



COMMUNICATION, DIGITAL MARKETING AND HEALTH

The Image of the Influencer with a Social-Health Purpose

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ABSTRACT

The increasing use of digital formats in the Spanish advertising landscape has brought about a significant change in marketing practices, leading to a growing demand for influencers as key components of brand strategies. The objectives are twofold: firstly, to highlight the importance of these influencer profiles and, secondly, to identify their impact on the operational framework of agencies, from marketing plans to strategic planning, creativity and media, thus assuming a key structural role. The methodology used combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches, including in-depth interviews, a survey and the Delphi method. The findings underline the paramount importance of these social profiles for society, end-users and communication and marketing agencies.

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1. Introduction

The intrusion of the digital universe and its different figures and formats into the communication ecosystem has changed the configuration of marketing and communication as we knew it in a revolutionary way (Sanz-Marcos et al., 2019). This new scenario now affects not only the commercial sphere, but also social and cultural aspects. We highlight the health sector (Ho et al., 2023).

The digital ecosystem in which we are developing has brought certain changes, in which we highlight social networks, which are now presented as communication tools that support the user and stimulate certain purchase decisions (Kim & Ko, 2010). This is accentuated in the case of communication that pursues social purposes, especially health (Oleskiewicz et al., 2022,). Thus, social media have become a key tool for patient communication and the dissemination of information about health and disease. In this context, it is worth highlighting Instagram, where the presence of e-patients, Instagramers or health influencers has been strengthened in recent years, creating a large community of active patients.

1.1. Social Media Marketing (SMM) and e-Word-of-Mouth (e-WoM)

In this scenario, social media marketing (we emphasise the 'social') can be defined as a tool where social media platforms are used as a form of marketing and where the aim is to create content for users to share with their environment, thereby promoting brand awareness (Rouse, 2011). We do not believe it is necessary to define this issue further. However, we highlight the current digital revolution in which consumers are becoming prosumers and, to a certain extent, controlling the message sent by organisations and institutions (Castillo-Abdul and Blanco-Herrero, 2022). In the case of health communication, this is very evident (Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko, 2019). This is where institutions design social marketing strategies (and tactics) through networks such as Instagram, X, Facebook, and others that a priori seem to have less depth but are becoming increasingly important in social marketing, such as YouTube, TikTok or WhatsApp (Harris et al., 2020). The intention is always the same: to promote web traffic and attract more users (Sanz-Marcos et al., 2019).

The greatest success in social media marketing is achieved when companies create content to attract the target audience and get them to share it with their networks. The process of sharing with others, digital word-of-mouth, plays a key role in this. The so-called eWoM (e-Word of Mouth) is about exploiting the possibilities of digital formats to maximise the dissemination of information or to generate greater brand awareness; it is about sharing experiences and achieving a multiplier effect in the dissemination of information thanks to the effectiveness and efficiency of the digital medium (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). All this leads to a larger audience and therefore to greater opportunities for information/communication.

The eWoM can influence any decision or knowledge (Dellarocas, 2003), which is why the use of social networks as a marketing tool has increased exponentially in recent years (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2023).

1.2. Dissemination of Information and Prescription in Strategic Planning

From the point of view of organisational strategic planning, social media influencers have been defined as "third-party actors who have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality and influence the organisation's stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction and personal appearance on the social web" (Enke and Borchers, 2019, p. 267). This definition highlights the interactive relationships that social media influencers can establish with their followers in large numbers. Thus, studies have found that follower engagement is an important factor contributing to the success of *influencer* endorsements (Reinikainen et al., 2020) and thus to the effectiveness of *influencers'* strategic communication on social media.

From the point of view of organisations, collaborating with these opinion leaders can be essential to achieve their strategic communication objectives because "with the democratisation of information and communication, this opinion leadership has expanded its scope" (Segarra-Saavedra and Hidalgo-Marí, 2018, p. 315) in such a way that *influencers* have become "new prescribers" (*ibid.*) and, with this, the traditional marketing and communication plan model is being rethought (Monserrat-Gauchi and Sabater-Quinto, 2017). In this sense, the power of *influencers* lies in the distance from the traditional marketing model whereby information is presented in an objective and impartial manner. Now, the communicative model based on influence is based on the consideration of ordinary people who launch

assessments and opinions that arouse the trust of audiences (Díaz, 2017). This influence resides in the recognition granted by their leadership and a digital activity that surpasses that of the brand itself (Escolar et al., 2023).

It should be noted that in 2016, 84% of Spanish brands were already running campaigns involving *influencers*; and that 81% of organisational communication professionals in Spain considered, also on this date, that relations with *influencers* are effective or very effective (Augure, 2017). These data increase if we consult the studies by Sanz-Marcos (2022) or Cambronero et al. (2023).

1.3. The health Influencer

In this digital landscape, it's not surprising to observe that social networks have emerged as key tools for visibility and advocacy on social issues, particularly in the health sector (Jiménez-Marín and Sánchez-Gey, 2023). The proliferation of campaigns initiated by medical or social institutions, associations or specific individuals, as well as the sharing of patients' experiences on their respective profiles (Cuenca-Octavio and Llorente-Barroso, 2023), has succeeded in raising public awareness and fostering empathy towards those dealing with different health conditions, as noted by Díaz and Ugarte in 2017.

In the field of public health and health communication, the existing academic literature on the role of social media influencers mainly focuses on the potentially negative effects of influencers on their followers (Leader et al., 2021; Jiménez-Marín et al., 2021; Jenkins et al., 2020). While these studies provide valuable insights into the spread of misinformation and other harmful content (Román-San-Miguel et al., 2020), it's also worth exploring the opportunities associated with influencers as identifiable opinion leaders and disseminators of critical information.

However, many of the social media influencers involved in public health communication campaigns by public or private organisations lack medical expertise, and their influence strategy is primarily rooted in interactive relationships with followers and their ability to generate and disseminate content (Enke and Borchers, 2019). Therefore, involving influencers in the strategic communication of public health issues (whether urgent - pandemic-related - or not) can pose risks for organisations if the accuracy of the message and the reliability of the source aren't adequately controlled (Pöyry et al., 2022). As a result, the content may lack accuracy or fail to attract the desired attention, engagement, and interaction from the audience (Sidorenko-Bautista et al., 2021).

Notable examples include the Finnish and Lithuanian governments, which were among the first countries in the world to engage social media influencers in urgent public health communication during the health information campaign during the global COVID-19 pandemic containment efforts. Both initiatives encouraged and supported social media influencers to share credible information about the coronavirus, counter the spread of misinformation, and reach citizens beyond the scope of traditional media and public organisation communication channels (Macijauskienė, 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2022; Ping Helsinki, 2020).

2. Objectives

This study takes as its starting point the changes that have taken place in the dissemination of information, in this case through regulated communication campaigns. In other words, companies, agencies and professionals are constantly learning about their audiences (consumers, users, recipients and viewers), as well as the role of new technologies in this context. In this line, Segarra-Saavedra and Hidalgo-Marí (2018, p. 323) have already stated that we are in a process of change that modifies planning and "enables new forms of contact between brands and their audiences through the mediation and influence of people who are not initially interested in the advertising industry, and this in turn invites a thorough study of the phenomenon". In this sense, we also take as a starting point the assertions of Mullaney (2012), who already stated that two thirds of large multinational companies use social networks or other Web 2.0 tools in their global information and marketing strategy. Therefore, this exploratory research aims to study the phenomenon of Spanish e-influencers on Instagram, the most widely used social network for this purpose (Pérez-Ordóñez and Martínez, 2023).

Thus, the main objective of this work is to provide the scientific community with an X-ray of the emerging profile of the health influencer in the context of media influence, on which there have been few specific studies to date. It also aims to provide a perspective on the significance of the activity of

these prosumers, analysing what content is being produced and consumed. Specifically, this text has the following two objectives:

1. To present and highlight the responsibility of health influencers for their messages, whether for profit or not, but with a social purpose.
2. To examine the profile of the social health influencer in Spain.

3. Methodology

The methodology used in this study was mixed quantitative and qualitative, incorporating the concept of methodological triangulation (Yin, 2002), and included survey, content analysis and expert panel techniques (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984; Masd  u, 2015).

All data analysed in this study were collected on health information disseminated via social media, specifically Instagram, during the period 1 July 2023 to 31 December 2023.

The survey instruments were rigorously validated. The survey design was reviewed by a panel of experts in the field, resulting in a high level of internal consistency, as indicated by a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.892. The content analysis was carried out in strict accordance with the guidelines set out by Codina (2000). Similarly, the expert panel was carried out meticulously following the guidelines provided by Landeta (1999). Therefore, in line with Yin's (2002) guidelines, it can be said that the combination of these methodologies serves as a reliable tool for achieving the objectives outlined in this research.

3.1. Technique Design and Implementation: The Survey

The first step was to carry out a quantitative analysis of an exploratory-descriptive nature, which was done through the survey. For this purpose, a questionnaire of 25 questions was created through Google Forms, combining closed questions with multiple options with open questions, in order to know the opinion of the sample in a broader way. According to Quispe (2013), the survey is a way of obtaining data from a certain sample of people, which is very effective for diagnosing needs or assessing the impact of actions or social phenomena, such as the repercussions of health information through Instagram and its impact on society.

A convenience sample was chosen. At the same time, a duration of 15-20 minutes was calculated, based on the recommendations of Hern  ndez et al. (2014), to reduce the probability of disinterest. A total of 853 surveys were collected, of which 827 were validated.

3.2. Technique Design and Implementation Through Content Analysis

Based on Quispe (2013), who believes that in all research it is advisable to use a complementary method to the survey as the only instrument, a content analysis was also included through non-participant observation. This analysis was based on the use of the two-stage communication flow model (Sofler, 2021; Moreno et al., 2020; Weeks et al., 2017), to which was added the application of an incipient theory of social influence (Montaigne, 2002), adapted to the current circumstances of social networks, according to the contributions of Arruda (2020), to analyse the data collected. Previously, a random sample was consulted through an anonymous participation survey, which made it possible to study the most prominent profiles of health and health information Instagrammers. Thanks to this survey, a ranking of the profiles of Spanish health Instagrammers was obtained, as indicated by the participants, which was used to analyse the content they published on health and health information.

Following the constructed week technique of Stempel and Westley (1989), which allows for a stratified sample by days of the week, a random schedule by days of the week was used for the six months of data collection.

Documentation was also collected on the main terms or keywords: e-patients, e-health, social networks, Instagram, influencers, Instagramers, using high-impact databases (Wos, Scopus, etc.), websites specialising in social media and the websites of health associations. The accounts that could be analysed were thus.

Qualitative content analysis was therefore used to see how the influencers communicated and how their followers responded. Why Instagram? Because it is the most widely used social network for this purpose, as already indicated (P  rez-Ord   ez and Mart  nez, 2023).

The study corpus consisted of 100 posts, 100 stories and 1000 comments on the Instagram network. Therefore, the content of a series of profiles and their effects were studied. Specifically, 7 profiles: @luciamipediatra (Lucía Galán Bertrand), @farmacia_enfurecida (Guillermo Martín), @enfermera_saturada (Héctor Castiñeira), @enfermero_emergencias (Jorge Prieto), @davidcallejo (David Callejo), @@farmaceuticofernandez (Álvaro Fernández) and @Boticariagarcia (Marián García). To collect the necessary information from each profile, an observation sheet was prepared containing eight parameters: a) real name of the Instagrammer; b) username; c) number of followers; d) number of publications; e) range of likes per publication; f) frequency of publication of content; g) subject of publications; and h) short biography. In this sense, it is interesting to note that, according to Codina (2000, p. 41), who states that "an evaluation methodology must consider the possibility of including criteria for the inclusion/exclusion of resources, as well as a procedure for weighting the parameters", it was decided to exclude several influencers who stood out more for their content on trends and consumption than for rigorous information; or for having paid collaborations, which were understood as a way of disseminating information determined by economic conditioning factors.

To complete the analysis, a table of eight evaluation criteria was drawn up, based on the proposal of Codina (2000), with each item scored from 0 to 2, where 0 corresponds to a poor application, 1 to an adequate execution and 2 to an excellent development. The weighted sum of the scores obtained made it possible to order the ranking and develop this content analysis.

3.3. Technique Design and Implementation Through the Experts Panel

It was considered appropriate to use this technique of expert consultation because, as Gaitán and Piñuel (1998) point out, it is a highly valid exploratory tool that can be used to carry out a theoretical construction of a specific area of study or to make an applied approach to the definitive design of a research project. Thus, and given that the aim of this method, in particular, is none other than to reach a consensus based on discussion among the experts who make up the panel, its operation is based on the preparation of a questionnaire which was answered by the experts on several occasions. This meant that the process was iterative. Once the initial information had been received, another questionnaire was drawn up, based on the previous one, to be answered again. And according to Landeta (1999), the results are presented anonymously, with controlled feedback and statistical group response.

The sample consisted of a panel of 12 experts.

4. Results

The literature review that served to build the initial theoretical framework, together with the application of the three methods, provided previous data on the relationship between the figure of the health influencer and the initial strategic planning, either when it is part of a campaign (Sanz-Marcos et al., 2019) or when it is proposed for a specific social purpose. Authors such as Castillo-Abdul and Blanco-Herrero (2022), Baker (2022), Rivero et al. (2021), Jiménez-Marín et al. (2021) or Segarra-Saavedra and Hidalgo-Marí (2018) show the relationships and interrelationships in these disciplines. However, once this basic framework has been established, the sample-based techniques provide particularly relevant data.

In this way, the implementation of the research methods has resulted in a set of data that have highlighted certain interesting keys to X-ray the Spanish healthcare influencer. Thus, from the panel of experts to the surveys, the different profiles provide conclusive opinions with scientific validity in terms of qualitative methodology. Although different positions have been highlighted in terms of format, there is a high level of consensus on key elements, such as the concept of transparency of information to reach users or the need to inform audiences efficiently.

As explained in the previous section on methodology, the accounts analysed were 7, all with a common requirement and denominator: to be health-related and not exclusively the basic brand image of a paid collaboration (advertising). The profiles were: @luciamipediatra, @enfermera_saturada, @farmaceuticofernandez, @farmacia_enfurecida, @enfermero_emergencias, @davidcallejo and @Boticariagarcia). They all met this criterion. In the case of @Boticariagarcia, she indeed is one of the images of Dia supermarkets (not the only one, remember @danielmchef4), but it is also true that it is

not her main way of life, but a collaboration. The panel of experts, meanwhile, was made up of 12 profiles from the health and media sectors, from Spain and aged between 34 and 65.

The sample consisted of people aged between 21 and 69, more than 80% of whom were women, with representation from almost all the Spanish Autonomous Communities, mainly Madrid, Extremadura, Catalonia and Andalusia. The majority (almost 75%) were aged between 29 and 52.

In all cases, they were people used to the digital environment and familiar with both the Internet and social networks.

4.1. The Health Influencer Profile

The democratisation of information has made it possible to increase the media authority of influencers, people who are initially unknown, and they are also considered prescribers, as Segarra-Saavedra and Hidalgo-Marí (2018) have already stated. In this sense, and considering the results obtained in the analysis, we can establish a series of main characteristics of health influencers:

1. They are close: Gradually, they have become more important to viewers and users because of their closeness and similarity to the public, as shown by the results of the surveys and, above all, the panel of experts. This is an important difference compared to traditional celebrities, who are known beforehand.
2. They generate trust: Influencers generate trust among users, which is a binding factor between the informer (or prescriber) and his followers. It has been observed that Instagram specifically facilitates interaction with the follower, establishing a two-way, close and effective communication; in fact, the question-answer sequence is very frequent in the conversations established between influencers and users, generating a great deal of activity on the profile.
3. They create content: On the other hand, the regular work of these influencers consists, on the one hand, in creating content that is new for society and, on the other hand, attractive, which is another of their main characteristics: they do what could be called "content marketing" from the perspective of relational communication and with a social purpose (in this case, health). It is worth noting that content creation accounts for almost 60% of the activities on which influencers' strategies are focused. It should be noted that this percentage refers to their work as influencers, which in many cases represents a tiny percentage of their daily work (@luciamipediatra is a paediatrician and @farmacia_enfurecida is a pharmacist). However, it is also interesting to note that branded content is not a new strategy, what these profiles are doing is simply adapting communication to digital media and formats that are evolving in social networks.
4. They entertain: What drives Web 2.0 is entertainment, so it is observed that the information dumped has large doses of pastime and distraction, becoming the commercial marketing and advertising trend of brand entertainment. In this sense, we speak of a win-win relationship, as the user receives useful information and entertainment, while the prescriber succeeds in informing society. It is a mutually beneficial relationship.
5. Viralisation and transmedia promotion: Users, after receiving the information, spread it in their social networks, facilitating its viralisation and promoting the use of other media to receive the messages (e.g. Instagram - WhatsApp). This allows the same message to reach a wider audience, in some cases complementing other promotional strategies in different media (Pino-Romero & Castelló-Martínez, 2017).
6. They empathise and communicate very effectively: The success of influencers' communication is because they have a high ability to communicate and, therefore, to empathise with their audience. As a result, users choose who to follow based on what they communicate and how they communicate it, so that information reaches users in a friendlier and less aggressive way.
7. They use simple language: The health influencer knows how to get the message across and uses simple communication. They can explain the methods of infection/non-infection of viruses and bacteria in a way that almost any type of audience can

understand (@luciamipediatra: "Viruses do not enter through the feet"). They do this in natural language.

8. You are committed to truth and honesty: Credibility is their main foundation, so their messages are clear and sincere. If the influencer is an expert on the subject, they have a great influence on their audience.
9. They do not adapt to their followers, but respond to contextual needs: This means that health influencers are not subordinated to market or consumer trends, or even to a specific industry, as can happen with commercial or professional influencers; in the case of health influencers, they act and launch messages based on information, health, health needs or as a reminder of basic issues (hand washing, when to take antibiotics, the effects of vaccines...).
10. They are not the image of a single brand: In addition to disseminating their information, they can represent several brands (@luciamipediatra and UNICEF or the Spanish government; @boticariagarcia and Dia or GH).
11. Raise awareness: They actively involve people in society by making their followers aware of an issue to achieve a positive effect by influencing their behaviour.

4.2. Social Impact

After delving into the various digital profiles analysed, the content published achieves good reach and engagement, showing a high level of interaction in the digital community in favour of both the information (sometimes brand) and the influencer.

Some of the results worth highlighting are the following:

1. Source of information: The selected sample states that the best source of information is always the doctor in question (MAP or specialist), but in second place, just before other health sources, they prefer the Internet as a medium (they do not specify specific sources) and social networks, where they mention specific health influencers and associations (of patients, Spanish Association Against Cancer, Multiple Sclerosis Patients Association, among others).
2. There is no mention of the conventional media: something that, as they point out, seems to be linked to the lack of rigour and the publication of misleading headlines and click-bait as a formula for attracting viewers or readers over and above the rigour of the information.
3. Instagram, the preferred network: For both general users and those with a pathological diagnosis, Instagram was named as the preferred or priority network by 59%, ahead of X (formerly Twitter) in second place and Facebook in third.
4. Following accounts: 78% of the sample surveyed and the 12 experts on the panel follow accounts of interest on IG because it helps them to inform themselves and learn more about health or specific pathologies, as well as prevention. Slightly less than a quarter do not follow Instagrammers, either because they do not use IG or because they prefer to get information through another medium.
5. Benefits of health influencers: Most of the participants in the study consider that the presence of testimonials on IG is beneficial, both for the dissemination of information and for increasing the visibility of pathologies.
6. Possibility of fake news: They refer to the suspicion of a lack of informational rigour, which can lead to the spread of fake news when the influencer is not a specialist in the field. However, this issue is reversed when the influencer is an expert in the disease, pathology, virology, or health situation.
7. Interesting content: The type of content that users are most interested in, an issue also mentioned by experts, is progress in research, prevention tips for diseases of virological or bacterial origin, and the dismantling of health-related fake news.

5. Conclusions

The consolidation of the digital media and information context, thanks in part to social networks, has led to a change in the communication model that is increasingly influencing information strategies and actions, both on the part of institutions and companies, as well as on an individual basis. The integration of the influencer in communication actions seems to offer positive results that increasingly attract users; in fact, as stated in the objectives of this research, the responsibility of health influencers towards their respective audiences has become evident. It can be argued that the influencer is a protagonist in the information work. This is also due to the potential of IG as a tool, as recognised by experts, some of them media and advertising agency managers.

In many cases, profiling is necessary to reach (and influence) the target audience and thus achieve the informative and/or persuasive purpose.

The importance highlighted by the experts of the novelty and the boom in the involvement of influencers in information dissemination campaigns (in the case of @Boticariagarcia, in collaboration with the Ministry of Consumer Affairs of the Spanish Government) as the main reason for success stands out. In the case of these experts, there is greater satisfaction and respect for the communicative actions of these profiles, mainly due to their social acceptance by society; however, they are specialists in a given subject. In other words, their curriculum counts and is decisive.

Concerning the study of the impact that the implementation of actions with influencers has had on the work of disseminating information, the panel of experts and the reading of the results of the survey noted the consideration of the emergence of agencies specialising in new services or the reduction of departments: this is the case of small pharmaceutical laboratories, large health industries or new health-related companies (the case of @luciamipediatra). This issue deserves special attention because, as noted in the scientific literature, this figure represents a prescriptive role that is widely recognised in the consulted references and set out in the initial theoretical framework. In this respect, it is worth considering the relevance of creating new specific profiles of professionals in this field. We highlight here the master's in health communication (offered by Rey Juan Carlos University) and the postgraduate degree of the Complutense University of Madrid, organised by the UCM-AbbVie Chair in Communication and Health. We also highlight the specific journals of the Communication and Health pair (Revista Española de Comunicación en Salud/Spanish Journal of Communication in Health (UC3M) and the Revista de Comunicación y Salud/Communication and Health Journal (UCM)). All this can help to make the training of these professionals more rigorous and serious.

Therefore, this study contributes to provide a new perspective on how influencers (especially Instagrammers) are the protagonists of many of the predictions that have been launched as a result of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, in a completely digital development and context. Social networks and the Internet are already a digital medium that is considered a new channel for information, communication, persuasion, and advertising.

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