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RESEARCH

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DISSEMINATORS, NOT INFLUENCERS: COMMUNICATION OF DIETITIANS ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

Divulgadores, no influencers: comunicación de nutricionistas en redes sociales

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Food generates a growing interest among the population, in particular among young people. The rise of social networks makes them a source of relevant information. In these social networks, expert profiles coexist with untrained influencers. **Methodology:** This article analyses the key aspects of the presence on social networks of seven of the most important nutritionists in this field in Spanish using a qualitative technique based on in-depth interviews. **Results:** The relevance of Instagram as the most important network in nutrition is confirmed. Six of the seven

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participants refuse to be classified as influencers, a concept to which they attribute objectives and values with which they do not feel identified, and prefer to define themselves as communicators. Nutritionists stress the importance of adapting the message to the characteristics of each of the social networks and only two of the seven combine personal and professional issues in their content. **Discussion and conclusions:** The role of nutritionists on social networks as disseminators acquires a particular relevance due to the low quality of content related to food. However, in the literature about communication, food, and social networks, limits between trained dieticians and influencers are unclear. Connected to that question, the results of the qualitative research are revealing because they show the interviewed nutritionists want to have influence, but they do not want to be considered as influencers. In contrast to the negative connotation they give to this concept, they defend coherence and authenticity. They accept branded content if it is clear and transparent, although three of the seven interviewees say they have been witnesses of bad practice.

Keywords: food, health, social networks, Instagram, Twitter, personal branding, nutritionist, influencer, disseminator.

RESUMEN

Introducción: La alimentación genera un interés creciente entre la población, en particular entre las personas jóvenes. La pujanza de las redes sociales hace que sean una fuente de información relevante. En ellas, perfiles expertos conviven con *influencers* sin formación. **Metodología:** En este artículo se analizan las claves de la presencia en redes sociales de siete de los nutricionistas más importantes en este ámbito en lengua española a través de una técnica cualitativa basada en entrevistas en profundidad. **Resultados:** Se constata la relevancia de Instagram como red más importante en nutrición. Seis de los siete se niegan a ser catalogados como *influencers,* concepto al que atribuyen objetivos y valores con los que no se sienten identificados, y prefieren definirse como divulgadores. Los nutricionistas destacan la importancia de adecuar el mensaje a las características de cada una de las redes sociales y solo dos de los siete combinan cuestiones personales y profesionales en sus contenidos. **Discusión y conclusiones:** El papel divulgador de los profesionales de la nutrición en las redes sociales adquiere una especial relevancia por la calidad deficiente de la información sobre alimentación. Sim embargo, en la literatura sobre alimentación, comunicación y redes sociales, los límites entre las personas catalogadas como *influencers* y aquellas profesionales de la nutrición y dietética se difuminan. En este punto, resulta revelador el resultado de la investigación cualitativa realizada, ya que se constata que los nutricionistas estudiados quieren influir, pero no ser *influencers*. Frente a la connotación negativa que atribuyen a este concepto, defienden la coherencia y la autenticidad. Aceptan el uso de contenido patrocinado, siempre que sea claro y transparente, aunque tres de los siete aseguran haber sido testigo de casos de mala praxis.

Palabras clave: alimentación, salud, redes sociales, Instagram, Twitter, marca personal, nutricionista, *influencer*, divulgador.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media is a thriving source of promotion and the creation of personal and professional identity. The rise of personal branding and self-branding attests to this (Vasconcelos and Rúa, 2021). Fueled by a social climate that some authors link to the expansion of individual neoliberalism (Khamis et al., 2017), social networks represent an ideal platform to make oneself known.

Influencer marketing not only impacts the most media-exposed areas such as fashion, the entertainment industry, politics, and the environment (Ardèvol et al., 2021; San-Cornelio et al., 2021; Establés et al., 2019; Segarra-Saavedra and Hidalgo-Marí, 2018; De Veirman et al., 2017; Quevedo-Redondo and Portales-Oliva, 2017; Castelló-Martínez et al., 2016) but also affects health and nutrition (Truman, 2022; Zou et al., 2021). These areas have seen a growing interest among the public, particularly among young people (Comscore, 2018). Despite this, as highlighted by Rogers et al. (2022) in their review study on scientific literature addressing nutrition communication through influencers on social media, this is a field of research that has not seen significant development. Hence, the relevance of works like the one developed below.

1.1. Professionals in nutrition and influencers

The expansion of social media and its impact on health communication has generated a field of research with various areas of interest, as reflected in different reviews published to date (Chen and Wang, 2021; Díaz-Campo et al., 2023; Korda and Itani, 2013; Moorhead et al., 2013; Shi et al., 2018). One of these areas focuses on the content and interaction of individuals identified as influencers who share guidelines, habits, and advice on food and nutrition, although many of them are not qualified dietitians or nutritionists and sometimes convey misinformation without scientific evidence or false information (Byrne et al., 2017). Therefore, these authors argue that nutrition and dietetics professionals are the best sources to offer credible and rigorous information, advocating for these professionals to share their knowledge with the public. This advice is particularly relevant when there are studies like Almousa et al. (2020), which highlight the influence of peers and influencers on food-related purchasing decisions among young people.

In a meta-study conducted by Moorhead et al. (2013) on the uses, benefits, and limitations of using social media to communicate health-related information, one of its main limitations was the uncertainty about the quality of information and the difficulties in distinguishing rigorous information from unreliable sources. Lofft (2020) also reflects this in an article analyzing how influencers transmit inadequate information about nutrition and why they are believed. In this text, she warns that although users have the option to consult professional dietitians, they continue to trust and consume nutrition content created by individuals without specific training in this field but with many followers. Among the proposed ideas to reverse this trend, she includes resorting to narrative formulas to communicate scientific and rigorous information to non-experts and thus achieve better understanding, interest, and engagement through storytelling techniques.

This combination of rigor and adaptation to the communication style of social media is key to providing arguments that debunk myths, as demonstrated in the meta-study by Chan et al. (2017). This importance extends to the field of nutrition, where nutrition and dietetics professionals are the ideal profile to carry out such endeavors.

The interest in understanding how social media influences food and the role of influencers in this context has led to collaborative research involving experts in medicine, nutrition, and communication. One such study is conducted by Barklamb et al. (2020). In this research, they analyze the engagement of the most prominent messages on Facebook and Instagram from accounts and individuals related to four fields: food industry brands, health-related organizations, lifestyle influencers, and nutrition professionals. Unlike other similar studies (Klassen et al., 2018), this one does take into account the presence and analysis of nutrition professionals on social media.

Another relevant work is carried out by Zielińska-Tomczak et al. (2021), in which they aim to assess the impact of nutritional education on Polish citizens through information provided on Instagram by ten dietitians. In Australia, Karathra et al. (2021) conduct a quantitative study of 39 influencers who write about health and nutrition, categorizing them into individuals with a dietitian degree and those without one. It is the latter group that has a higher number of followers on all analyzed platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest). Although all differences are statistically significant, the gap is narrower on Instagram. They also register the type of content offered, and among the most relevant data, it is observed that 40% of non-dietitian influencers promote food products, while this percentage decreases to 7% for accredited dietitians. Continuing with Instagram, Black et al. (2019) warn of the risk of exposure to misinformation faced by followers of non-health professionals when these individuals discuss nutrition.

The risk of misinformation regarding nutrition messages on Instagram focused on the Realfooder movement led by Carlos Ríos is also highlighted in the research conducted by Gil-Quintana et al. (2021). As stated in their conclusions, Instagram exposes its users to content related to healthy habits from various perspectives, based on unverified and unfounded information. Through their social media presence, influencers not only communicate information but also thoughts, ideas, and emotions that influence the younger generations. The authors point out that obesity, eating disorders, and unhealthy habits are some of the new challenges that health education must face.

Among the strategies proposed to strengthen the role of dietitians and nutritionists on social media in the face of unqualified profiles, which are sometimes referred to as 'quacks' (Iheme, 2019), the following are emphasized: using evidence-based options to guide the public, supporting, recognizing, and officially regulating the activities of registered dietitians/nutritionists on social media, identifying the needs of active users on social media, providing training in social media marketing, and achieving engagement with influencers and personalities present on social media.

1.2. How nutrition and food are reflected on social media

In messages about food and nutrition on social media, what is being said is important. Recent research indicates that the content about food provided by search engines within social media platforms, such as Instagram, is of extremely low quality (Kabata et al., 2022). And who is delivering the message is also relevant. As studies like Schouten et al. (2020) point out, the influencing power of social media influencers is greater than that of conventional celebrities.

In addition to what is being said and who is saying it, how it is delivered is also crucial. Studies like the one conducted in Australia (Barklamb et al., 2020) show that the proper use of tools offered by each social media platform enhances message engagement. For instance, on Facebook, using tags and calls to action are linked to increased engagement, while on Instagram, the inclusion of links and strategies requiring user interaction and humor are associated with higher engagement. These characteristics are also consistent with those found in other studies on influencers and nutrition communicators (Marauri-Castillo et al., 2021b; Marín et al., 2021; Inan-Eroglu and Buyuktuncer, 2018). On the other hand, strategies with lower performance include reused content, emotionless and non-playful messages, and messages with a negative tone. This analysis emphasizes the need for health promoters to adapt their messages to different social media platforms and to use techniques that foster higher engagement to establish better connections with their potential audiences.

As highlighted by Rogers et al. (2022) in their review of research on how influencers talk about nutrition and food on social media, it is of great interest to identify their strategies, approaches, themes, and ways of communicating. This information can be applied by institutions and governments that aim to influence and improve dietary habits and nutritional education among the public. The authors emphasize that this subject is increasingly attracting the interest of citizens, including on the internet and social media.

Five main themes mark the communication efforts of these food influencers: promoting a change in diet, seeking a unique style and way of conveying information, emphasizing attractive traits and characteristics to appeal to their followers, employing a language that includes elements such as humor, motivation, heroism, and accusation, and finally, establishing personal connections with their followers and building a community.

Similar to influencers in other fields, food influencers look for precise messaging and communication techniques to attract potential followers. In light of their analysis, the authors provide a guide of tools for individuals or institutions seeking to imitate the communication style of these influencers. This guide includes promoting clear and simple messages related to diet or food, using references and scientific research from others and their credentials to establish credibility, applying a unique style in content, using a spokesperson who can attract and resonate with followers, employing persuasive language techniques with an appropriate tone, and finally, creating a sense of community with bidirectional communication.

The level of knowledge demonstrated and possessed by individuals who disseminate information on the internet is an element of authority that conveys trust and credibility to their readers. Sbaffi and Rowley (2017) emphasize this in their systematic review of the literature on health websites.

However, knowledge alone is not enough. In the case of nutrition professionals, it is necessary to convey a message of heroism, of success, on social media to gain authenticity and generate greater trust (Jenkins et al., 2020). Trust and competence of individuals talking about health and nutrition are key aspects valued by users, even though appearance and attractiveness are often given more priority (Kirvesmäki, 2021).

As highlighted by Klassen et al. (2018) in their analysis of social media strategies of the food industry related to lifestyle and health promotion, it is relevant and useful to transmit positive messages and adapt them to the characteristics of each social media platform.

It is also important to know the profile of those who consume this kind of content. As noted by Gil-Quintana et al. (2021) in their analysis of the Realfooder community in the Spanish language on Instagram, these influencers' main followers are women aged 18-24 to 35-44 years. The percentage of male followers is less than 20%. Among these female followers, there is a predominant interest in issues related to personal care and leisure. The dominance of women and the millennial generation is also evident in other studies conducted in countries like the United States of America (Tricas-Vidal et al., 2022).

In the same study, it is highlighted that the larger the number of followers an influencer has, the lower the interaction rate. Among the possible reasons, citing Karouw et al. (2019), is the perception that the more economic benefit an influencer gains, the lower their credibility. However, they found that in the case of Realfooders, credibility increases as their number of interactions and followers grows. This rise of interactions and followers is associated with the publication of highly motivational and persuasive messages achieved through advertising marketing techniques that generate excitement and interest among consumers.

The authors advocate for improving consumer education and regulating the information published on social media to help distinguish content from knowledgeable food experts from content generated by individuals without such expertise.

2. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this research is to identify the role played by social media in the work of the most prominent Spanish-speaking nutritionists on the internet. Additionally, the study aims to determine the level of relevance of each social media platform and the importance of their presence on these platforms in creating their personal brand and online reputation. Lastly, the research aims to gather their

testimonies regarding practices that generate controversy, such as sponsored content and the inclusion of personal matters.

The achievement of this objective will serve to verify the validity of the following hypotheses:

H1. Social media platforms play a significant role in the personal branding and online reputation of nutrition and food communicators.

H2. Nutrition and food communicators consider themselves influencers.

H3. Instagram is the preferred social media platform among nutrition and food communicators.

H4. Nutrition and food communicators reject the use of personal matters in their content.

H5. Nutrition and food specialists view sponsored content as a legitimate formula.

3. METHODOLOGY

In an area like social media, where quantitative aspects set the trend, such as the number of likes, views, comments, or followers, there is also an increasing number of studies that value a more qualitative approach (Cornelio and Roig, 2020; Díaz-Campo et al., 2021; Hall, 2018; San Cornelio et al., 2021b; Trieu et al., 2019). The present study falls within this framework, based on research through in-depth interviews with seven nutritionists actively present on social media. Similar to studies focusing on the field of journalism (Marauri-Castillo et al., 2018), a qualitative methodology was followed to interpret and understand the reality of nutritionists' use of social media through their impressions and reflections, that is, from their subjective perspective (Taylor and Bogdan, 1992; Banister et al., 2004).

To select interviewees, profiles that met the following criteria were sought: a) active presence on social media, b) active presence in media outlets, either as information sources or contributors and c) qualifications as registered dietitians-nutritionists. Since there was no specific list or classification available, a previous study's sample was used as a starting point (Marín-Murillo et al., 2021). Additionally, the number of followers (Table 1) on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, three of the most relevant social media platforms in Spain according to the IAB social media study (2022), was considered. Reciprocal followings between communicators were also taken into account, and an effort was made to ensure a gender balance among the participating profiles.

The selected individuals are Aitor Sánchez (also known by the name of his blog 'Mi dieta cojea'), Lucía Martínez (also known by the name of her blog 'Dime qué comes'), Julio Basulto, Gabriela Uriarte, Juan Revenga, Virginia Gómez (identified on social media as 'Dietista enfurecida'), and Miguel Ángel Lurueña (also known by the name of his blog 'Gominolas de petróleo').

Table 1

List of selected nutritionists and the number of followers on social media.

	Web	Instagram	Twitter	Facebook
Julio Basulto	juliobasulto.com	188.000	98.800	130.000
Gabriela Uriarte	gabrielauriarte.com	292.000	0	0
Aitor Sánchez	midietacojea.com	306.000	93.000	118.000
Lucía Martínez	dimequecomes.com	136.000	33.*300***	71.000
Juan Revenga	juanrevenga.com	32.000	62.100	21.000
Virginia Gómez	dietistaenfurecida.com	68.000	30.000	30.000
Miguel Ángel Lurueña	gominolasdepetroleo.com	86.000	73.700	42.000

**Data collected in May 2023*
***Number of followers before canceling their account*

Source: Author's own work.

A semi-structured questionnaire has been designed, focusing on 24 questions, with an order of open-ended questions based on the research objectives and hypotheses. Each interviewee has been asked the same questions to ensure the consistency of the research results and make them comparable (Taylor and Bogdan, 1992, p. 101). This questionnaire has been included as an annex at the end of the text.

Six out of the seven interviews were conducted through video call services, with an average duration of 45 minutes. Due to scheduling constraints with one of the interviewees, the questionnaire was completed through email correspondence.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Personal brand and reputation

All the interviewees defend the relevance of personal branding on the internet in general and on social media in particular. Illustrative are the responses provided by Juan Revenga, Gabriela Uriarte, and Aitor Sánchez.

Revenga points out that he discovered the importance of social media when it was emphasized to him by a media outlet.

> "I discovered their importance or how crucial they are over time. I fully engaged with social media in 2012, and in fact, I was pushed into it because I wasn't aware of the significance of personal branding or online reputation. It was that year, 2012, when I started working on a blog for 20 minutes, and they told me, 'When you publish, share a reference on Facebook and Twitter.' Facebook and Twitter were the main platforms back then, but I didn't have an account on either. I had to do it, initially reluctantly, but then I realized that social media is essential for visibility and reputation."

Uriarte describes the use of social media as "the great boost" or "the big push."

> "I don't think I'm an extraordinary dietitian-nutritionist; I can be better or worse, but I believe that ultimately, presenting yourself on a social media profile can make people trust you, and what used to be word-of-mouth in Donosti (referring to San Sebastián, a city in Spain) now multiplies exponentially."

Aitor Sánchez emphasizes that social media has allowed those professionals with better communication skills to stand out.

> "Before, my perception was that mainly questions were directed to people who were renowned professionals (before 2005-2010). Now (…) society doesn't value professional trajectory as much; it probably values communication skills more."

Words that frequently appear when asked about the tools to enhance personal branding and online reputation are "coherence" and "authenticity." This is highlighted by Lucía Martínez:

> "That there is coherence in what you publish and show on the internet, and that this coherence is maintained over the years. This doesn't mean always saying the same thing; opinions can change, either due to new evidence or because you've learned more, and that also still means maintaining coherence. I also believe that it is essential to have some interaction; it's not enough to just express your opinions and set them in stone without any feedback. There should be some conversation, as that's what social media is for. I would also say not to lose sight of the economic aspect. Let me explain: when people reach a certain level of popularity, they start receiving economic sponsorship proposals and collaborations. It's crucial to have a clear head and know which opportunities align with your profile and which ones don't. Making a mistake there could seriously harm your personal brand and reputation on the internet."

Julio Basulto explains it like this:

> "I believe that a good personal brand and a good online reputation rely on building our online presence by providing useful and unbiased information, based on the precautionary principle. Additionally, it's essential to add generosity, empathy, leading by example, knowing how to apologize when we make mistakes, avoiding psychopaths, sadists, or Machiavellian individuals, and above all, being true to oneself."

Gabriela Uriarte highlights the importance of naturalness.

> "It's paradoxical, but the more you strive to get followers, feedback, and likes, I believe that can be off-putting. Even though Instagram has changed a lot, I think the audience rewards naturalness. That's when true engagement is created. The key, for me, would be to work on social media as if my goal was not the number of likes or having more followers. In other words, working on it naturally and in a close and authentic way."

4.2. From the blog to Instagram

Six out of the seven communicators observe the loss of relevance of the blog as a communication tool and for building personal branding. Younger profiles like Virginia Gómez and Gabriela Uriarte do not have a blog. Lucía Martínez provides a detailed explanation for this phenomenon.

> "(...) The nutrition blogs that exist nowadays are mostly run by people who started a long time ago. In my case, for example, I started ten years ago (May 2010). At that time, dissemination mainly occurred through blogs, and conversations were happening in the comments below each post. Gradually, those conversations shifted to social media. With the rise of social media, and especially with the tremendous growth of Instagram in recent times, you'll be told that what matters is having an Instagram account, not Facebook or Twitter, but Instagram. As a result, people who have joined in with the rise of social media don't have blogs or websites; they rely solely on social media, YouTube... People no longer want to read blog posts. As soon as they see more than five lines in a row, they get overwhelmed. You can convey the same information in a YouTube video, and it will have much more impact."

His colleague Aitor Sánchez explains, through his evolution, the shift in the importance from blogs to social media.

> "In the early years, from 2010 to 2014, we could say that the presence of the blog was unquestionable. Blogs were of great importance and partly filled the gaps in points of debate and interaction within the profession. Blogs hosted real debates, almost like conference communications. The comments made real contributions, but that has changed a lot. From 2014 onwards, social media took the spotlight. (…) We are dealing with formats that heavily influence you, and you can't have those robust debates anymore (…). The immediacy of social media doesn't allow for that, the format doesn't allow for that. From 2014 to 2017, Facebook and Twitter stood out, and from 2017 until now, Instagram and YouTube have gained much more importance. I have always tried to adapt to them when I realized that people were there. Those of us who engage in dissemination have to be where the people are."

4.3. Same message for different social media platforms

That work is reflected in the fact that all seven interviewees maintain two or more social media platforms. The strategies for their maintenance are based on adapting, to different degrees, the same message for different networks. Aitor Sánchez explains it as follows:

> "I plan my content calendar and use the same content, but I adapt it to different social media platforms. It is true, for example, that I use the same copy on Instagram and Facebook. Sometimes, I also include it as a video description on Youtube. These can coincide. However, if you try to post the same content on

> Twitter and Instagram, it won't work because they are networks with very different idiosyncrasies and you have to handle them differently. You need to make small adaptations for each platform, but I try to post them simultaneously on the same day. For example, on Facebook, you can afford to have a longer text, but you have to make sure that the first lines, the ones that appear before "read more," are particularly eye-catching. On Instagram, if you share something and don't have a particularly striking photo, people might not even stop to read it. And on Twitter, you have to make sure that the first tweet, even if it's part of a thread or includes a good link, stands on its own as a complete unit of content. The real daily adaptation to a social media platform depends not so much on the age or profile of my followers, but on the possibilities that particular platform offers."

The differentiation of social media platforms also emerges in the responses of Lucía Martínez, Juan Revenga, and Miguel Ángel Lurueña. All three agree that the content intended for Instagram is characterized by simplicity and an informal tone, while on Twitter, the content is deeper and more nuanced.

> Lucía Martínez: "In general, I try to make the content on Instagram very simple, very visual, not requiring a great effort from the person. On the other hand, on Twitter, I share more profound and nuanced things, and discussions can get heated, but at least you get a response, which you wouldn't get on Instagram. Facebook, at the moment, is a free-for-all."

> Juan Revenga: "On Instagram, I present myself in a way that is more in line with the Instagram audience, more 'happy flower,' so to speak, and on Twitter, I adopt a more sarcastic tone. I adapt my stance or image, but not my personality."

> Miguel Ángel Lurueña: "What I do is share the information on all three platforms. I have a space called 'Gominolas de peseta,' where I post small informative tidbits on all three social media platforms. Each platform has its characteristics, and you know that there are things that are not well-received on some platforms or are easier to misinterpret. For example, on Facebook, it's easier to misinterpret information. On Twitter, at least the ones who follow me, have a more scientific, more tech-savvy profile, and I can share more complex information with them. On Instagram, there is more demand for personal information due to the nature of the social media platform."

4.4. Instagram, the most important platform, and Twitter, the favorite one

The seven profiles consulted share the view that Instagram has become the most important social media platform for their work. The reasons are summarized by Lucía Martínez as follows:

> "There are many factors why people prefer to share information on Instagram. Firstly, it is relatively easy to gain followers on Instagram. Secondly, in Instagram stories, I can easily share my thoughts without being challenged or corrected publicly on the platform, creating a safer environment for expressing

> opinions. Thirdly, with simple content that requires little elaboration or in-depth knowledge, such as comparing two yogurts and stating that one is good and the other is bad due to its sugar content, you can achieve a high level of visibility and engagement. This makes Instagram very attractive to many people. Moreover, it is the most monetized platform. If I want to monetize my content, brands are more likely to pay for content on Instagram. About 90% of the monetization opportunities come from Instagram, while Twitter may account for only around 10%, and that's quite rare. So, the combination of less exposure to public criticism, easier ways to gain followers with basic content, and higher income potential makes Instagram the preferred platform."

Even though Instagram is considered the most important platform, it doesn't necessarily mean it's their favorite. Four out of the seven interviewees claim that their preferred and most valued platform is Twitter. Aitor Sánchez provides the following reasons for his preference:

> "I really like Twitter, and it's different from the platform where I have the most followers. In proportion, I have fewer followers on Twitter than on Instagram. Twitter is more challenging to gain followers, to build a community. That's why even though I may have four times more followers on Instagram than on Twitter, I believe Twitter followers hold more value because it's harder to grow there. On Instagram, you can find people with 100,000 or 200,000 followers, which would be considered influential, but on Twitter, having over 50,000 followers in Spain means you're very influential. I prefer Twitter; it has provided me with more and where I keep learning the most. It allows for greater interaction and more professional input compared to Instagram. Although some people are creating interesting content on Instagram, it still lacks the ease of linking external content. In Instagram, the photo has to be the complete content unit, which makes it difficult. On Twitter, you can easily include links. Right now, Twitter remains more useful professionally than Instagram, except if you're aiming to build a large community for monetization, which some influencers are doing now.

The absence of real interactivity is a recurring reason why some interviewees don't consider Instagram their preferred platform. Lucía Martínez explains:

> "I don't like Instagram because having conversations there is very challenging. Comments are placed under posts, but they aren't arranged in a way that makes it agile or comfortable to follow conversations. Moreover, the typical Instagram user is more interested in lifestyle, fashion, etc., and less interested in science. Science discussions happen more on Twitter. In Instagram, you have to present content that is visually appealing and easily digestible, avoiding going into too much detail. Also, there's a lot of advertising on Instagram, which discourages me from spending my free time browsing the platform. I rarely find valuable content. This is different on Twitter, where I read my timeline and follow links to recommended articles or discussions that interest me. Overall, Twitter's

> content is much more attractive and has less advertising, which is also appreciated."

However, Lucía Martínez herself admits: "Right now, if you don't have Instagram, you're nobody in the world."

4.5. Personal issues and professional matters

One of the elements used to attract followers and attention on social media is the combination of professional and personal issues in their posts, a tactic that is not without controversy and has both supporters and critics. The same happens with nutrition influencers. Julio Basulto and Aitor Sánchez do use this approach. This is Sánchez's opinion:

> "It helps generate more empathy, a sense of community. It may make people see you as more authentic, and I believe that's the key. I don't do it in the sense of 'I'm going to post a photo helping my grandmother so that people see and say, Aitor is so good with elderly people.' I don't approach it from that perspective. When I share personal content, I also do it from a dissemination point of view because it fits within one of my goals, which is to create a healthier society. If I post about my leisure activities, like a photo from a hiking trip, it's to show that hiking is an option for spending a Sunday. Or when I travel and experience other cultures, I find it interesting and share it. I include about 15-20% of personal content in my posts because my objective is to spark curiosity, and it aligns with my professional goals."

Juan Revenga believes that if personal and professional aspects are mixed, "they have to be closely linked." Like Virginia Gómez, Miguel Ángel Lurueña states that he is "not very inclined to write private things," although he admits that dedicating space to personal aspects "is becoming more popular."

Both Lucía Martínez and Gabriela Uriarte also acknowledge this, but they both flatly refuse to share personal issues on their social media. This is how Martínez defends her stance:

> "I don't usually share personal details. I've been on social media for ten years, and people know practically nothing about me. I think it's a matter of personal character; some people feel comfortable doing it, and others don't. I couldn't tell people about my day-to-day life outside of my professional sphere, what clothes I wear, or what I have for breakfast. It just doesn't feel right for me. One thing is certain and we all know it very well: if you share your personal life, you'll get more followers. That's just how it is. Why? Because people are curious. They are very interested in whether you're tired, what you eat, and so on. If you share personal content, you'll have a larger audience. Top accounts often share personal content. On the other hand, in my opinion, a few years ago, the role of an influencer and a science communicator was more distinct. A science communicator was someone who shared their knowledge and created informative or educational content based on what they knew. An influencer, on

> the other hand, shared their life, clothes, and food, but didn't provide valuable content. The influencer was about visibility, while the science communicator offered technical analysis. However, in recent times, these two profiles have started to merge from the perspective of science communicators. This means that there are not just influencers becoming science communicators, but many science communicators have started to have an influencer side as well. They provide technical, informative, and educational content, but at the same time, they share their personal lives and work with brands (previously, science communicators focused on technical analysis, while influencers focused on promoting a product or service). These aspects are starting to intertwine, and they will continue to grow because, as I mentioned before, it gives very good results in terms of metrics. I know that if I post about having dinner with my partner, it gets a lot of attention... and it's not adding anything, not sharing anything valuable, not teaching something... Yet, people love it. That's why more and more science communicators are incorporating parts of their personal lives into their professional communication."

This view aligns with the perspective shared by Uriarte

> "My goal on social media is not to become famous myself but to earn people's trust as a professional. I believe that focusing on other things can divert attention, even though it might be very tempting because deep down, I can see that's what interests people. I notice it when I'm talking about the story of vitamin B12, and they ask me about the lipstick I'm wearing or where my sweater is from... Once again, if I were to grab this opportunity and become a fashion influencer... It's sad, but ever since I appeared on the program *Abocados* [a TV program about food in the Basque public television], you look at the most relevant searches about Gabriela Uriarte, and they are about my age, partner, pregnancy, and then nutrition... What people are most interested in is knowing my age."

4.6. Divulgator vs. Influencer

When asked if they consider themselves influencers, six out of the seven interviewees - everyone except Julio Basulto - resist being labeled as such. They understand that it is a concept associated with other types of profiles on social media and believe they have nothing in common with them. Aitor Sánchez sums it up:

> "I specifically do not consider myself an influencer if you take into account the definition of this figure. However, I do believe that there are people who have influence. To me, the term influencer seems 'defining', meaning you are an influencer because you are not something else. Or because you also make an impact in a certain way. Influencers mix personal and professional matters, and when they recommend something, they do it from the perspective of usage or consumption, not from a technical standpoint, which is not the case with us. I don't talk about a product just because I'm enjoying it on a terrace. I talk about a product based on technical analysis. I consider myself a disseminator.

> Sometimes I've received a contract that says: 'On one hand, the company... and on the other hand, the influencer Aitor Sánchez...'. And I said: 'I won't sign the contract like this, please remove that word because I am not one'. I don't consider myself an influencer; I consider myself, and the people you've called, individuals with influence."

4.7. Sponsored content

One of the criteria that identifies influencers is the publication of sponsored content, which means content for which a company or institution pays a certain amount to these individuals. When questioned about their stance on this practice, all seven of them affirm that it is acceptable as long as it is done openly, with a declaration of any potential conflict of interest, and agreements are established with companies whose products or services are consistent with the content the disseminator publishes. Juan Revenga describes it this way:

> "I was discussing this a few days ago with a representative from the olive oil sector. I said that I 'sell' myself, but only when there is a coherent argument in line with my discourse and professional ethics. As long as the company embraces these two principles, I am open to it without any problems. (...) On my website, under the "Companies" section, you can see the logos of the companies I have collaborated with and received money from. Anyone who reads it can see whether there is a conflict of interest or not."

Lucía Martínez establishes three premises: clearly identified advertising, a published advertising policy on social media and the blog, and content that is not influenced by payment. She emphasizes that all three must be met for her to consider it acceptable.

> "A communicator or a nutritionist, when doing advertising, has a double responsibility because they are endorsing it as a professional. A fashion influencer, when talking, for example, about how well a lipstick looks on them, endorses it with their opinion and the subjective idea that it suits them well. However, for a nutritionist or a health professional, their power of prescription is greater because their credibility is higher. That's why we should never pervert this fact to do advertising that is not aligned with good professional practice."

Therefore, she criticizes practices that, in her opinion, are unethical.

> "Recently, well-known health communicators did covert advertising for Sanitas [a Spanish private healthcare company], without disclosing it or anything. In the case of nutritionists, many are making paid posts without declaring it. And how do I know that what they are doing is undisclosed paid advertising? Because they have approached me too. And I have rejected it. (...) This is happening with Realfood too, where products are sometimes included that don't have much to do with Realfood principles. There is a clear commercial interest. It is very tempting not to comply. At those levels, they pay quite well. It's very tempting. You have to be very clear about things and not depend financially on this source of income to be as ethical as I am. If I had to make a living from it, I would have

> to swallow it. Obviously, my credibility wouldn't be the same. If my credibility is high, it's partly because I have maintained consistency over these years. And a brand knows that if I recommend their product, my prescribing power is very high."

Even with the compliance of the characteristics detailed by the interviewees, sponsored content generates misgivings among a part of the follower community, as explained by Aitor Sánchez.

> "Publishing sponsored content in a clear, clean, and ethical way does not diminish your credibility for 90% of the people. Then there will be 10-15% of the people who want you to be an immaculate being without any contradictions in your life, like Mahatma Gandhi. There will always be a hurdle, but if it is done well, it will not diminish credibility; in fact, it can even enhance it."

Julio Basulto also believes that the ethical way of including advertising in social media content is not common.

> "It seems fine to me if it comes from companies whose products or services do not harm public health and as long as that conflict of interest is declared. However, in most cases, that is not the situation, and it creates confusion and, consequently, harms the health of the population."

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The use of social media as a communication channel and as a source of information about food and nutrition is growing, especially among younger profiles and women (Gil-Quintana et al., 2021; Tricas-Vidal et al., 2022), who are its main users (Comscore, 2018). This increased usage brings about greater interest and concern about what is being shared about food, how it is presented, and who is sharing it (Rogers et al., 2022). In the context of poor-quality nutrition content on social media (Byrne et al., 2017; Kabata et al., 2022) and the special power of influencers, surpassing even that of conventional celebrities, to influence behavior (Schouten et al., 2020), the educational role of nutrition professionals on social media becomes particularly relevant. This is especially true when considering the proven ability of peers and influencers to influence food-related purchasing decisions among young people (Almousa et al., 2020). However, this importance is not adequately reflected in research on their work, which, with some exceptions (Argiñano and Goikoetxea-Bilbao, 2021; Argiñaño-Herrarte et al., 2023; Iheme, 2019; Inan-Eroglu and Buyuktuncer, 2018; Marauri-Castillo et al., 2021a; Marauri-Castillo et al., 2021b; Marín et al., 2021; Romero-Cantero et al., 2022), can be described as scarce.

The boundaries between individuals categorized as influencers and those who are nutrition and dietetics professionals blur in the literature review on food, communication, and social media. The results of the qualitative research are revealing in this regard, as six out of the seven analyzed profiles resist being labeled as influencers. Their justification is centered around not wanting to be associated with individuals who define themselves solely by their influence on social media and are

linked to the promotion of goods and services. In response to this reality, alternative terms such as "educator" or "person with the ability to influence" emerge. Thus, the second hypothesis on which the research was based is refuted.

Despite their reluctance to be identified as influencers, there is a consensus among the interviewed nutritionists about the importance of their work on social media in creating, reinforcing, and expanding their brand and reputation. This effect is not limited to communication-related fields such as journalism (Hanusch and Bruns, 2017; López-Meri and Casero-Ripollés, 2017; Marauri-Castillo et al., 2018; Molyneux and Holton, 2015). This consensus confirms the first hypothesis on which the research is based.

For the preservation and reinforcement of their brand on social media, the analyzed nutritionists highlight, beyond analyzing metrics and technical aspects, the importance of coherence and authenticity. This impression conveyed by seven of the leading nutrition educators in Spain coincides with the findings of previous research (Jenkins et al., 2020; Kirvesmäki, 2021; Sbaffi and Rowley, 2017).

One aspect that can hinder the transmission of authenticity through social media is the publication of sponsored content, where companies or institutions pay the person who posts them to be associated with their products or services. The seven disseminators state that this practice is acceptable as long as it is done openly, any potential conflict of interest is disclosed, and agreements are established with companies whose products or services are consistent with the content being published, without the companies conditioning the message. This confirms the hypothesis put forward. However, three of the seven interviewed nutritionists warn that in profiles related to health and nutrition, these premises are not always met, and they have witnessed malpractice cases.

The responses of the leading Spanish nutritionists on social media also bear similarities to the results reported in the scientific literature when they emphasize the need to adapt the message to the specificities of each social network (Barklamb et al., 2020; Klassen et al., 2018). In most of their answers, they indicate that the strategy is based on delivering the same message but with different ways of conveying it depending on the chosen social media platform. Generally, content intended for Instagram is associated with simplicity and an informal tone, while content on Twitter is deeper and more nuanced.

The seven profiles consulted share the view that Instagram has become the most important social media platform for their work. In fact, in six out of the seven cases, Instagram is the platform where the interviewed profiles have the largest number of followers. The prominence of Instagram is also reflected in studies conducted on food, nutrition professionals, and social media, where Instagram is the primary reference (Black et al., 2019; Gil-Quintana et al., 2021; Karathra et al., 2021; Zielinska-Tomczak et al., 2021).

However, the fact that Instagram is the most important platform does not necessarily mean it is the preferred one for these profiles to transmit information about food and nutrition. Despite having a larger number of followers on Instagram, most of the nutritionists interviewed lament the superficiality and lack of real interaction that this social media platform offers, which refutes the hypothesis with which the research began. They contrast it with the richness of debates and content, in their opinion, found on Twitter.

Instagram is also the platform where personal content appears most frequently, combined with educational or professional content. Two of the seven nutritionists interviewed include this type of content. As observed in the results, although the other five prefer not to do it, they acknowledge that it is one of the factors that can help increase the number of followers and improve engagement on the account, leading to the creation of a community. This finding confirms the results obtained in other research studies (Rogers et al., 2022).

This research, which provides the qualitative perspective of individuals who have become references in the field of nutrition communication in the Spanish language, complements the findings of content analyses of these and other professionals (Marín et al., 2021). Its qualitative nature limits the scope of its results, but considering the limited work done on this topic so far and the growing social interest in food and nutrition, it represents an interesting line of work and research. This could lead to addressing new questions related to the aforementioned social media platforms and other emerging ones, such as TikTok, where the presence of such profiles is still limited.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire used in the in-depth interviews conducted with the selected nutritionists.

1. Do you believe that personal branding and a good online reputation have been key in your professional role as a nutritionist/nutrition educator? How have you achieved this?

2. What are the essential tools for defining and nurturing personal branding and reputation on the internet? Have you applied them in your case?

3. Has the rise of social media and its consumption made blogs unnecessary as a tool for personal branding? Has it become a secondary tool?

4. Which social media platforms do you use, and how do you use them?

5. Do you manage your social media presence alone, or do you seek help for maintenance and management?

6. Do you try to use synergies in maintaining different social media platforms, or do you individualize your management and content publishing on each of them?

7. Do you establish any kind of specialization on each social media platform? Why and what does it consist of?

8. Do you consider that each social media platform you are present on targets a different audience? What would that audience be in each case?

9. Do you relate the content of different social media platforms? How?

10. Which social media platform is the most important to you, and why?

11. Do you believe that some social media platforms, due to their specific characteristics, are better suited for transmitting nutrition-related information than others?

12. How much time do you dedicate per day to managing your social media, and how often?

13. Regarding personal branding and online reputation, how important do you consider search engine optimization, especially on Google? Do you dedicate time to this aspect, and what guidelines do you follow?

14. What influence have social media had on your professional career? What job opportunities have you been able to access thanks to them?

15. Do you believe that personal branding is conditioned by the number of followers you have?

16. Does it matter how many followers you have, or does it matter more who those followers are?

17. How relevant is web analytics in your use of social media?

18. Do their results influence the work you do, and in what way?

19. Do you think your example of using social media applies to nutrition professionals seeking to enter the job market?

20. Do you believe that using social media and blogs professionally has become the best way for nutrition professionals to present themselves, replacing the traditional CV when applying for a position?

21. To what extent is it important not to mix personal and professional matters on the same account, blog, or profile?

22. Do you believe there is a cause-effect relationship between your work on the internet and social media and your appearance in the media?

23. Do you consider yourself an influencer? Why?

24. What is your opinion on sponsored content, native advertising, or branded content related to nutrition and, in this case, also related to the food industry, which appears in the media and on some nutritionists' accounts?

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