

The current role of influencers in public relations: Comparing Spain and the USA

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Abstract

Influencers currently play a key role in corporate communications. Their presence is increasing in promotional activities, initiated both by private companies and public institutions, which has transformed them into particularly important figures over the past decade. But what is their specific role in public relations? Are they also part of PR campaigns? Are they considered a useful tool? This paper intends to provide answers to these questions, first by reviewing the academic literature in order to gather information about the current position of influencers within PR campaigns; and next, by analyzing two surveys completed by professionals in the USA and Spain, in order to understand the situation in both countries and to compare them with one another, so as to give a more complete picture of the current scenario. The bibliometric review shows that academia is studying the figure of the influencer, both from a general and a public relations point of view, acknowledging its importance in strategic communication today. Furthermore, the results of the questionnaires reveal that PR companies are actively hiring influencers; that they are considered a good complement to their other tools; and that these partnerships are delivering good results for their clients. Although incorporating them involves challenges, practitioners are improving their managing processes and believe that such collaborations will continue in the future.

Keywords: public relations, influencers, social media, communication strategies, Spain, USA

Resum. *El paper actual dels influencers en les relacions públiques: comparació entre Espanya i EUA*

Els *influencers* exerceixen actualment un paper fonamental en la comunicació corporativa. La seva presència és cada vegada més gran en activitats de promoció, iniciades tant per

empreses privades com per institucions públiques, la qual cosa els ha convertit en figures especialment rellevants en l'última dècada. Però, quin és el seu paper específic en les relacions públiques? Formen part de les seves campanyes? Es consideren una eina útil? Aquest article pretén donar resposta a aquestes preguntes revisant, en els primers apartats, literatura acadèmica per recaptar informació sobre la posició actual dels *influencers* en les campanyes de relacions públiques; en la segona part s'analitzen dues enquestes, cobertes per professionals als Estats Units i a Espanya, amb la finalitat de conèixer la situació en tots dos països i comparar-la per oferir una imatge més completa de l'escenari actual. La revisió bibliomètrica mostra que l'entorn acadèmic està estudiant aquesta figura, tant des d'un punt de vista general com des del de les relacions públiques, i que la seva importància es reflecteix avui dia en la comunicació estratègica. A més, els resultats dels qüestionaris proven que les empreses de relacions públiques estan col·laborant activament amb *influencers*, que els consideren un bon complement per a les seves altres eines, i que aquesta associació ofereix bons resultats als seus clients. Encara que la seva incorporació suposa un repte, els professionals estan millorant els processos de gestió i consideren que les col·laboracions continuaran en el futur.

Paraules clau: relacions públiques; *influencers*; xarxes socials; estratègies de comunicació; Espanya; EUA

Resumen. *El papel actual de los influencers en las relaciones públicas: comparación entre España y EE. UU.*

Los *influencers* desempeñan actualmente un papel fundamental en la comunicación corporativa. Su presencia es cada vez mayor en actividades de promoción, iniciadas tanto por empresas privadas como por instituciones públicas, lo que los ha convertido en figuras especialmente relevantes en la última década. Pero ¿cuál es su papel específico en las relaciones públicas? ¿Forman parte de sus campañas? ¿Se consideran una herramienta útil? Este artículo pretende dar respuesta a estas preguntas revisando, en sus primeros apartados, literatura académica para recabar información sobre la posición actual de los *influencers* en las campañas de relaciones públicas; en la segunda parte se analizarán dos encuestas, cubiertas por profesionales en Estados Unidos y en España, con el fin de conocer la situación en ambos países y compararla para ofrecer una imagen más completa del escenario actual. La revisión bibliométrica muestra que el entorno académico está estudiando esta figura, tanto desde un punto de vista general como desde el de las relaciones públicas, y que su importancia se refleja hoy en día en la comunicación estratégica. Además, los resultados de los cuestionarios prueban que las empresas de relaciones públicas están colaborando activamente con *influencers*, que los consideran un buen complemento para sus otras herramientas, y que esta asociación está ofreciendo buenos resultados a sus clientes. Aunque su incorporación supone un reto, los profesionales están mejorando los procesos de gestión y consideran que las colaboraciones continuarán en el futuro.

Palabras clave: relaciones públicas; *influencers*; redes sociales; estrategias de comunicación; España; EE. UU.

1. Introduction

When people are asked about influencers, in most cases what comes to mind is either a young girl trying out outfits that a trendy retail brand has delivered to her door or a young boy testing a videogame that a popular gaming com-

pany has given him for free – both of them in front of a camera, presenting their experiences via a well-known social media platform. But what happens when communications professionals are asked the same question? What is their take on who influencers are, and on what they do? And do they believe that their activities can be included in their clients' campaigns? Taking all this into consideration, the authors of this paper were particularly interested in the perspective of public relations (PR) professionals, as the discipline of PR is not traditionally considered the primary environment for collaborations with influencers.

This paper intends to provide answers to the questions above, attempting to describe the actual role of influencers in PR activities, and to find out whether PR practitioners are currently using their services and consider them useful tools to achieve their communication goals. For this purpose, first academic literature is reviewed, to define the figure of the influencer and to find out from a scientific point of view whether influencers are being embraced by the discipline of PR. Sources of information include a selection of the main scientific databases (Google Scholar, Academia, Researchgate, Dialnet, Web of Science, Springer, Elsevier, Scopus), using search criteria relating to the topic keywords and timeframes. Next, the results of two surveys of public relations professionals in Spain and the USA are analyzed, to understand the business perspective regarding this trend in those two countries. These surveys are also compared, to provide a more comprehensive overview of the current global scenario.

The main objectives of this paper are therefore:

- Objective 1 (O1): To describe the role that academia currently assigns to influencers in PR activities.
- Objective 2 (O2): To understand the perspective of PR professionals in Spain regarding influencers in their field.
- Objective 3 (O3): To understand the perspective of PR professionals in the USA regarding influencers in their field.
- Objective 4 (O4): To compare both perspectives, in order to find congruences and differences, and to build an overall picture of the current situation of influencers in PR.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Influencer who?*

Traditionally, the decision-making process, when applied to consumer behavior, has been studied from either a problem-solving or a need-solving perspective. As such, it has been divided into five stages: problem/need recognition; search; alternative evaluation; purchase decision; and outcomes/evaluation (García Soria, 2015). Also traditionally, those five stages took place in the offline world. However, the rise of the internet has progressively shifted

most of this process to the online environment, particularly the three central stages (Darley, Blankson and Luethge, 2010).

In order to tip the scales in that decision-making process, brands have often turned to experts and celebrities to foster positive responses towards their products or services. This task is usually assigned to individuals who have the ability to influence the purchases or actions of other individuals, through their opinions, assessments or recommendations, or through their own purchases or actions (Marín, Serrano and Galiano, 2020). The process is reflected in works by authors such as Katz and Lazarsfeld (1966), who argued that there is a two-step flow of communication in the unfolding of media content influence, mediated through personal networks and their communication systems, and including opinion leaders; that is, people who interpret and deliver information that guides others. Those opinion leaders have also been defined as “individuals who exert an unequal amount of influence on the decision of others” (Rogers and Cartano, 1962: 435). In fact, it has been asserted that admired personalities tend to increase the credibility of messages, boost brand awareness, raise recall percentages, improve the perception of the organization responsible for the products or ideas and, ultimately, drive up purchases and adherences to causes (Castelló and Del Pino, 2015).

The figure of today’s social media influencer has its roots in these offline brand endorsers, experts or celebrities who link their image to specific products or services with the objective of making them stand out as attractive to the public. The increasing prevalence of the internet and social media has moved these figures, together with the above-mentioned decision-making process, from the offline world to the digital environment, where their influence is amplified and they are officially assigned the name “influencers” (Vilajoana-Alejandre, Rom-Rodríguez and Miotto, 2019).

Enke and Borchers (2019) define these influencers as “third-party actors who have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to and influence on organizational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web” (p. 267). Freberg et al. (2011) argue that they are “a new type of independent third party endorser who shapes audience attitudes” (p. 90). IAB Spain (2022) completes and updates the definition by adding that influencers have the potential to create engagement, boost conversions and affect purchasing decisions.

According to these definitions, in this new, social-media-related environment, the traditional brand-prescribing model is nowadays linked to a person who generates content but also to a community which receives this content, interacts with it and makes decisions based on it. This, to some scholars, is closely related to the concept of word of mouth, which also exists in the offline world and is focused on personal communications about products or services through channels not directly controlled by the company (Kotler et al., 2002, in Bakker, 2018: 80). Word of mouth has evolved into a digital process and, unlike the traditional version, one that “can be either a free form

of communication or paid, modern word-of-mouth in the internet age involves brand owners who engage people who have a large followership on social media platforms to speak – for payment – on their brand’s behalf” (Bakker, 2018: 80). Linking both concepts, influencers are the crucial figures in influencer marketing, which is also called e-word-of-mouth and is defined as the practice of compensating individuals for posting about a product or service on social media (Campbell and Rapp Farrell, 2020).

2.2. Influencer who, in public relations?

Social media are currently crucial for public relations. Just like in other communication disciplines, they have become one of its main tools, as they are one of the information and leisure sources preferred by audiences: in 2021, people all over the world spent on average 2 hours and 27 minutes on social media every day (We Are Social and Hootsuite, 2022). Extensive studies included in several international monitors have in fact proved their increasing importance in the communication environment (Moreno et al., 2017; Zerfass et al., 2016). Moreover, as Booth and Matic (2011) note, “while the fundamentals of public relations are essentially the same as social media relations, the addition of this new marketing channel allows practitioners to engage with influencers one on one” (p. 190).

Furthermore, influencers, as figures who are currently key in social media, have proved to be valuable tools in PR campaigns. According to Borchers and Enke (2021), their participation increases brand awareness, creates product reviews, generates publicity, quickly spreads information and creates believable and authentic content. Besides, influencers, when chosen correctly, tend to know the organization’s stakeholders well, as they are part of their online communities. In addition, according to Villena (2018), they can identify which part of those audiences has a greater degree of influence on other consumers.

From a public relations perspective, it is also interesting that influencers are currently acting as gatekeepers, given their central role in deciding about information flows, and are becoming both senders of and channels for messages (Navarro et al., 2020). In fact, Herzig, Mass and Roitman (2014) argue that they are able to “disseminate interesting content, ideas or opinions to others, hoping to stimulate some intended reactions by potential readers, e.g., be endorsed, followed, cited, or even trigger an active discussion” (p. 46), which applies to commercial environments but also to other fields such as political communication. Probably for this reason, many PR professionals believe that using influencers can in some cases be more effective nowadays than standard advertising and traditional press releases, as many consumers now trust and/or actually listen to the latter less than to influencer-created content (Tworzydło, Zyczynski and Wadja, 2019).

Nevertheless, of course, it should also be noted that the implementation of the influencer figure in public relations campaigns is a relatively new trend. Therefore, managing their correct incorporation into communication strate-

gies can be challenging for PR companies. As Wolf and Archer (2018) state, “the dynamics of influencer engagement present major challenges to even the most experienced PR professionals, due to the rapid rise of individual influencers, changing business models, and only slowly evolving best practice approaches to the evaluation of influencer engagement” (p. 502). These new challenges involve supervising (and working in a beneficial way with) people who can share, send, copy, extract or comment on content relating to recommendations to large communities (Navarro et al., 2020). Furthermore, PR companies are continuously trying to find effective metrics to determine who are the most influential players, how far conventional metrics apply to new media, and what tools are lacking for measuring influencers in relation to PR activities (Gillin, 2008). Despite all these factors, public relations professionals seem to be up for that challenge, as they see “a potential in using influencers in activities associated with communication” (Tworzydło et al., 2019: 146), and consider it a growing trend to which the discipline should adapt, and which it should even try to embrace.

As proof of this, studies such as those by Charest, Bouffard and Zajmovic (2016), Tworzydło et al. (2019), and Davies and Hobbs (2020) show that many public relations managers and practitioners are already incorporating influencers into their activities on a regular basis. Although for some of them it is still not a common practice, the goals of reaching new potential audiences, and ones that they are not usually able to approach through other channels, and contributing to better results in terms of two-way communication, are great incentives to make influencers part of general communication strategies. Difficulties certainly arise, which are frequently found in the planning and monitoring stages, given that working methods differ from the traditional media’s methods, but nevertheless, the results of the above-mentioned studies show that PR companies are improving influencer integration processes, with highly positive results.

3. Methods

In order to achieve this paper’s objectives, surveys were chosen as the main research method, following a quantitative approach. Two different questionnaires were used to reach our two main target groups:

- Survey A (Spain), in Spanish. Created using the software Qualtrics (<<https://www.qualtrics.com/>>), and addressed to public relations professionals in Spain.
- Survey B (USA), in English. Created using the software Google Forms (<<https://www.google.com/forms/about/>>), and addressed to public relations professionals in the United States of America.

The surveys were distributed via email during the month of March 2022. Recipients were top public relations agencies in both countries, chosen from

rankings and lists published by ADC (2022), Comunicare (n.d.), El Publicista (2020) and Top Comunicación (2022) for Spain; and Business2Community (2022), Influencer Marketing Hub (2022), Observer (2022), PRvoke Media (2021), for the USA. The calculations to verify the validity and representativeness of the survey samples were made using the recommendations of the Harvard University Program on Survey Research, specifically, their sample size calculator, included in Creative Research Systems (Creative Research Systems, n.d.). A confidence level of 95% and a confidence interval of 10 were introduced.

Survey A (Spain) met the statistical criteria for the representativeness of the sample: 125 companies were included in the sources above and therefore, using Creative Research Systems calculations, the sample size needed was 55. The questionnaire was filled out by 63 companies.

Survey B (USA) also met the statistical criteria for the representativeness of the sample: 101 companies were included in the sources above and therefore, using Creative Research Systems calculations, the sample size needed was 49. The questionnaire was filled out by 49 companies.

The structure of the two surveys was very similar, including questions about the respondents' work with influencers in 2021 (and previous years, if any), their reasons for working/not working with influencers, business sectors, results, and thoughts about the future, both in their personal collaboration with influencers and in the industry in general. Answers were collected and analyzed using the Qualtrics and Google Forms data, analysis, results and report tools.

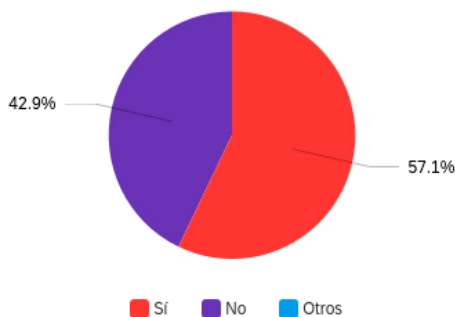
4. Results

4.1. Work with influencers in 2021

The first question was "Has your company worked with influencers in 2021?".

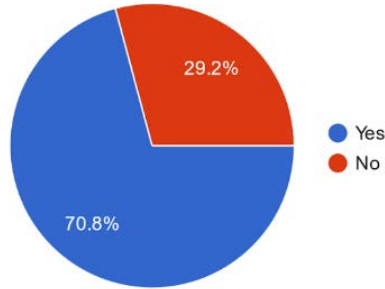
In Survey A (Spain), 57.1% of respondents stated that they had worked with influencers during the year 2021, while 42.9% indicated that they had not.

Figure 1. Work with Influencers in 2021 - Spain



In Survey B (USA), 70.8% of respondents stated that they had worked with influencers during the year 2021, while 29.2% indicated that they had not.

Figure 2. Work with Influencers in 2021 - USA

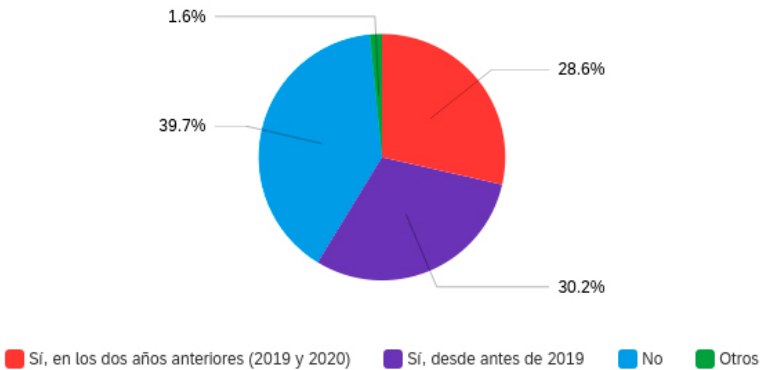


Source: Authors' own.

4.2. Work with influencers before 2021

When asked if their company had previously worked with influencers, in Survey A (Spain), 30.2% of respondents said that they had indeed used their services since before 2019, 28.6% chose the option “yes, in the 2 previous years (2019 and 2020)” and 39.7% said that they had not worked with influencers before that year. The 1.6% who chose “other” explained their answer in the text field, and in all cases they wrote that they had worked with influencers since before 2019, therefore the real percentage for the answer “yes, since before 2019” is 31.8%.

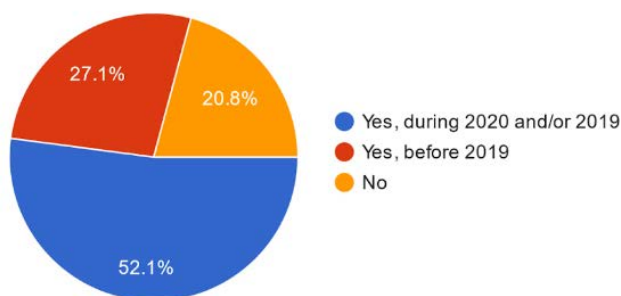
Figure 3. Work with Influencers before 2021 - Spain



Source: Authors' own.

In Survey B (USA), when asked if their company had previously worked with influencers, 27.1% of respondents indicated that they had actually used their services since before 2019, 52.1% chose the option “yes, in the 2 previous years (2019 and 2020)” and 20.8% said that they had not worked with influencers before that year. None of the respondents chose the option “other”.

Figure 4. Work with Influencers in 2021 - USA



Source: Authors' own.

4.3. Reasons for not working with influencers

In the next section, those PR professionals who had stated that they had not worked with influencers were asked to briefly explain their reasons.

In Survey A (Spain), many different responses were received. These included financial reasons, not finding influencers that were appropriate for their client or sector, not finding their services necessary, preference for other communication tools, and not believing that they are good professionals.

In Survey B (USA), responses were also varied, ranging from financial reasons to not knowing enough about the sector, and including not considering the industries or the specific clients a good match. A smaller percentage of respondents believed that influencers were not honest/profitable, and therefore would never hire them.

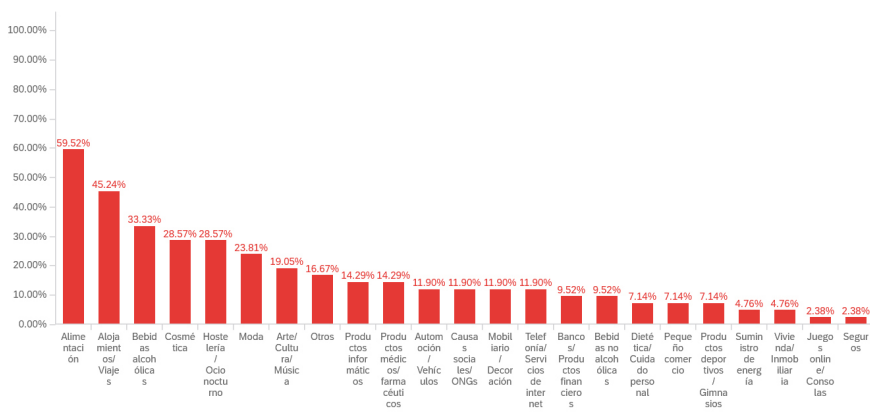
4.4. Sectors

The next question, addressed to those PR professionals who had stated that they had worked with influencers, referred to the business sectors where they had used their services.

In Survey A (Spain), the highest percentage was achieved by the category “food” (59.52%), followed by “lodging/travel” (45.24%), “alcoholic beverages” (33.33%), “beauty” (28.57%), “hospitality/nightlife” (28.57%), “fashion” (23.81%), “arts/culture/music” (19.05%), “other” (16.67%), “technology/IT” and “healthcare/pharmaceutical products” (both with 14.29%); and

“automotive”, “non-profit”, “furniture/decoration” and “mobile/internet services” (all of these with 11.90%). The remaining sectors reached percentages below 10%.

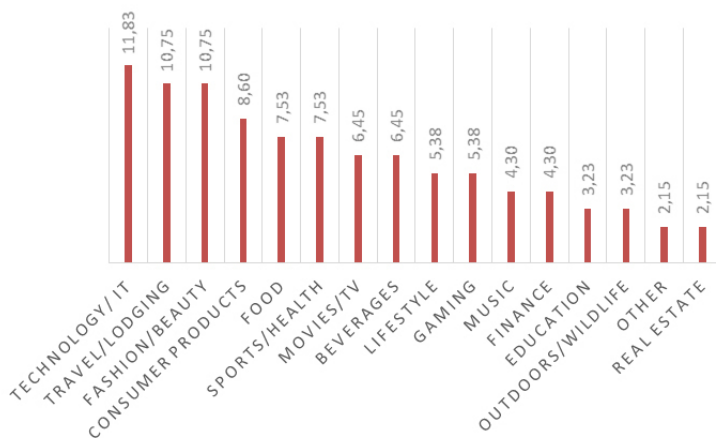
Figure 5. Sectors Working with Influencers - Spain



Source: Authors' own.

In Survey B (USA), the highest percentage was achieved by the category “technology/IT” (11.83%), followed by “lodging/travel” and “fashion/beauty” (both with 10.75%), “consumer products” (8.60%), “food” and “fitness/health” (both with 7.63%), “movies/TV” and “beverages” (both with 6.45%), and “lifestyle” and “gaming” (both with 5.38%). The remaining sectors reached percentages below 5%.

Figure 6. Sectors Working with Influencers - USA



Source: Authors' own.

4.5. Assessment of results

The following question, addressed to those PR professionals who had stated that they had worked with influencers, asked whether the results of the communication activities involving them had been positive.

In Survey A (Spain), 43.9% of the respondents stated that they had always had positive results, while 56.1% indicated that had happened in some cases. None of the respondents chose the option “no, never”.

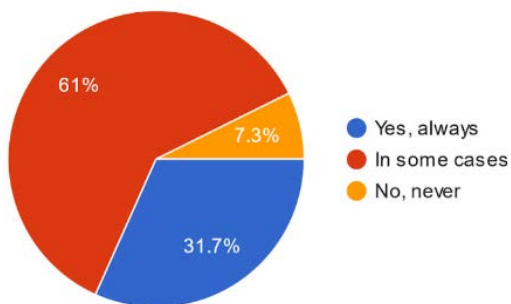
Figure 7. Assessment of Results - Spain



Source: Authors' own.

In Survey B (USA), 31.7% of respondents stated that they had always had positive results, while 61% indicated that had happened in some cases. 7.3% of respondents chose the option “no, never”.

Figure 8. Assessment of Results - USA



Source: Authors' own.

4.6. Explanation of assessment of results

In the next section, those PR professionals who had stated that they had worked with influencers were asked to briefly explain their previous response.

In Survey A (Spain), those who had obtained positive results listed more traffic to businesses websites, reaching wider audiences, raising brand awareness, growth of social media communities, and an increase in consumer loyalty. Those respondents who had obtained positive results only in some cases stated that not all influencers behaved professionally, that it was hard to measure real conversion rates, not choosing the right influencer for their client, or not getting good price/results ratios. Respondents who said they had never obtained positive results indicated that the influencers that they had hired did not meet the contract agreements, displayed a lack of professionalism and/or charged high prices.

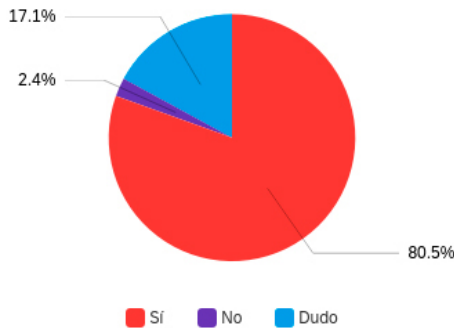
In Survey B (USA), those who had obtained positive results listed working only with influencers who can guarantee results, more traffic to e-commerce websites, greater audience engagement, raising brand awareness, attracting customers, an improvement in social media impressions and reach, and broader visibility for other actions (i.e. press releases). Those respondents who had obtained positive results only in some cases stated that it was hard to track results, some partnerships not being a great fit, not meeting initial expectations, or influencers often not following directions. Respondents who had never obtained positive results indicated that they believed that influencers are overrated, that most of the contents that they posted did not generate any interest, or did not drive actual sales.

4.7. The future

The next question, addressed to those PR professionals who had stated that they had worked with influencers, concerned whether they thought that they would use the services of influencers again in the future.

In Survey A (Spain), 80.5% of the respondents stated that they would, 2.4% indicated that they would not, and 17.1% said that they were not sure.

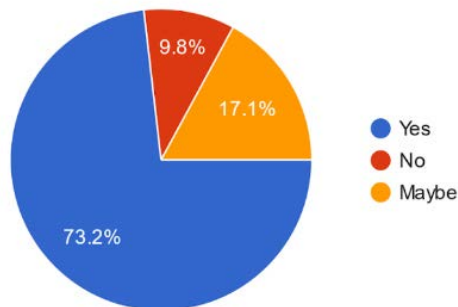
Figure 9. Use of Influencers in the Future - Spain



Source: Authors' own.

In Survey B (USA), 73.2% of the respondents stated that they would, 9.8% indicated that they would not, and 17.1% said that they were not sure.

Figure 10. Use of Influencers in the Future - USA



Source: Authors' own.

4.8. Explanation of future assessment

The next question, addressed to those PR professionals who had stated that they had worked with influencers, asked them to briefly explain their previous response.

In Survey A (Spain), those who believed that they would use influencers in the future wrote that they reached new, different profiles, that maintaining a stable relationship with them was beneficial, it was a great way to promote products, it was the right complement to other communication activities, it had provided good results in previous experiences, that good influencers yielded profits, or that choosing the right influencer always brought positive results. Those respondents who had chosen “maybe” in the previous question stated that they would use influencers in the future depending on the campaign, the contract, the influencer and the target audience; they also indicated that before using them again, the agreements should be clearer, and the actions better monitored. Respondents who did not believe that they would use influencers in the future provided responses similar to those for the two questions above: not cost-effective, lack of trust, and too much work for too little profit.

In Survey B (USA), those who believed that they would use influencers in the future wrote that they found them useful for increasing social media followers, that they were a top strategy for driving traffic to websites and ecommerce, that they constituted a valuable and relatively inexpensive asset, that consumers found influencers relatable and tended to purchase items that they promoted, or that it rounded out communication strategies, reaching a different demographic as compared to other tools. Those respondents who had chosen “maybe” in the previous question wondered whether choosing

the right influencers was really possible, whether other tools were more useful, whether they would soon be replaced by other tools, and whether the costs were actually worth the trouble. Respondents who did not believe that they would use influencers in the future provided responses similar to those for the two questions above: that they believed that influencers were overrated and not profitable; some added a few undermining words about their personalities.

4.9. *Influencers beneficial for PR*

The next question, addressed to both the PR professionals who had stated that they had worked with influencers and those who had stated that they had not worked with influencers, asked whether they thought that they are beneficial for PR activities.

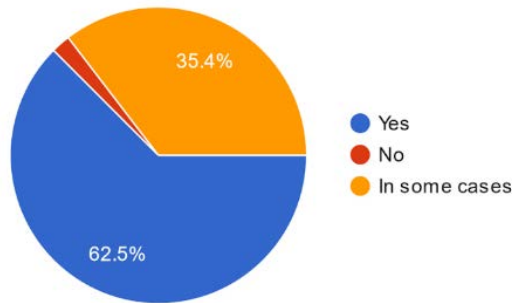
In Survey A (Spain), 53.7% responded affirmatively, while 42.6% chose the option “In some cases”. 3.7% did not think that using influencers is beneficial for PR activities.

Figure 11. Influencers beneficial for PR - Spain



Source: Authors' own.

In Survey B (USA), 62.5% responded affirmatively, while 35.4% chose the option “In some cases”. 2.1% did not think that using influencers was beneficial for PR activities.

Figure 12. Influencers beneficial for PR - USA

Source: Authors' own.

4.10. Explanation of assessment of benefits

Finally, both those PR professionals who said they had worked with influencers and those who said they had not were asked to briefly explain their previous response.

In Survey A (Spain), those who believed that they would use influencers in the future wrote that, with an adequate strategy, they were a powerful tool and were key stakeholders who should always be taken into account; that they brought greater media coverage and contributed to brand growth; that they complemented other PR activities, reaching niche target audiences; or that in their opinion public relations were in fact reborn (in the eyes of society in general) thanks to the influencer trend. Those respondents who had chosen “maybe” in the previous question stated that it depended on the industry, the product and the target audience; they also believed that leaving the reputation of a company in the hands of an external person was dangerous; or that knowing the way influencers operated, they could be very useful as a tool, but inexperienced PR practitioners could be easily fooled. Respondents who did not believe that they would use influencers in the future provided the following responses: they considered themselves non-believers, did not trust them, or thought they were too focused on younger audiences, which were never among their target audiences.

In Survey B (USA), those who believed that they would use influencers in the future wrote that they helped to direct customers to businesses, reaching new target audiences and bringing their own followers, particularly the younger ones; that they rounded out the PR tool chest, as they were another outlet for messages; that, with more and more people turning to social media for information, influencers were an important part of the communications mix; that they played a role in further expanding awareness, generating momentum and attracting people’s attention; or that they could lead to increased PR coverage and credibility. Those respondents who had chosen “maybe” in the previous question wondered whether influencers were not

just a new version of traditional spokespersons, and understood that they were only useful for specific types of industries and particular audiences. Respondents who did not believe that they would use influencers in the future provided responses similar to those for the two questions above, as most of them believed that influencers were overrated; some added that they “suspect that they have free reign and may not adhere to company values/guidelines”.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This paper was aimed at defining the role of influencers in public relations, focusing on finding out whether they are currently part of PR campaigns, and are considered a useful tool by academia and practitioners.

Objective 1 (O1) specifically sought to describe the role that academia currently assigns to influencers in PR activities. The literature review included relevant documents covering the emergence and evolution of the figure of the influencer, and key texts regarding their inclusion in the discipline of public relations, both on a theoretical and a practical level. This confirmed that influencers are today often part of PR campaigns, and that they are considered valuable tools, given, among other reasons, their contributions to brand awareness and engagement, their role as information gatekeepers, or the fact that they complement other communication activities and serve as a means to reach specific and/or niche target audiences. Of course, incorporating this new figure involves challenges, but the literature proves that public relations companies are improving influencer integration processes, with highly positive results.

The second objective (O2) aimed to understand the perspective of PR professionals in Spain regarding influencers in their field. The results of Survey A (Spain) showed that more than half of public relations practitioners in Spain currently use their services, and have been doing so for some time now. Over 50% of them stated that they had always achieved positive results, and although some of them said that they would preferably use them only in specific situations, none of the respondents had consistently had negative results. Probably for this reason, 80% of respondents stated that they would use influencer services again in the future, arguing that they can reach new, different target audiences, yielding benefits and becoming a great complement to other communication activities. Regarding the specific benefits of using influencers for PR activities, more than half of the respondents thought that they were a powerful tool, provided that they were framed within an adequate strategy, as they brought greater media coverage and contributed to brand growth. While several respondents were hesitant when answering these last questions, their explanations mostly included concerns about campaign/target audience/brand suitability, monitoring issues and cost.

The third objective (O3) was focused on understanding the perspective of PR professionals in the USA regarding influencers in their field. The results of Survey B (USA) revealed that most of the public relations practitioners cur-

rently include influencers in their communication activities, and that they have been doing so for several years. Although one third of the respondents stated that they had always had positive results when using their services, most of the respondents indicated that this had happened only in some cases, and some of them had only had negative experiences. Nevertheless, almost 75% of them were ready to give the tool a second chance, as they confirmed that they would use influencer services again in the future, indicating that they are a top strategy for broadening social communities, driving traffic to websites, and reaching targeted audiences, and that they are a relatively inexpensive tool. With regard to the benefits for PR activities, many respondents mentioned that they rounded out communication tool chests, as they are a new channel to send out messages and provide new audiences – particularly younger ones – and that they lead to increased coverage credibility and awareness. Most of the hesitant respondents indicated that trusting them was an issue, as they did not believe that they would respond to instructions and/or bring benefits.

The fourth, and final objective (O4) addressed the comparison of the perspectives of both countries, trying to find common grounds and differences. As seen above, many of the responses about the reasons for using influencers, their intentions regarding the future and the benefits they bring to PR activities were similar for both countries. The majority of the respondents in Spain and the USA provided positive feedback, which reflected good previous experiences and predicted a good public relations-influencer relationship in the future. The reasons for the positive feedback and forecast were also very similar, therefore the main differences were found in some of the percentages obtained for the “yes/no” questions and the business sectors where influencers are currently used. As for the percentages, the results show that more American (70.2%) than Spanish (57.1%) companies currently employ the services of influencers; and that in Spain (56.1%) more firms have had only positive results than in the USA (32.5%), where some of them had never achieved good outcomes (7.5%). Consequently, the percentages for those American PR practitioners who had decided not to use influencers in the future, or who believed that they were beneficial for PR activities, were slightly higher than in Spain, although they stayed below 10% in all cases. Finally, the business sectors where influencers were hired differed between both countries, with the highest figures obtained for technology in the USA and for food in Spain; travel, fashion and beauty came next in both cases, although the ranking order was also slightly different.

This research was limited in its focus to two countries, and to the PR practitioners who could be reached by the authors during a limited period of time; for these reasons, the respondents could not be fully representative of global public relations professionals. Furthermore, not all the literature that was consulted for this project could be included, due to restrictions in length. Nonetheless, the results of this paper provide valuable insights regarding the current role of influencers in PR activities, both from an academic and an industry point of view. It has been proved that influencers today actively par-

ticipate in public relations campaigns; that their reputation among agencies is positive, given that they contribute to brand awareness and growth; and that a long term relationship with them is foreseen. Moreover, although all this involves challenges, as the figure of the influencer has not traditionally been part of the public relations toolset and including influencers introduces new players with different working systems, PR companies can see the benefits of this new partnership and are definitively ready to accept the challenge.

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