

Radiography of *microinfluencers* in the digital platform economy: dissatisfaction, free labor and unequal remuneration

Radiografía de los *microinfluencers* en la economía de las plataformas digitales: insatisfacción, trabajo gratuito y desigualdad en la retribución

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RESUMEN

Introducción: Los *influencers* se han convertido en nuevos prescriptores y trabajadores digitales que construyen comunidades digitales sólidas para los anunciantes. Los *microinfluencers* (5.000 - 40.000 seguidores) son utilizados por las marcas para impactar en comunidades digitales pequeñas con un alto grado de compromiso. Esta investigación explora la relación entre la inversión de tiempo, el impacto digital y la remuneración económica de la actividad de los *microinfluencers* para identificar

nuevas formas de precariedad laboral en el ámbito digital. **Metodología:** Se han estudiado 34 *microinfluencers* a través de dos técnicas: la monitorización de sus perfiles digitales para calcular sus KPI (ej. *engagement* y EMV), y a través de un cuestionario destinado a conocer su satisfacción, tiempo invertido y remuneración económica. Además, se ha realizado un segundo estudio sobre la actividad digital de 21 *influencers* celebridades. **Resultados y discusión:** El análisis de los datos indica que los *microinfluencers* están insatisfechos debido a tres factores: la relación entre el tiempo invertido y la remuneración económica, la necesidad de crear publicaciones sin generar ingresos y la desproporcionada relación entre el tamaño de su comunidad, el vínculo que producen con sus seguidores y los beneficios en comparación con las *celebridades influencers*. **Conclusiones:** Las conclusiones contribuyen a la literatura precedente sobre la falsa meritocracia del éxito en redes sociales y confirman la retribución a través de visibilidad y capital social a costa de la precariedad de las condiciones laborales dentro de una economía liderada por las plataformas digitales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: economía de la atención; *microinfluencers*; precariedad laboral; prescriptores digitales; redes sociales; economía digital; creación de contenido digital.

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Influencers have emerged as new prescribers and digital workers who build strong communities for advertisers. *Microinfluencers*, who have between 5,000 and 40,000 followers, are used by brands to impact small but highly engaged digital communities. This research explores the relationship between time investment, digital impact and economic remuneration of *microinfluencers'* digital activity to understand new forms of labor precarity. **Methodology:** To this end, 34 *microinfluencers* have been studied through the monitoring of their digital profiles, measuring engagement and EMV, and through a questionnaire to find out their satisfaction, time invested, and economic remuneration. In addition, a second study was conducted on the digital activity of 21 popular influencers. **Results and discussion:** The results identify the precariousness conditions that *microinfluencers* face in a quantitative perspective. Besides, the analysis indicates that *microinfluencers* are dissatisfied due to three factors: the relationship between time invested and economic remuneration, the need to create publications without generating income, and the disproportionate relationship between the size of their community, the link they produce with their followers, and the benefits compared to celebrity influencers. **Conclusions:** The findings contribute to build on the preceding literature on false meritocracy and retribution through visibility and social capital at the expense of precarious working conditions within a neoliberal digital economy.

KEYWORDS: attention economy; *microinfluencers*; precarity; digital prescribers; Instagram; social media; digital economy; digital content creation.

1. Introduction

Influencers are a form of online micro-celebrity that accumulate a large number of followers on their social media profiles through visual and textual narratives usually linked to their personal lives and daily experiences (Abidin, 2015; Senft, 2008). Compared to traditional celebrities, influencers are characterized by having achieved popularity using digital self-branding and generating close and intimate relationships with their followers, on whom it is assumed that they exert a strong influence. In this sense, influencers are specialists in generating content that captures the attention of a large number of users. Their success and popularity have attracted advertising agencies and advertisers, who are increasingly investing in these digital influencers to bring their products and brands to the public (Arriagada, 2021).

In general, preceding studies agree that influencers possess distinctive skills and qualities to communicate effectively in digital media (Britt et al., 2020; Kay et al., 2020; Park, et al., 2021).

Therefore, advertising agencies are trying to incorporate influencers' activities as part of their business and advertisers are using them to market their brands and brand values (Arriagada, 2021). This is usually done through advertorials written in the form of editorial opinions about products, brands, and services (Abidin, 2015). Consequently, the figure of the influencer emerges as a new possible profession. Their popularity and success have grown exponentially recently, as reflected by the increase in marketing investment in influencers. According to Human to Human (H2H), the increase represents 185% in Spain (El Economista, 2020), and a report by InfoAdex (2020) explains that influencer marketing-generated about 75 million Euros in Spain in 2020. Globally, the Danish media company, Influencer Marketing Hub, specializing in marketing industry reports, predicted in its 2022 report that the influencer marketing industry would grow by approximately \$16.4 billion in 2022 and that in 2021 it managed to reach the amount of \$800 million.

However, the incorporation of influencers into the marketing industry and its new media economy is not happening without tensions. On the contrary, the emergence of influencers as new digital prescribers is taking place in a context of the transformation of media industries, including marketing and advertising, affecting audiences, consumption patterns, and profit evaluation tools (Cunningham & Craig, 2021) and being led by digital platforms (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). The growth of the professionalization of influencers and their relevance in marketing is closely linked to the development of digital analytics associated with the logics of digital platforms. Currently, the trust of marketing campaigns is based on the promise to pay for the maximization of the visibility of the brand and its products, aspects that are measured through key performance indicators (KPI), such as engagement, which allow calculating the impact of the influencer on the virtual community (Novoselova & Jenson, 2019).

Within this context, attention appears as a new exchange value, within a field of analysis oriented to the measurement of consumption focused on digital attention and the disputes between large digital platforms to capture the attention and data of users (Pasquinelli, 2009). Large technology companies, such as digital platforms, stand at the center of the 21st Century economy in the attention economy scenario (Goldhaber, 2006). The attention economy describes some of the problems of the information society, where a structured oligopoly is built on information goods, data (Franck, 2019; Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013), and on the conscious or unconscious attention time (Beller, 2006) that users spend interacting with technological platforms (Davenport & Beck, 2002). Attention time is a good unit of measurement to quantify the resource that feeds the digital economic system itself (Giraldo-Luque & Fernández-Rovira, 2020) since the time invested in each click, in each touch of the screen or in each second of digital consumption translates into more data and profits for oligopolistic companies.

The influencer, as the main agent that captures attention, plays a decisive role, especially within social media. Influencers use the popularity of their profiles on social networks to attract advertisers and promote their products in exchange for financial compensation (Giraldo-Luque et al., 2021) or in search of social recognition (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011). However, research by the influencer platform Marvelcrowd (2016) claims that 9.8% of influencers receive between 500 and 1000 euros per month, while the rest do not exceed 500 euros per month. The study also ensures that 24.6% of the sample analyzed does not receive any income for their work as an influencer. In addition, the Marvelcrowd study also shows the big difference between those celebrity influencers who are at the pinnacle of success and are the example of how to make a living from social media activity and those other users who manage to obtain certain economic benefits from their social media activity thanks to their community of followers, but who do not reach the monetary income of the former.

The report data reveal the contradictions of the discourse that surrounds the figure of influencers. The appearance of an idyllic life of fun, passion, freedom, and creativity that influencers sell in their profiles masks a precarious reality for most of them, characterized by countless hours of work, low wages, insecurity, and lack of a stable employment framework that protects them from the uncontrollable metrics and data on which their economic possibilities depend (Duffy & Wissinguer, 2017). A reality that especially affects small influencers with a minor number of followers, the so-called microinfluencers. They are users who have between 5,000 and 100,000 followers but have a strong engagement and power of influence in their community (Kay et al., 2020). Therefore, brands bet on them looking for a strong impact on smaller virtual communities. However, microinfluencers do not manage to achieve the voluminous economic benefits and social revenue of celebrity influencers, even though their activity on their social media profiles is usually even bulkier and requires a greater investment of time and effort. This situation can make microinfluencers face more precarious conditions in their work performance within the digital sphere.

Consequently, the study examines the new forms of precarious employment in the digital economy. Specifically, it studies the role of the microinfluencer in the social media economy identified as an example of precarious entrepreneurship. In this research, microinfluencers are defined according to Kay et al. (2020) as digital users who have between 5,000 and 100,000 followers and also who monetize their content through collaborations with brands and/or on their own digital platforms. The research proposes two complementary studies to achieve the objectives. The research proposes two complementary studies to achieve the objectives. The first study aims to know the activity of a group of microinfluencers, as well as to describe the monetization that their work on the social networks generates for them. The second one monitors and describes the activity of 21 of the most popular celebrity influencers in Spain. The joint analysis allows a description and comparison of the activities and remuneration of celebrity influencers and microinfluencers in Instagram.

1.1. Theoretical framework

1.1.1. Working in the Influencers economy

The rise of influencers in today's marketing has its origin in the phenomenon of bloggers, especially, fashion or lifestyle blogs (García & Solana, 2019; Novoselova & Jenson, 2019). Those known as bloggers were mostly women who used these online places to express their tastes and narrate their lifestyle through a personal and intimate narrative around which a community of followers was generated (Abidin, 2018). The popularity achieved by some of them, such as Gala González or Lovely Pepa, turned them into aspirational models for many of their followers (García & Solana, 2019). Their success laid in presenting themselves as relatable and accessible women who established a more bidirectional interaction with their community than in other channels (Kay et al., 2020) to the point of mostly challenging the limits of intimacy and privacy (Regueira et al., 2020). This way of relating and presenting themselves on social networks favors identification processes and power of influence among their followers (Novoselova & Jenson, 2019). Precisely, these attributes make them attractive for commercial brands, which identify in these new digital prescribers a way to reach niche audiences in a closer way and generate a greater impact. At the same time, bloggers saw the possibility of working with brands as an opportunity to transform their passion into an online business (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2019; Duffy, 2017).

Digital *platformization* (Nieborg & Poell, 2018) led largely by social networks went along with the emergence of influencers. Especially, Instagram has been the social network that has contributed most to the success of these new Internet celebrities. Indeed, most bloggers moved to Instagram where they had to adapt their digital identity and ways of communication with their followers to the affordances of

the social network (Arriagada & Ibañez, 2020). The rise of Instagram also made influencers improve the quality of their advertorials, ads written in an opinion editorial form and deeply intertwined with the narrative of their daily lives (Abidin, 2018). Moreover, they began to compete with celebrity influencers, i.e., traditional celebrities who became famous independently, prior to their social media activities (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), who were also present on social networks. Therefore, Instagram is a central piece around which influencer marketing pivots.

Influencer marketing is based on the idea that digital influencers can guide the tastes and decisions of their followers (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Compared to other types of prescribers, influencers are characterized by being experts in authenticity, through self-representation strategies and affective practices that allow them to create relationships of intimacy and closeness with their audiences (Abidin, 2016; Banet-Wiser, 2012). Consequently, influencers are presented to advertisers as experts in social media communication. In particular, influencers offer advertisers skills that allow them more direct contact with their potential consumers and shorten the distance and asymmetry between the brand and the followers (Arriagada & Ibañez, 2020). In this sense, influencers can be the authentic and affective face for brands and products (Arriagada, 2021; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016), as well as bring new values and qualities to communicate brands in the new media ecology (Arriagada & Concha, 2019).

Thus, advertising budgets are moving towards digital media (Barthel, 2019) where advertisers try to get the attention of audiences (Arriagada, 2021). Social media platforms such as Instagram or Youtube function as attention economies, where attention is a scarce resource and money flows to attention (Goldhaber, 2006; Fernández-Rovira & Giraldo-Luque, 2021). Hence, influencers use their self-branding strategies and affective practices to maintain the attention of their followers, so that they become attractive profiles as attention grabbers for advertisers. Attention is measured and determined by digital analytics associated with the logic of digital platforms. Currently, the impact of an ad is evaluated with metrics known as KPI (key performance indicators), such as engagement or the Earned Media Value (Colicev et al., 2018; Yesiloglu & Costello, 2020). At the same time, the reputation of influencers is subject to metrics (e.g., number of followers, likes, views...) that are valued by advertising agencies and other commercial entities when establishing collaborations (Gandini, 2016; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016).

So far, the number of followers has been the main aspect to classify influencers and establish differences between them. In this sense, a common classification of influencers is proposed by Campbell and Farrell (2020), who identify five types of influencers according to their number of followers: celebrity influencers and mega-influencers (more than one million), macroinfluencers (between one million and 100,000), microinfluencers (100,000-10,000) and nanoinfluencers (less than 10,000). As for comparisons between them, preceding studies warn that microinfluencers and nanoinfluencers are perceived with a higher degree of intimacy than megainfluencers and macroinfluencers (Britt et al., 2020). Also, microinfluencers are more persuasive than megainfluencers because the brands they advertise are perceived with greater authenticity (Kay et al., 2020; Park et al., 2021) and generate a higher level of consumer-brand engagement (Marques et al., 2021). Despite these indications, influencer marketing has made a greater commitment to megainfluencers, especially valuing their greater reach (Ismail, 2018; Schwarz, 2020). A fact that is reflected in how influencers with fewer followers are treated by brands and the marketing industry, which results in the precariousness they may experience.

1.1.2. Precariousness on social media platforms

In his work, Arriagada (2021) talks about how influencers with fewer followers (i.e., microinfluencers) are usually treated as "amateurs" by advertisers and advertising agencies. This fact usually translates into a "collaborative" relationship between microinfluencers and agencies and/or advertisers that

denies the existence of a commercial relationship and, therefore, implies replacing an equally beneficial relationship for both parties with a relationship of opportunity on the part of the agency or advertiser to microinfluencers with the promise of becoming part of the marketing and advertising realm. In this type of relationship, advertisers and advertising agencies often set up trial periods for small influencers in which they pay little or nothing, pay in kind (e.g., products, coupons...), or in exchange for invitations to events. Therefore, advertisers articulate their relationship with small influencers as giving them an opportunity to create new content for their audience and improve to maximize their digital position and achieve economic returns in the future (Arriagada, 2021).

Meanwhile, microinfluencers view this collaboration as a reflection of their entrepreneurial spirit to do what they love and, at the same time, gain the trust of advertisers and advertising agencies to transform their passion into a profession and flourish. To do this, they must do visibility labor (Abidin, 2016). Visibility labor is the work that individuals do when they self-position and curate their self-representations to stand out positively among potential employers (Neff et al., 2005), clients (2016), the press (Wissinger, 2015) or their followers (Abidin, 2015). This turns them into new self-branded entrepreneurs (Novoselova & Jenson, 2019) and aspirational workers (Duffy, 2017) linked to the labor imaginary based on the mantra of "with enough talent, anyone can work on their passion" (Tokumitsu, 2015) or "being able to live, for what you love to do" (McRobbie, 2015). In this sense, successful profiles in social networks require being able to transform and present themselves as autonomous subjects: "self-invented" and "self-regulated" (Elias et al., 2017), while always expressing passion for their projects (Duffy & Hund, 2015) and maintaining an ongoing bond of intimacy and engagement with their followers (Abidin, 2015). This type of collaboration leaves microinfluencers at a disadvantage and vulnerable position to advertisers and agencies, because while small influencers deal with a precarious reality of low wages, insecurity, long working hours, and unpredictability, advertisers and advertising agencies take advantage of the positioning and promotion that microinfluencers give them in exchange for very little.

So far, the precariousness experienced by digital content creators has been explained by the academic literature according to their dependence on digital platforms (Duffy et al., 2021; Poell et al., 2021). In this regard, Nieborg and Poell (2018) have conceptualized digital content creators as "platform dependent". The dependence is articulated insofar as the production and creative practices and the possibilities of success of content creators are closely determined by the infrastructures of digital platforms, by their technological and algorithmic configuration, and by the terms and policies that govern their operation (Poell et al., 2021). Precariousness, therefore, is linked to the fact that the possibilities of developing a professional career in digital culture depend on factors that are uncontrollable and alien to its users, among them, the creators of digital content. This precariousness is intensified by the changing and unpredictable nature of digital platforms (Duffy et al., 2021). Ultimately, precariousness is due to an unequal relationship between digital platforms and digital content creators. Moreover, preceding literature has also warned of the labor, personal, psychological, and emotional costs of creative digital workers attached to digital corporations (Guarriello, 2019).

2. Objectives

This research aims to identify new forms of precariousness and digital labor exploitation by studying the figure of the microinfluencer. A profile that has received less attention, since most of the previous literature on digital creative workers has barely delved into the distinction between microinfluencers and celebrity influencers, and has mostly focused on the latter. To this end, this study analyzes the situation of a controlled group of Spanish microinfluencers. To do so, it seeks to observe three variables linked to the economic profitability of Instagram profiles: time invested, economic return and the KPIs that measure the impact on their community of followers. In addition, the article describes their degree

of satisfaction and job expectations in relation to their work in the digital environment. Along with this first analysis, a second objective is proposed: it collects the KPIs of the activity on Instagram of famous influencers' profiles in order to delve into the economic profitability of these digital prescribers. The comparison of the two studies allows to deepen and specify the work realities of each of the digital subjects analyzed and to observe the differences between them. In addition, it allows to explain the dissatisfaction of microinfluencers with their activity on digital platforms.

3. Methodology

In order to achieve the objectives, a quantitative methodology has been designed, which is divided into two studies. The first one aims to describe the work activity of microinfluencers, and consists of three main actions:

1. An online questionnaire designed to find out how much time microinfluencers spend on their social networks, the earnings generated, the degree of satisfaction and the money obtained in exchange for their digital work.
2. A monitoring of their social media profiles with the Social Elephants platform (Veron & Pallarés, 2017) allows to identify four of the main KPIs used in the digital marketing industry to measure the impact and economic performance in social networks: the number of daily publications, the engagement (number of social interactions divided by the number of posts, published in a specific period of time, and by the size of the community of the profile analyzed), and the Earned Media Value (the economic value generated by a publication from the interactions it produces, the number of user followers and the CPM). These indicators have been used by previous literature to evaluate the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns (Colicev et al., 2018; Yesiloglu & Costello, 2020).
3. A content analysis of the publications to determine which are commercial and which are not.

The second study aims to describe the activity of celebrity influencers. The Social Elephants platform was also used to identify the same KPIs as in the first study: frequency of publication, engagement and EMV (Earned Media Value). The comparison of the data resulting from both analysis allows us to compare the estimated time of dedication and economic performance obtained between the celebrity influencers and the microinfluencers in the sample.

3.1. Sample

This is a convenient and not representative sample. The sample of the first analysis is composed of 34 microinfluencers. The requirement to participate was to have a community of followers of between 5,000 and 100,000 followers on Instagram (Key et al., 2020) and monetize their content through collaborations with brands or the platforms. To do this, it was essential that they had an Instagram profile as a business account or content creator account. For their selection, we contacted advertising agencies specializing in microinfluencers and courses and postgraduate studies on training to become influencers, and in both cases, we asked them to encourage participation among their clients and students, and to distribute the online questionnaire. These centers were approached because both the clients of an agency and the students of courses in this field would meet the required profile: digital users who aspire to monetize part of the activity they carry out on their Instagram profiles. Finally, 34 people who met the requirements accepted to participate in the study. To confirm their participation, they were asked about their number of followers and whether they monetize their content on social networks in the questionnaire.

The microinfluencers of the sample answered the questionnaire and gave their consent to be monitored in their activity as Instagram users through the Social Elephants platform. The list of participants can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. List of study participants

Microinfluencer	Number of followers (March 2020)
Microinfluencer 1	12000
Microinfluencer 2	21400
Microinfluencer 3	18400
Microinfluencer 4	65421
Microinfluencer 5	24996
Microinfluencer 6	28510
Microinfluencer 7	9606
Microinfluencer 8	7099
Microinfluencer 9	12002
Microinfluencer 10	31948
Microinfluencer 11	5817
Microinfluencer 12	46440
Microinfluencer 13	60046
Microinfluencer 14	23704
Microinfluencer 15	2448
Microinfluencer 16	6130
Microinfluencer 17	1818
Microinfluencer 18	15120
Microinfluencer 19	6892
Microinfluencer 20	6318
Microinfluencer 21	6158
Microinfluencer 22	52800
Microinfluencer 23	15459
Microinfluencer 24	9870
Microinfluencer 25	5058
Microinfluencer 26	5390
Microinfluencer 27	33373
Microinfluencer 28	5625
Microinfluencer 29	7249
Microinfluencer 30	6316
Microinfluencer 31	5013
Microinfluencer 32	4365
Microinfluencer 33	16048
Microinfluencer 34	10078

The sample of the second study is made up of 21 celebrity influencers, four from the group considered global celebrities and 17 from the Spanish context. The selection of the Spanish profiles was based on the MERCA2 reports on the 50 most important influencers in Spain. Firstly, the top 20 profiles in the ranking were chosen and only 17 Instagram profiles were available to be monitored by the Social

Elephant platform. Therefore, it was decided to replace them with four global influencer profiles with the largest number of followers in the world in March 2020. The full sample is shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Sample of celebrity *influencers* analysed

Influencer	Number of followers on Instagram (March 2020)	Celebrity type
Cristiano Ronaldo	222000000	Global
Kylie Jenner	179000000	Global
Kim Kardashian	173000000	Global
Lionel Messi	153000000	Global
Georgina Rodriguez	18463769	Spain
Paula Echevarria	3175911	Spain
Dulceida	2835455	Spain
Paula Gonu	2028117	Spain
Alexandra Pereira	1958528	Spain
Laura Escanes	1562150	Spain
Maria Piombo	1445384	Spain
Jessica Goicoechea	1273084	Spain
Verdeliss	1263175	Spain
Rocio Osorno	1183432	Spain
Gala Gonzalez	1159147	Spain
Sara Escudero	1156318	Spain
Alba Paul Ferrer	1102628	Spain
Pelayo Diaz	1045559	Spain
Sergio Carvajal	1036074	Spain
Daniel Illescas	1021360	Spain
Xavi Serrano	967403	Spain

3.2. Instruments and data collection

Three instruments were used for data collection: an online questionnaire, the Social Elephants platform, and an analysis template for content analysis. All three instruments were used for the first study. The online questionnaire consists of 12 questions related to the time microinfluencers invest in their activity on social media networks (i.e. How many hours do you spend on average to publish a post? Taking into account the preparation of the post, also the time to reply to your followers, etc.), the monetization they obtain for their publications on their profiles (i.e. How much do you normally charge for a post on each of the following social networks?), and their degree of satisfaction with their work and the economic retribution (i.e. Currently, do you consider that the economic benefit you get from your activity in social networks is fair considering your efforts and dedication?).

The Social Elephants platform was used in both studies to monitor the profiles of the sample of microinfluencers and celebrity influencers. The monitoring was carried out over a two-month period (30 March to 30 May 2020), and the following activity indicators were extracted: number of posts per day, engagement and earn media value (EMV).

Finally, a content analysis was carried out of the publications made by each profile of the microinfluencers in the sample in the two-month period that the monitoring lasted (between 30 March and 30 May). All the publications were classified into two categories: commercial publications, those that were monetizable (because they included a promotion or reference to a brand) and non-commercial publications, those that were not.

4. Results

4.1. A radiography of microinfluencers

The results obtained from the analysis of the questionnaire and the content analysis show some parameters that have been established to measure their work activity on social media. These are: time of dedication, monthly income, hourly fees, frequency of publications, charge per publication, total publications and followers. Table 3 shows these parameters. The data presented are estimates resulting from the calculation of the general averages obtained through the data provided by the participating microinfluencers and the analysis of their social media networks. The data provided in Table 3 are estimates and are not intended to be representative. The establishment of these parameters is intended to establish a first approximation to a model for analyzing the phenomenon.

Table 3. Activity and income parameters of microinfluencers

Parameter	Quantification	Description
Dedication	45 hours / month	Microinfluencers spend an average of 3 hours per post. 45 hour per month in total (3 hours/publication * 15 publications /month)
Monthly income	936 euros / month	Income calculated from the publications identified as generating financial remuneration and the income statement per publication of each microinfluencer.
Fees	18 euros / hour	Ratio of income earned to hours spent per month
Publications	15 / month	The influencers analyzed make, on average, 0.5 posts per day.
Charge per post	102 euros	Average remuneration received per publication reported by microinfluencers
Total account posts	1039	Total number of publications of the analyzed accounts
Followers	17269	Average number of followers per user
Consolidation time	Between 4 years and 8 years	Time in which the user consolidates his or her account as a microinfluencer
Investment in account consolidation	31170 euros	Calculation of the time spent to consolidate the account at a rate of 10 euros per hour
Own elaboration		

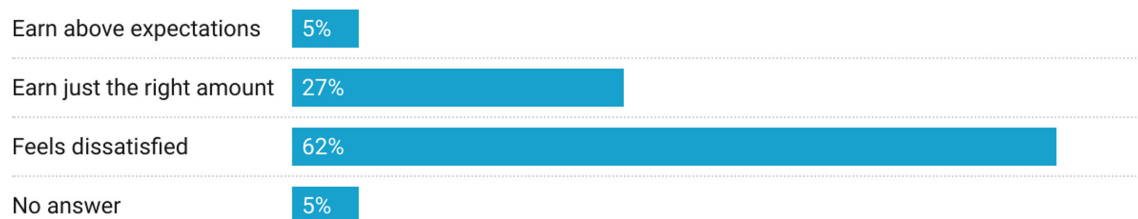
More deeply, the outcomes show that although the average of hours dedicated to the preparation of each publication is 3 hours, among the responses there are microinfluencers who claim to spend less time, the least being one hour, and also those who claim to spend more hours, the maximum being seven hours. In addition, some of the participants explained that the hours invested in a publication also include the time spent creating, preparing, producing, publishing and monitoring its impact on their followers. The social media most monetized by respondents is Instagram, both Instagram feed and Instagram stories, since 67.6% provide the data with which they monetize their activity in this

social network. Besides, Instagram is the social media platform in which they obtain a higher charge for publishing contents and stories sponsored by brands.

However, most of the participants said they were not satisfied with their work activity on social media (Graph 1). Specifically, 62.16% of the microinfluencers monitored indicated that they are not satisfied with the income they receive for their work on social media. Although some see potential in their work as an influencer (32.5%), most consider that the hours dedicated to their Instagram profiles are poorly paid, and only 43.2% of the sample aspires to work exclusively on their activity on social media.

Graph 1.

Satisfaction of microinfluencers with the income they receive



Source: Own elaboration. Data collected by Social Elephants. • Created with Datawrapper

The dissatisfaction can be understood by the relationship between the time invested and the economic retribution they receive. The asymmetry in the relationship can be observed in the following factors, based on the data obtained and considering previous studies. The first factor is related to the time spent on their profiles. On the one hand, because to monetize the publications it is necessary to build a community, which implies a previous time of work, generally unpaid. According to the average activity parameters of the sample (Table 3), and if we assume that the microinfluencers from the beginning of their activity have maintained the same dedication to each publication and published with a similar frequency, it can be estimated that in most cases it takes between 2 years (20-26 months) and more than 2 years (from 20 to 39 months) to consolidate an account. The influencers analyzed take an average of 8 years to build a community that allows them to charge for some of their posts.

On the other hand, the tasks that an influencer or microinfluencer must perform to create a publication imply a dedication that is not always considered within the final remuneration. Creating a publication requires an adequate pre- and production of the content. In many occasions, publications -even the most amateur ones- entail an almost professional production. Furthermore, microinfluencers, given the size and scope of their profile, do not usually have a team. On the contrary, they are the ones who individually take on all the necessary tasks: choice of topic, content writing, clothing, location, photography, recording materials and final editing. Besides, after the publication, they are the ones who follow up the publication, a fundamental step to build their community. According to the answers given to the questionnaire, microinfluencers invest an average of three hours for each publication, however, given the number of tasks, it seems difficult that they can be done in that period of time. This may be because microinfluencers do not include in their activities the preparation of content or even the management of their community, which take up a large part of their time.

The second factor may be determined by the type of publications that feed their profiles, as not all publications are revenue-generating. In this sense, part of the posts they publish do not have a commercial

purpose but are used with the aim of strengthening their personal brand and their community, which is undoubtedly their added value for brands to trust them. According to the content analysis, at least 42.5% of their publications do not receive any remuneration. In all of these publications, no brand sponsorship or display of specific products can be seen.

The third factor of dissatisfaction may be related to the disproportionate relationship between the size of their community, the bond they generate with their followers and the revenue they receive. This relationship is observed from the data obtained thanks to the comparison of two metrics: engagement and Earned Media Value (EMV), both used to evaluate the success of a marketing campaign on social networks based on the size of the community and the interactions generated. The following section presents the results comparing the behavior of microinfluencers and celebrity influencers.

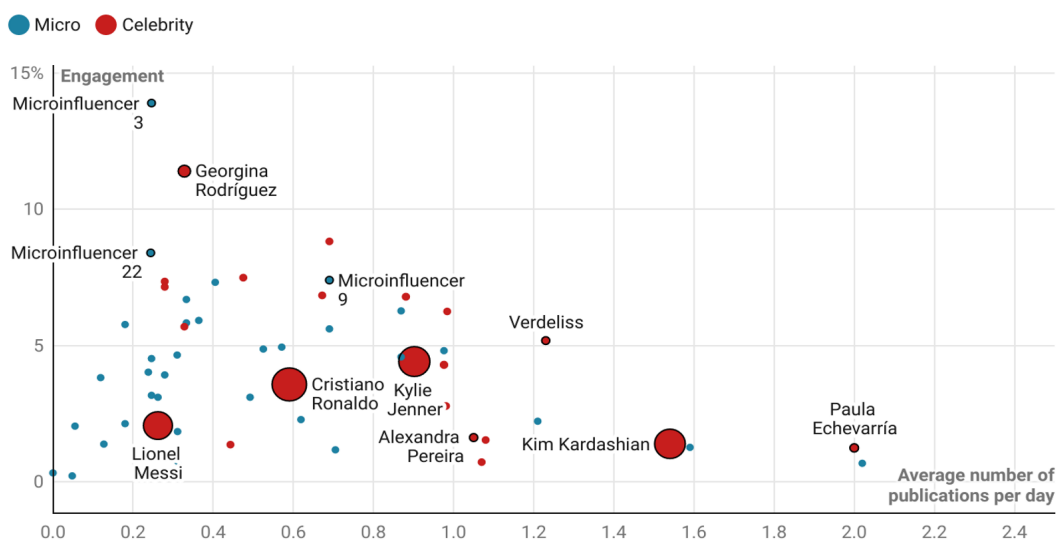
4.2. Engagement and Earned Media Value

Engagement can be defined as the link established by the user of the networks with their community of followers and is a measure used to calculate the impact of a profile on social media. Three values are used to measure it: the number of interactions of the publication (through likes and comments received), the number of publications made in each period and the number of followers of the profile. Consequently, its calculation is determined by the percentage of interactions that the publication has in relation to the number of followers of the profile.

From the monitoring of the profiles, the engagement generated by microinfluencers during the two months was obtained and compared with the engagement generated by the 21 celebrity influencers. Graph 2 shows this comparison. The results show that the engagement generated by the microinfluencers studied is on average (4%) higher than that produced by celebrity influencers such as Paula Echevarría or Lionel Messi, who have an average engagement of 2.38% in the same period. Besides, it is a microinfluencer of the sample who has the highest engagement of all users, which is 13.9%.

Graph 2.

Engagement generated and publications per day. Comparison between celebrities and microinfluencers



The size of the circles represents the number of followers of each influencer. The data was extracted from the Social Elephants platform. Own elaboration.

Created with Datawrapper

The other metric used to calculate the earning potential of microinfluencers is the Earned Media Value (EMV). This parameter refers to the economic value produced by the activity of a user on social media networks considering its reach among its followers (Launchmetrics, 2019). Calculating its value allows us to know how much a user should charge for each publication. It is calculated by: 1. the interactions produced by the post (likes and comments), 2. the number of followers of the user, and 3. the CPM, which stands for the "cost to generate 1000 impressions" or the cost at which a number of views of a post is paid in a given advertising format, such as Instagram, radio or television. The CPM is a benchmark metric within the advertising market that serves to calculate the cost of a campaign in each medium and is established based on the division of the cost of positioning an advertising message by the number of impressions (expressed in thousands) it generates. The CPM values of each medium are usually set according to the advertising market itself with established reference tables (Solomon, 2021).

The EMV permits to analyze the impact that a user's publication has on his/her followers and assign a price according to the reference CPM in the market. So, the EMV allows to know the fairest price that a microinfluencer should charge for a sponsored post. When the research was carried out, the calculation of the EMV of a microinfluencer's publications in the advertising market was based on a model that considered the CPM equal to 20 Euros (Solomon, 2021).

From the set of data collected, an estimate of the EMV of each microinfluencer was made. This data has been compared with the income declared by publication that they have made in the questionnaire and their difference has been calculated. Table 4 shows the estimated EMV of each microinfluencer, their declared income per publication and the difference between the two expressed in Euros. The last column shows the difference in percentage.

Table 4. Projected Earned Media Value (EMV) and comparison with microinfluencers' reported revenues

Microinfluencer	EMV projection per publication (20€ per CPM)	Revenues declared per post	Difference between revenue and projected EMV	Percentage difference
Microinfluencer 33	12 €	300€	288 €	96%
Microinfluencer 30	41€	200€	159€	80%
Microinfluencer 15	100€	300 €	200 €	67%
Microinfluencer 23	66€	200 €	134 €	67%
Microinfluencer 14	83 €	200 €	117€	59%
Microinfluencer 21	84€	200 €	116 €	58%
Microinfluencer 29	22€	50 €	28 €	57%
Microinfluencer 31	26€	50 €	24 €	48%
Microinfluencer 34	10€	15 €	5€	35%
Microinfluencer 18	70€	100€	30 €	30%
Microinfluencer 7	167 €	200 €	33 €	17%
Microinfluencer 13	87 €	100 €	13€	13%
Microinfluencer 26	43€	50€	7€	13%
Microinfluencer 17	111 €	100 €	-11 €	-11%
Microinfluencer 5	224 €	200 €	-24 €	-12%
Microinfluencer 3	336€	300€	-36€	-12%
Microinfluencer 22	66 €	50 €	-16 €	-31%

Microinfluencer 27	66€	50€	-16€	-33%
Microinfluencer 9	135 €	100€	-35 €	-35%
Microinfluencer 20	69€	50€	-19€	-38%
Microinfluencer 10	143 €	100€	-43 €	-43%
Microinfluencer 16	77€	50€	-27 €	-53%
Microinfluencer 28	37€	20€	-17€	-84%
Microinfluencer 19	67€	30 €	-37 €	-124%
Microinfluencer 6	239 €	100€	-139€	-139%
Microinfluencer 1	614 €	200€	-414€	-207%
Microinfluencer 2	411 €	100 €	-311 €	-311%
Microinfluencer 12	92€	20 €	-72€	-359%
Microinfluencer 8	147€	16 €	-131€	-818%
Microinfluencer 11	191 €	15 €	-176 €	-1173%
Microinfluencer 4	394 €	0 €	-394€	N / A
Microinfluencer 24	48€	0 €	-48€	N / A
Microinfluencer 25	55€	0 €	-55€	N / A
Microinfluencer 32	9 €	0 €	-9 €	N / A
Average	128€	102 €	-26 €	-95%
Own elaboration				

The results of the EMV show a significant difference between what microinfluencers could be paid and what they self-report they earn per publication. The microinfluencers analyzed earn 95% less than the expected EMV. In fact, only 13 of the profiles in the sample earn more than the estimated EMV and their positive percentage difference against the potential EMV is 49%. On the contrary, 17 users charge below their potential with a very significant distance from the EMV calculation since they are an average of -205% away from their EMV projected. Similarly, four of the microinfluencers in the sample claim not to charge for their publications even though, according to their EMV, their publications could generate economic value for the advertisers they promote. There is also a notable difference between the overall average EMV projected for the entire sample and the average revenue reported by the study participants.

5. Discussion

This research seeks to understand the emerging figure of microinfluencers as a new profession in the digital sphere and pays special attention to the precarious conditions faced by users who invest hours of work in the construction and adaptation of their profiles. In addition, this work presents an analysis model that allows the study of this phenomenon. Digital influencers have seen their power of influence grow exponentially. The supposed creative and performative freedom offered by social media together with the possibility of monetizing this activity have turned being an influencer into an attractive job opportunity. Marketing and advertising agents are increasingly using these digital profiles to promote their products. The microinfluencers can be successful profiles to make a product visible to a specific target audience, since their community of followers is smaller than that of a celebrity influencer, but more loyal, closer, and committed. This intermediate position between celebrity influencers and ordinary users makes microinfluencers more vulnerable to the individualistic, industrial, and ideological logics that make social media work (de Peuter, 2014).

This is demonstrated by the results obtained, which allow us to identify data that confirm previous theories on the digital precariousness of these new virtual prescribers. Preceding studies have evaluated the precariousness of digital creators, such as influencers, in terms of their relationship of dependence on digital platforms (Duffy et al., 2021) and their context of social and political vulnerability (Guarriello, 2019); however, this research provides data that allow us to observe the precariousness of microinfluencers in a more quantitative perspective. Specifically, the relationship between the time invested and the economic income obtained by the microinfluencers participating in the research shows the low monetary return they receive for their activity. Moreover, not all the hours dedicated to their digital performance translate into money, although every second invested does translate into an economic benefit for digital platforms (Fuchs, 2014) and advertisers.

The differences in time invested and economic revenue between the microinfluencers in the sample also show the instability, unpredictability, and itinerancy that this type of digital work entails, as authors such as Gill (2010) and Duffy and Hund (2015) have already identified. However, the data that most reveals the precarious conditions of microinfluencers is that almost half of the publications they make are not monetized. The logics of digital platforms demand regular, constant, and quality publications to maintain the impact on the community of followers. Therefore, influencers must nurture their digital brand identity regardless of whether the publications are paid or not. Besides that, data reveals that building a digital community and a reliable and desirable digital profile to attract advertisers usually involves a consolidation time where the work invested does not receive any kind of financial compensation. Thus, microinfluencers, unlike celebrity influencers who usually have an offline community of followers, must invest free time in their social media profiles under the promise of making their digital profiles profitable (Duffy, 2017).

The unequal position faced by the microinfluencers analyzed is also showed in the comparison with celebrity influencers. There are no significant differences in the average brand impact (or return on investment) that an advertising campaign can have between large celebrity influencers and microinfluencers. However, there are differences in the financial revenue received between the two groups. The difference is clearer when looking at the Earned Media Value. The disparity between the potential calculated on the EMV and the income declared by the microinfluencers in the sample shows that they are a profile used by brands to add, at low cost, greater value to their products. Therefore, it can be deduced that advertising campaigns do not recognize, monetarily, the ability of microinfluencers to generate engagement among their community and with the product they promote. Contrariwise, income is usually established in relation to the number of followers and not according to the impact generated by the publications. However, given the limitations of the sample used, it is recommended that future studies use larger samples in order to observe differences between the various types of influencers: megainfluencers, macroinfluencers, microinfluencers and nanoinfluencers.

This fact questions the meritocratic potential of social media platforms (Duffy, 2017; Mahoney, 2020) have warned. The supposed path to success in social networks is then revealed to be undemocratic, where the value of the hours invested and the effort to create a loyal community does not always have an economic reward. This result brings to the surface the prior privileges that seem important to gain advertisers' trust. Franck (2019) and Fuchs (2014) highlight this fact through the theory of the asymmetry of visibility power, and so does Ross (2013) in his concept: jackpot economy. They argue that the digital media give greater visibility and put the focus on the most successful profiles and with greater fame, without explaining the previous social and economic privileges essential for their success. So, the idea that in the network everyone is equal is perpetuated. In the case of the sample analyzed, it can be observed that some of the celebrity influencers have a social recognition that precedes their arrival on social networks, which gives them other brand values to which microinfluencers cannot aspire.

All the above explains the dissatisfaction shown by *microinfluencers* with their work in social networks. However, previous studies warn that dissatisfaction and inequality, do not translate into a complaint or denunciation on the part of those affected, which can be useful to understand and contextualize the data obtained in this work. Firstly, as de Peuter (2014) explains, the labor reality faced by digital users is characterized by the de-standardization of employment and the absence of trade unions, which prevents them from claiming fair conditions and identifying their indirect employers: digital platforms. Secondly, the display of disagreements or grievances does not contribute to create an image of fun, happiness, and authenticity (Duffy & Wissinguer, 2017) necessary to build a desirable and trustworthy digital identity for followers and advertisers. These two aspects place users who want to monetize their content in social networks may come to experience a situation of vulnerability that, as authors such as Guarriello (2019) or Poell et al. (2021) point out, may be due in part to the relationship of dependence they maintain with the companies that dominate the digital economy. They are necessarily at the mercy of the companies that dominate the digital economy and contribute to perpetuate the myths and mechanisms that make digital capitalism work (McRobbie, 2015).

Finally, this research aims to establish a model of analysis that allows the study of this phenomenon and it is expected to be used and enriched in future research. In this sense, it is recommended that future studies deepen in some aspects such as the observation of the differences between the types of influencers according to their size (i.e. nano, micro, macro and mega), their sector of specialization (lifestyle, video games...) or if their popularity is due exclusively to their activity in social networks or if they are popular for other type of activities.

6. Conclusions

The research carried out on the dedication and remuneration (current and potential) of the microinfluencers analyzed shows a significant difference between the payments they receive for their work and the value that is actually generated with that same work and that is, ultimately, used both by the brand (visibility and loyalty) and by the platform (attention time of their followers). The low satisfaction of the users studied with their remuneration is very clear, even in the lack of knowledge of the potential values of payment based on their main metrics (KPI) on Instagram.

It has also been found that, within the hours of dedication to their profiles, microinfluencers spend about half of their work producing content and managing their networks without receiving any remuneration in return. These hours invested and not recognized in the form of financial remuneration are another form of exploitation (free work) that companies take advantage of for their own benefit.

Finally, it has been proven how microinfluencers, despite having much lower incomes compared to big celebrities, generate a brand identity and loyalty (return on investment) more favorable for advertising companies that take advantage of this condition. Many times, they do not even pay their prescribers, but use them as advertising showcases in exchange for the social prestige that the brand can bring to the user-microinfluencer. It can be seen as a new currency of payment, prestige or social influence, which should be analyzed in future studies.

The present research provides an analysis model that can be an instrument for discussing the impact of social media on free work and the construction of new labor imaginaries. According to authors such as Christian Fuchs (2012) or Angela McRobbie (2015), in its technological phase the domination of capital also takes care of internalizing in users the ideological framework that renders the critique of exploitation irrelevant. Conversely, even precarious workers defend exploitation as an alternative form in the face of the economic and labor crises of the 21st Century. In their defense, the platforms go unnoticed, as mere aseptic instruments that have only been put there for the benefit of their users. Their cloak of invisibility is their best strategy to hide the capitalist control of their huge profits.

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