the influence they exert on their audiences, as well as the increasing benefits they bring to brands that they recommend or whose products they promote. But this was not that obvious for all the opinion leaders who participated in the research: when they start business relationships with brands and become entrepreneurs —self-employed in many cases— they have social responsibilities to fulfill. Among the youngest influencers, spontaneity and freedom of expression prevail.

*"We are aware of our impact and the flow of information we channel" (Influencer 17). "The influencer brings proximity to the consumer, the brand is farther away, trapped in its policy. An influencer can break that, and bring the brand closer to the consumer" (Influencer 9).*

For their part, brands are aware of how the IM sector is evolving and the need to professionalize relationships with influencers, for example, by increasing regulated contracts for collaborations.

*"All influencers are aware of the influence they have, but not everyone is aware of the ethical approach that this profession should have and that the influence they exert on others can be detrimental or positive" (#Brand2).*

Organizations, institutions and consumer representatives have become concerned about the impact of opinion leaders on minors, especially because minors have not yet developed their own criteria for discerning the suitability of the advice they receive or the veracity of the information they obtain. They highlight the need for all stakeholders to be aware of the vulnerability of children on social media.

*"Minors are vulnerable consumers because they have a special perception of credibility with respect to certain figures and, therefore, greater credulity to messages. So if the message is inappropriate, it can create confusion or generate dangerous behaviors" (#Consumer7).*

However, there is little awareness on the part of young people regarding what it means to be an influencer. For them, it is an aspirational status they strive to reach:

*"I am concerned about minors who want to be influencers and who, desperate to get more followers, engage in risky practices or overexpose their privacy without thinking about the consequences in the medium or long term" (#Institution3).*

In relation to the responsible use of personal influence vis-à-vis society, influencers point out that they are very often singled out as "guilty" or "unethical or not recommendable" social media for minors. They defend themselves by arguing that there are many parties involved in the IM sector and that they cannot control the access of minors to the content, so they blame parents, platforms and institutions as being the parties responsible for the access of minors to information on social media.

The media also carry out a self-diagnosis of their role in IM and they are aware of the responsibility they have in this environment:

*"A media company can include influencer marketing in its strategy in the same way as a brand can. Either to impact new audiences or because their communities have moved to other channels, for example, from a website to a social media site (...) Due to the idiosyncrasies of the journalistic profession, the media must be even more responsible than agencies or advertisers" (#Media4).*

The study showed that awareness of the negative aspects was greater depending on the level of professionalization of the player or the greater age of the interviewee.

In the groups and interviews, the issues that were most often addressed can be divided into four sub-topics: 1) Minors' addiction to social media; 2) Novelty of the influencer profession and the IM industry; 3) Lack of commitment on the part of the players involved, such as influencers, brands and agencies, which sometimes leads to ethical issues and lack of transparency among them; 4) Lax regulation that does not properly identify the responsibilities of each player.

### ***Sub-topic 1: Minors' Addiction to Social Media***

Various IM players pointed out how minors only see the positive aspects of social media, as well as highlighting the need for specific education in this area:

*"The correct use of technologies should be taught, starting at school. The social media are part of the life of the new generations and we must learn to manage them and live in this virtual community" (#Agencia1).*

### ***Sub-topic 2: Novelty of the Influencer Profession and the IM Industry***

As the research was conducted in Spain, participants noted their concern about the lack of consensus on the definition of what an influencer is. They also pointed out that the continuous growth of new profiles of content creators and brands that want to collaborate with them, creates a saturation in the IM industry that hinders the maturity of relationships and professionalization. In addition, the digital environment has led to an increase in the speed of business decision-making due to the urgent demand for content creation for social media, producing instability and generating short-term relationships and agreements.

Likewise, the players pointed out that audiences are becoming increasingly selective and demanding.

### ***Sub-topic 3. Lack of Commitment and Ethical Issues***

Users and User and Consumer Associations highlighted the negative impact of some content disseminated by influencers on young people, due to the lack of ethical codes in social media. But at the same time, young influencers showed their discontent, since they felt that all the other players blamed them for addiction problems or negative behaviors on social media.

The respondents also mentioned that the high remuneration of influencers and the commercialization of their profession can produce egocentric images and disavowal of authorities such as teachers, parents and experts. Furthermore, agencies, influencers and brands recognized the lack of transparency in business agreements and the opacity of the results presented by influencers, agencies and brands. Likewise, this lack of transparency was highlighted in relation to the operation of social platforms and their algorithms. Platforms or social media are the place where influence flows and conversations and relationships amongst the different players that make up the influencer ecosystem take place.

The excessive use of platforms by users, especially minors, positions platforms as major mediators of IM.

*"We are aware of our impact and the information flow we generate. We need to make progress on what type of information the user receives and how they receive it. Currently there is no clear regulation in this regard. We, the platforms, are private companies that are obliged to take action and set our own rules for the user. We need a global regulatory framework that establishes general rules." (#Platform1)*

### ***Sub-topic 4. Regulation***

Most interviewees once again highlighted the problem of the absence of a clear definition of what an influencer or content creator is and what rules he or she should follow as a

media professional. In addition, users and brands pointed out that current self-monitoring codes were limited and that regulatory processes undertaken by regulators were slow.

*"An influencer is an audiovisual communication service provider, so they should be subject to the same criteria and regulation as traditional media." (#Consumers7)*

## 5. Discussion

More than 50 million independent content creators, known as influencers, exert their ability to influence the opinions, attitudes and behaviors of individuals within the new digital environment. This research has delved deeper into the influence aspects of different IM players, addressing questions relating to awareness of their influence and the possible negative aspects of IM.

The interviews and focus groups conducted for the entire IM environment and especially for younger users clearly demonstrate that influencers are sources of information, advice and reassurance; they are role models and disseminators of innovations, as well as boosters of cultural trends and styles (SanMiguel & Sádaba, 2017; Weimann et al., 2007).

Their power is exerted in an ecosystem where—in addition to establishing links with consumers—other players become relevant, such as the brands that hire them, the agencies that represent them, the platforms where they interact, not to mention the agencies, media, regulators and institutions that revolve around their activity. The model presented by Hudders et al. (2021), which was supplemented in this paper, aids this deeper understanding of IM. As it has been recently suggested, parents are another player to consider for future research (Hudders & Lou, 2023).

The academic literature, however, has addressed influence within this ecosystem in a limited manner, either because it has not considered the IM environment as a whole, or because it has stressed the responsibility of influencers, given that they are the ultimate generators of the IM business (Farivar & Wang, 2021; Tanwar et al., 2022).

This study shows that, when talking about the power of influence, the same degree of awareness on the part of all IM players does not exist. It is clear that younger consumers suffer from a lower awareness of this power, as studies on minors and social media would seem to indicate (Bashir & Bhat, 2017). Negative influence, however, cannot be focused solely on the role of individuals acting as influencers. It also takes place within an environment of sometimes self-interested, un-professionalized and poorly regulated players (Ye et al., 2021). Then, future research should address the differences between macro and micro influencers and specifically, to understand if the smaller ones are in line with this concept of professionalization.

However, in this new landscape, each and every one of these players must be aware of their role and their accountability, especially when the power of influence involves minors (Feijoo & Sádaba, 2021). More research is needed to go deeper into each of those agents. Some of them, as agencies and regulators for instance, have not been explored yet. There is no data about how the incipient regulation for the IM industry is being actually implemented.

All the players involved in the influence ecosystem emphasize the importance of digital platforms as the main means of communication for young people. Youngsters use these platforms to develop personal and professional relationships, and to interact on a regular basis with companies, media, institutions, influencers and users (Hudders et al., 2020).

As a result, there is an urgent need for mutual collaboration amongst the different players in order to create an environment in which the possible adverse effects of the inappropriate use of leverage can be addressed.

The players agree on the potential dangers of IM and identify four sub-topics. Some of them are mostly related to previous research and concerns about minors' addiction to social media (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Bashir & Bhat, 2017) and lack of regulation (Ramos & Fernández-Blanco, 2021). But there are other topics—more original and scarcely studied—that address the consequences of the new industry, namely the speed of IM growth, and the lack of commitment and transparency on the part of brands, platforms and talent agencies.

## Author's contribution

**Patricia Sanmiguel:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Validation, Visualization, Writing-original draft. **Teresa Sádaba:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Writing-review and editing. All authors have read and agree with the published version of the manuscript. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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## Notes

- 1 Interviews with digital platforms were scarcer because they declined to participate in the study, and in the case of regulators in Spain, there were only two interviewees.