



# Political Influencers on Instagram: The New Digital Agents of Political Engagement in Spain<sup>1</sup>

## *Influencers Polítics en Instagram: Los nuevos agentes digitales de la participación política en España*

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### Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study is to determine whether the phenomenon of influencers has led to a shift towards the spectacularisation of politics on Instagram and its reach among young people. Sixty key political influencers in Spain were identified through social listening, influencer analysis tools, expert consultations and social media searches. A detailed profile analysis focusing on performance metrics and audience demographics was conducted and triangulated with content analysis of 600 posts. The results show that these political influencers have a combined total of 6,287,149 followers, primarily under the age of 35, and have high interaction rates (3.9%). These influencers are also young, with 68% under 35, predominantly male (65%), and well educated. Their content is mainly political information blended with entertainment, addressing current political issues through the reel format. This study represents the first mapping of Spanish political influencers and highlights their potential impact on young people and deliberative democracy on social networks.

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**Key Words:** influencers, political engagement, digital persuasion, youth activism, political communication.

## Resumen

El propósito de este estudio exploratorio es determinar si el fenómeno de los *influencers* ha provocado un cambio hacia la espectacularización de la política en Instagram y su alcance en los jóvenes. Utilizando social *listening*, herramientas de análisis de *influencers*, consultas a expertos y búsquedas en redes sociales, se identificaron 60 *influencers* políticos en España. Se extrajeron métricas demográficas y de rendimiento y se triangularon con un análisis de contenido de 600 publicaciones. Los resultados muestran que estos *influencers* políticos acumulan 6,287,149 seguidores —principalmente menores de 35 años— y registran una alta interacción (3,9 %). Estos *influencers* son mayoritariamente jóvenes (68 %), hombres (65 %) y formados. Su contenido combina información política con entretenimiento abordando temas de actualidad a través del formato *reel*. Este estudio supone el primer mapeo de *influencers* políticos españoles, y pone de manifiesto su potencial capacidad de impacto en los jóvenes y la democracia deliberativa en redes.

Palabras clave: *influencers*, participación política, persuasión digital, activismo juvenil, comunicación política.

## INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers (SMIs) have undoubtedly managed to capture the collective imagination in the online sphere. They are professional content creators who have successfully reached large numbers of young followers and obtain high levels of engagement, forging real communities and becoming advocates in one or more thematic areas. In Spain, 69% of Gen Zers (18-25 year-old) users follow influencer profiles, 96% of the time on Instagram (IAB, 2022a). Moreover, the association between active influencers on Instagram and the Spanish population is one of the highest in Europe, with a rate of 3.33%, significantly surpassing other countries where the rate falls below 1% (IAB, 2022b).

Some authors (Bause, 2021; Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Soares et al., 2018) consider influencers as digital opinion leaders simply based on the accumulation of followers, which highlights the significance of this indicator in terms of persuasion. In fact, the most common classification of influencers is based on groups determined by follower numbers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). One of the most recent studies in the field of influencers finds that followers can have a pivotal influence on attitude change (Zhou et al., 2023). The authors propose the “mere number effect”, which examines the

relationship between the number of followers and the perceived power of influence of SMIs.

According to the latest data, 47% of Spanish users perceive influencers as credible (IAB, 2022a). Indeed, De Veirman (2016: 1) defines influencers as “people who built a large network of followers, and are regarded as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches”. However, while the number of followers remains a crucial metric for assessing SMIs, it is not the sole indicator for identifying a genuine influencer (Gräve, 2019). Vries (2019) found that both high and low likes-to-followers ratios negatively affect an influencer’s perceived credibility and effectiveness. The prevalence of purchasing fake followers is a well-known and unethical practice in digital environments (Akyon & Kalfaoglu, 2019), and consequently, engagement metrics have become crucial in evaluating the true persuasive power of these profiles.

Despite the extensive evidence from numerous studies demonstrating the persuasive power of SMIs, understanding of the theories behind influencers remains an area with significant room for further exploration (Casaló et al., 2020; Joshi et al., 2023).

The study of SMIs has primarily taken a marketing approach and analysed their influence on consumer decision making, encompassing topics such as fashion, foodie culture and gaming. However, a new type of influencer has emerged that could potentially become a determinant transformer of opinions, society and democracy, ultimately impacting political participation, especially among youth: the political influencer (Riedl et al., 2021; Carcavilla-Puey et al., 2024). This research aims to identify a new category of influencers that has not yet been extensively studied: specialised political influencers. These influencers mainly generate and share political infotainment content. By searching for influencers and analysing their profiles, content and followers, the definition and characteristics of these political content creators are established in the subsequent sections.

## **1. DIGITAL NATIVE INFOTAINMENT FIGURES FOR YOUTH: POLITICAL INFLUENCERS**

The earliest academic references to political infotainment, a genre that combines two seemingly opposing media functions of political information and entertainment, date back to the 1990s. In more recent years, this genre

has been referred to as “politainment” (Nieland, 2008; Sayre & King, 2010; Schultz, 2012).

Politainment content underwent a process of spectacularisation that followed a course set by four strategies (Gingr s, 1998): dramatisation (highlighting alarmism and conflict); fragmentation (focusing on isolated facts); normalisation (simplifying the proposed solutions to political problems); and personalisation (decontextualising by narrowing down the information to the bare specifics). In addition to these four parameters, other characteristics included humour, emotionality, the use of colloquial and euphemistic language (Berrocal et al., 2014), and the use of the technical resources of image, video and sound in the post-production phase (Lozano, 2004).

Social networks have participated in the success of politainment. According to the research carried out so far (especially in the sphere of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, and to a lesser extent, Instagram and TikTok), it has proved to be a very useful tool for generating content and high rates of interaction (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). While this may not have raised a real discussion of public interest (Alonso-Mu oz et al., 2016), the phenomenon itself has clearly benefited, to the extent that it has been dubbed online pop politics (Berrocal-Gonz lo et al., 2022).

Instagram plays a peculiar role in political discussion, primarily because it is essentially visual and emphasises lifestyle content, which fundamentally transforms the codes of communication. Unlike platforms like Twitter, which primarily rely on written discourse, Instagram allows politics to be materialised through captivating visuals, videos and curated content. This divergence is likely to grow, assuming that Instagram’s future trajectory involves an increased emphasis on video content (Mosseri, 2022), potentially in an attempt to compete with TikTok (Santos, 2022). The trend for video-based communication aligns with Wilson and Sherrell (1993), who suggest that face-to-face interaction and the use of visual media have greater persuasive impact. Moreover, Myers (1995) posits that information presented through audiovisual media tends to be more comprehensible.

Studies on politics and politainment on Instagram have taken one of the following three main directions. First is the analysis of the main political leaders, the shaping of their discourse (Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Casta o, 2017) and their image (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Marcos-Garc a & Alonso-Mu oz, 2017; Quevedo-Redondo & Portal s-Oliva, 2017; Tirado-Garc a & Dom nech-Fabregat, 2021), and the content issued by their political parties

during campaigns (Eldin, 2016; Filimonov et al., 2016; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017; Russmann & Svensson, 2017; López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021). Second, other authors have adopted a narrower focus by distinguishing influential profiles of leaders not identified as politicians (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Weeks et al., 2015) and their characteristics (Walter & Brüggemann, 2018; Winter & Neubaum, 2016), which materialises Katz et al.'s (2006) two-step flow theory, in which opinion leaders intermediate between the mass media and the general public. The third direction of study goes further (Caldeira, 2020; Kissas, 2022) by developing pioneering avenues including the generation of interactions on political content from influential profiles on various topics (Trevisan et al., 2019).

In the specific case of political influencers, Riedl et al. (2021: 5) point to the limited availability of systematic empirical evidence in the study of political influencers, which means that they are not conceptualised uniformly. These authors suggest ignoring merely influential accounts—such as those of politicians—and prioritising native content creators, who are more closely related to traditional social media influencers. When determining the nature of political influencers, Abidin (2015: 1) clarifies by providing a definition that underpins this study: “Influencers are every day, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media”. This premise is crucial when defining the focus on native SMIs’ political profiles and excluding the accounts of political leaders, political parties, journalists or show business celebrities who comment on current political events, but cannot be considered native SMIs since their fame derives from their offline and professional activity.

In general, previous investigations do not follow this approach, but rather focus on non-political profiles that generate political content or aspire to have some form of impact on politics, and bypass the phenomenon of these specialised influencers. A noteworthy illustration of this phenomenon is the German case of the music YouTuber Rezo (Allgaier, 2020), who took a stance against a political party during the 2019 European elections, and sparked a substantial debate over the political significance of influencers (Dambeck, 2019). Naderer (2023) uses this case to focus on non-political SMIs, defining the potential of influencers as political agents and their ability to reach uninterested users and motivate political action. Harff (2022) determines that lifestyle and entertainment influencers may raise interest in other topics based on similarity and parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Arnesson (2022: 1) proposes that “the political potential of influencers might

not always be as spokespersons for a cause or party, but rather as ideological intermediaries who promote a lifestyle to be inspired by, and aspire to". This statement encapsulates two of the main communication theories in influencer studies: parasocial relationships and the two-step flow of communication theory.

Our research aligns with the trajectory proposed by Muñoz (2021) and Palacios-López et al. (2023), both advancing the notion of the "influencer-activist" as a progression from cyberactivism. Also in the Spanish political arena, Carcavilla-Puey et al. (2024) have identified and studied five political influencers as a phenomenon in itself on YouTube, pointing out the radicalism in their storytelling and the polarisation derived from the creation of content. It is significant that the initial investigations into the political impact of influencers have mainly focused on social causes such as feminism (Navarro & Villegas-Simón, 2022) or sustainability and pro-environmental causes (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Riedl et al., 2021; Suuronen et al., 2022).

The significance of these political influencers has become evident due to their impact on modern democratic societies. Dekoninck and Schmuck (2022: 2) highlight "that following political influencers who post about elections or party politics increases online participation, which predicts higher offline participation over time", supporting the validation of the gateway hypothesis (Conroy et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2017). This paradigm shift holds particular importance for younger generations whose political opinions are still being shaped and who dedicate a considerable amount of their time to social media and influencers on these platforms.

Young people become even more significant if we consider that their political perceptions, behaviours and participation play a decisive role in shaping democratic societies (Mohamad et al., 2018; Oser et al., 2022; Skoric et al., 2016). Similarly, the work of Cheng et al. (2023) and Schmuck et al. (2022) prompt us to reflect on how influencers can shape the political opinions of their younger followers by impacting their intention to share political information on social media, and through their perceived simplification of politics and their cynicism.

In summary, scholars illustrate the increasingly significant role that SMIs play in the political domain. Political influencers have the ability to shape public opinion, advance specific political agendas, motivate political action, act as ideological intermediaries and generate social awareness, especially among youth. It is therefore essential to detect, identify, analyse and monitor these profiles, and ultimately establish them as a distinct category.

## 2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main question this exploratory-descriptive study asks is whether there has been a notable shift towards the spectacularisation of politics on Instagram driven by the influencer phenomenon. The study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between politics and social media, specifically on Instagram, and to uncover the emergence of political influencers as a novel and influential force within youth and the environment of a politicised society.

To shed light on this new figure, the following research goals (RG) are proposed:

RG1: to identify and categorise the most representative influencer profiles involved in politainment on Instagram in Spain. This will involve an in-depth search and examination of influencers who engage in the fusion of political and entertainment content, especially with young audiences.

RG2: to gain insights into the patterns of content creation these influencers adopt in order to understand the strategies, themes and formats political influencers use within the realm of pop politics on Instagram.

To do so, this exploratory-descriptive study followed a two-step process: a first phase to identify and select profiles; and a second phase to conduct account analysis and content analysis.

To identify relevant political influencer profiles, data was triangulated from various sources including social listening platforms, influencer analysis tools, platform searches, literature reviews, expert surveys and manual cross-network searches. Synthesio and Shinebuzz software tools were used for automated searches and quantification of influencer reach. Synthesio is social intelligence software that collects and analyses conversation on social networks to identify relevant profiles participating in it, as well as the most important flows and topics. Shinebuzz is an influencer profile analysis tool that gathers information from social networks by accessing influencers' performance metrics. Used together, these tools can measure the impact and popularity of the accounts and identify similar profiles. In addition to the automated and big data search techniques employed, the detection process also included qualitative scouting. Firstly, we identified prominent political Tweeters and YouTubers in Spain, drawing upon previous research (Muñoz, 2021). To ensure the inclusion of all relevant profiles and prevent obsolescence, we engaged the expertise of 34 advertising professionals from SamyRoad, an advertising agency specialising in influencer marketing. Once

these profiles had been identified on other social media, we searched for their Instagram handles, names and pseudonyms. To further refine the process and overcome limitations of automated searches, we manually examined the following of each profile in an attempt to identify potential political influencers.

This phase of identification took place between April 15 and August 10, 2022. Based on the aforementioned references, the criteria for the final selection were that the accounts analysed:

- have more than 10,000 followers; nano-influencers were excluded since RG1 aims to identify the most representative political influencers (Campbell & Farrel, 2020).
- register an engagement rate of at least 1% (Sehl & Tien, 2023).
- regularly generate publications and be an active social media creator.
- are owned by people whose influence derives from their creation of specialised political content, not from their role in professional politics or as political journalists.

For the purpose of analysing the Instagrammers' accounts and their content, we used a taxonomy specifically designed for this study (Figure 1) based on Castro-Higueras et al. (2021) and Gr ve (2019). In line with the platform's settings, it was divided into four categories made up of qualitative variables with dichotomous and polytomous response options, and discrete quantitative variables. The engagement rate was calculated using the formula accepted on Instagram (Sehl & Tien, 2023): result of the sum of likes, comments, shares and saves (total engagement), divided by the number of followers of the account multiplied by 100 (Figure 1). Data extraction for the variables took place between 11 August and 12 September 2022.

For the content analysis, we selected a representative sample of the publications that would be analysed. The population size, which considers the entirety of the contents the influencers published ( $N=60$ ), is 92,308 publications. The sampling unit was established by selecting the ten most recent fixed-format content posts at the date of extraction (September 27, 2022). In this way, a total of 600 posts constituted the content sampling unit ( $n=600$ ). The recording unit is the image or video of the content itself, as well as the text or caption accompanying the image.



**Figure 1**  
**Taxonomy and metrics of analysed profiles, contents and audience.**

Categories/Variables	Description/Operationalisation
<b>1. Account metrics and performance</b>	
Number of followers	Influencer's total amount of followers
Influencer Tier	Micro-influencers (10K-100K followers), macro-influencers (100K-1M followers), and mega-influencers (+1M followers) (Campbell & Farrell, 2020)
Account seniority	Time since the account creation
Number of posts	Total amount of posts published up to the extraction date
Likes	Average of likes of the 50 last posts
Comments	Average of comments of the 50 last posts
Shares	Average of shares of the 50 last posts
Saves	Average of saves of the 50 last posts
Total engagement	Average sum of likes, comments, shares and post saves
Audience localisation	Spanish audience amongst the influencer's total audience
Audience gender	Male / Female / NA/ NK
Audience ranges	13-17 / 18-24 / 25-35 / 35-44 / 45-54 / 55-64 / +64
Duplicate and overlap of followers	Percentage of shared followers with other influencers' accounts
<b>2. Account description and biography</b>	
Verified Badge	Official recognition of account as authentic and belonging to a public personality
Profile bio	Brief description about the user and/or the contents offered by that profile
Instagram category label	Label categories predetermined for Instagram business accounts
Reference to ideology	Mention of their political ideology on the Instagram biography
Media mentions	Whether biography mentions participation on traditional media
Other social networks	URL, linktree or handle to their own profiles on other social media
<b>3. Psychodemographic of the influencers</b>	
Name	Profile name on Instagram
Username	User name on Instagram. It is the name that appears after the "@"
Gender	Male / Female / Non binary / NA/NK.
Age ranges	13-17 / 18-24 / 25-35 / 35-44 / 45-54 / 55-64 / +64 / NA/NK
Educational level	Baccalaureate / Vocational training / Graduate / Post-graduate / NA/NK
Education	Area of knowledge in which the influencer has been trained
<b>4. Content Analysis</b>	
Content theme	Politics / Other (lifestyle/ gastro/ gaming...)
Topic treated by the publication	International / National / Society / Economy / Environment / Culture / Identities / Others
Instagram Format	Reel / Live / Carousel / Post
Publication Format	Image / Video / Text / Illustration
Length of the caption	Characters in the text field of the publication on Instagram
Tone	Critical/ laudator/comedic/disparaging/ protest-oriented
Authorship	Whether the content was created by the influencer or not

Source: the authors

This analysis has a margin of error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%; the sample is therefore sufficiently representative, according to the descriptive statistics applied to media (Riffe et al., 2014). The coding of these contents was carried out manually by two of the authors. To ensure reliability, a pooled sample of 100 publications was analysed. After two rounds of coding, a level of agreement of 91.2% was obtained.

### 3. MAIN RESULTS OF THE POLITICAL INFLUENCERS' PROFILES AND CONTENT

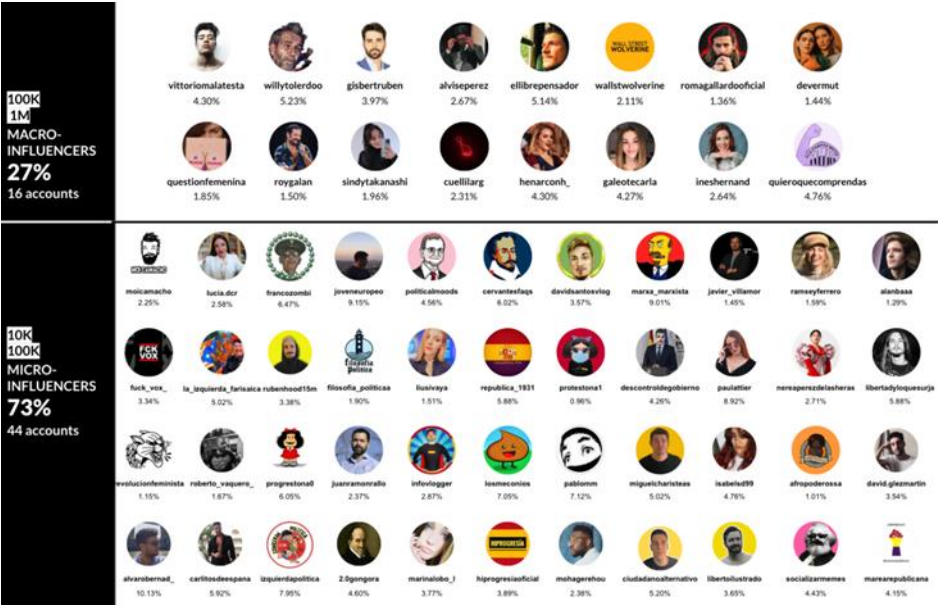
#### 3.1 Influencers' metrics and performance

The results of the 60 accounts identified as political influencers (Figure 2) allowed us to make an initial distinction based on the number of followers. These influencer accounts have a total of 6,287,149 followers. According to Campbell and Farrel's (2020) tier classification, 73% of the influencers were micro-influencers and 27% were macro-influencers. Although macro-influencers were the minority, they reached more than three thirds of the gross number of followers, thus accounting for 76% (4,766,459) of the total number of followers. The accounts with the highest number of followers were @devermut (711,770), @roygalan (521,586) and @alviseperez (476,966).

However, although the number of followers totalled 6,287,149, a thorough analysis of the overlapping audience variable reveals that the actual impact totals 4,289,556 unique followers. This represents a duplicate audience of 31.7%, meaning that the same user follows more than one political influencer. The implications of this variable shed light on Instagram users' inclination towards this category of profiles and their content.

When analysing SMIs, another essential aspect to consider is the level of interaction their content generates, which serves as an indicator of their followers' response. In terms of total engagement, a notable figure of 185,365 interactions was recorded, averaging 30,089 per post. This data yielded an engagement rate of 3.97%, which is regarded as commendable (Sehl & Tien, 2023). Furthermore, we found that 18% of the analysed accounts attained a high engagement rate of over 10% (Figure 3). As content creators, they had published a total number of 92,308 posts, with an average number of posts per profile of 1,538.

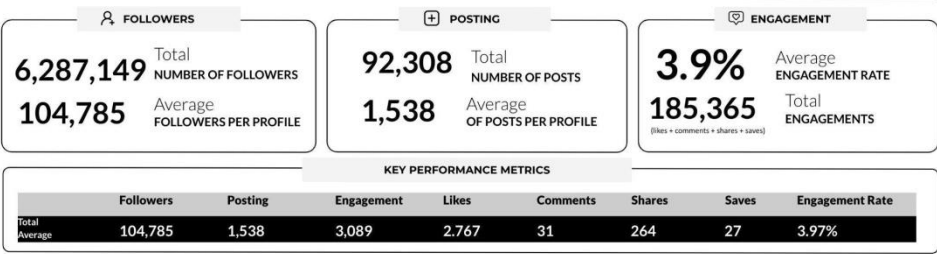
Figure 2  
Instagram profile picture, username and engagement rate of the political influencer identified and analysed



Source: the authors

Furthermore, the duration of activity was documented to observe growth patterns: on average, influencers opened their profiles 70 months ago, equivalent to nearly 6 years. The oldest account (@pablomm) has been active for more than 11 years, meaning that its inception coincided with Instagram's initial launch in 2010. Conversely, @galeotecarla is less than two years old, yet it has managed to amass a community of 107,662 followers during this short period. It is noteworthy that there is no temporal pattern linking the growth and success of these accounts to their creation period.

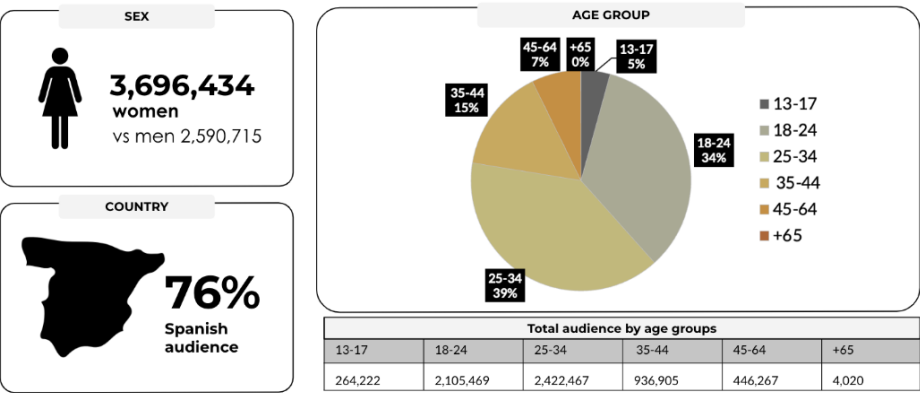
**Figure 3**  
**Political influencers' key data and metrics of account performance**



Source: the authors

Regarding the characteristics of the audience that follows political influencers, women outnumbered men: political influencers had a total of 3,696,434 female followers (60%), and 2,590,715 male followers (40%). A substantial proportion of the audience (76%) had accounts created in Spain and the majority were young: 5% of followers were in the 13 to 17 age range; 34% were between 18 and 24; and 39% were between 25 and 34 (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**  
**Demographic analysis of the followers of political influencers**



### 3.2. Influencers' account description and biography

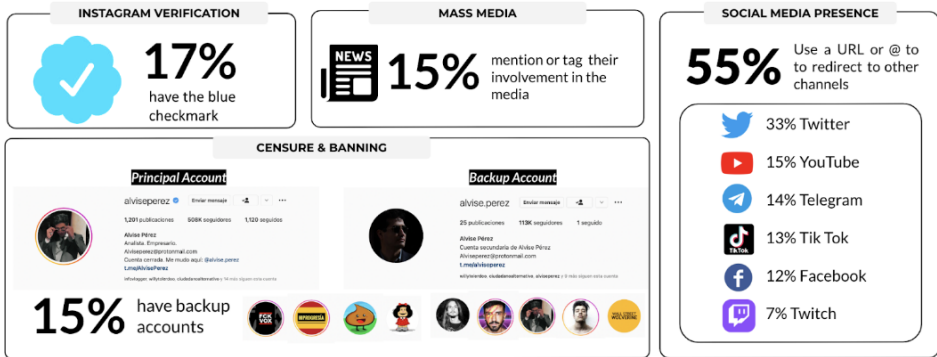
The Instagram biography section enables influencers to define themselves and offers a dedicated space where they can establish their credibility and engage with prospective followers. It also reflects their perceptions of their own accounts and their desired projection.

To assess their homogeneity as a collective and their self-identification when defining and describing their activities, we found that only 29 accounts used category labels, which were significantly fragmented. While the most commonly used label was "Digital Creator", it only featured in four accounts. The description chosen by influencers followed the same pattern: 41 did not describe their account or activity in any way. Among the accounts that did provide some precise information, four defined themselves as political scientists; another four as writers; and three as journalists. Other freely-categorised self-descriptions included references to personal characteristics or value attributes such as woman, immigrant or forerunner. Only 10 profiles owned Instagram accounts that had undergone the verification process, denoted by the distinctive Instagram blue checkmark. Furthermore, an examination of media affiliations revealed that only nine political influencers make explicit mention of collaborations with media entities.

Regarding the endorsement of their own profiles on other social media platforms, slightly more than half (55%, 33) included a URL in their bio to give visibility to other channels. The three social networks that obtained the most visibility are Twitter, YouTube and Telegram. Nevertheless, the platforms to which the profiles were linked were highly diverse, encompassing blogs, personal websites, links to podcasts, LinkedIn, Spotify or WhatsApp, and even to their Amazon Wishlist or OnlyFans (Figure 5).

To conclude this section, although this aspect was not considered as a research objective, during the collection and identification of profiles we found that at least nine political influencers' accounts had been subjected to censorship. Furthermore, nine accounts maintained secondary or even tertiary accounts as alternatives to mitigate the potential risks of being banned, censored or expelled from Instagram.

**Figure 5**  
**Key factors in political influencers' Instagram biographies**



Source: the authors

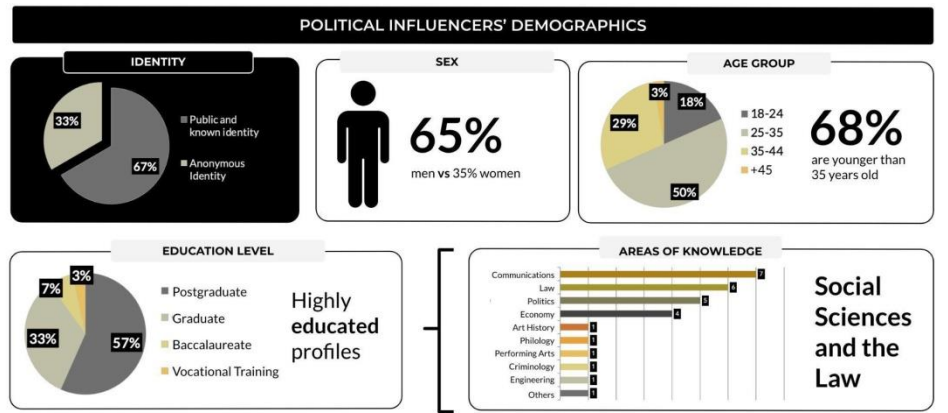
### 3.3. Psycho-demographics of the influencers

As for the psycho-demographic profile of these digital opinion leaders, the results indicated 40 of the users behind these accounts were people whose identity was known; 20 had hidden identities (Figure 6). Hence, this section was constrained by the inherent limitations associated with extracting psycho-demographic data from anonymous accounts. Moreover, certain accounts with identifiable profiles opted to conceal certain personal information, rendering it impracticable to gather comprehensive data on specific variables.

The average age of the 38 account owners for which we were able to find out this information was 32 years old; 18% of them were in the 18–24 age range with the youngest influencers @paulattier, @filosofia\_politicaa, @galeotecarla, @lucia.dcr aged 22 years old. Of the remaining accounts, 50% were between 25 and 35; 29% were between 35 and 44 and 3% (1) was over 45. The highest percentage, 65% (26), of political influencers were men, compared to 35% (14) who were women. With regard to education level, 90% had a university degree, the majority in social sciences and law disciplines (Figure 6).

The relation between total number of posts and age of political influencers shows that the profiles in the intermediate age ranges (25–34 and 35–44 years old) produced most of the content, with 75% of the posts.

**Figure 6**  
**Demographic analysis of the political influencers**



Source: the authors

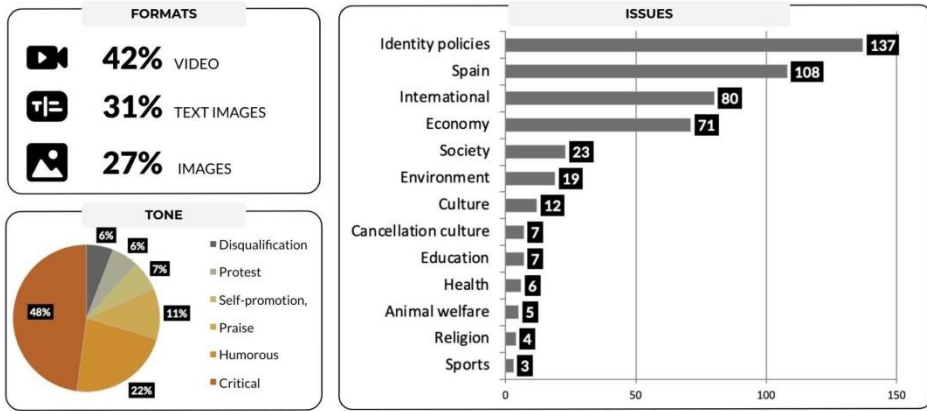
### 3.4. Content Analysis

Out of the 600 analysed posts, a significant 80% predominantly featured infotainment and politainment content, referring to politically oriented information taking a sensationalist approach that aligns with the characteristics outlined in section 1. The remaining 20% consisted of non-informative and non-political content, which could be aimed at establishing a closer connection with users and fostering a sense of affinity with the community. These posts were diverse and fragmented, covering a wide range of topics such as lifestyle, fashion, music, travel, leisure, self-promotion, gastronomy and humour.

Of the political topics dealt with in their posts, identity politics received the most attention, followed by Spanish politics and international politics (Figure 7). However, the substance of the issues that were dealt with was always related to current events, topical public discussions and the strong impact of the topics.

**Figure 7**

**Analysis of the political influencers' content in terms of form, tone and the issues they address**



Source: the authors

The tone the digital opinion leaders adopted in the analysed posts is predominantly critical (48%), followed by those incorporating humour (22%); praise was the third most common tone (11%), whereas a minority, only 6%-7% of the posts, corresponded to attitudes of self-promotion, protest and disqualification (Figure 7).

The Instagram formats most frequently used by the influencers were fixed posts (49%), followed by reels (42%); carousels were less common (9%). The majority post format used was video (42%), followed by text or static text content images (31%) and images (27%). The predominant content among the videos was on-camera commentary by the influencer on a political topic (85), while texts were shared through screenshots of their own tweets (75), and memes were the most common image content (48) (Figure 8).



Figure 8  
Content categorisation by type and format and illustrative examples



Source: the authors

4. DISCUSSION

As seen in the results, political influencers have the capability to amass a substantial following. This phenomenon not only establishes their position as digital opinion leaders, especially for young users (Bause, 2021; Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Soares et al., 2018), but also underscores their significance as emerging political actors. Indeed, one of the influencers in the sample with the most followers, Alvisé Pérez (@alviseperez), created his own political platform for the 2024 European Parliamentary Elections, achieving parliamentary representation with three seats. The number of followers directly influences their popularity, likability, attractiveness and credibility (De Veirman et al., 2016; Jin & Phua, 2014), further solidifying their role in shaping public opinion. It has been demonstrated that the number of followers can have a decisive influence on attitude change (Zhou et al., 2023).

The rate of engagement serves as a conclusive measure to underscore the significance of this phenomenon, with the average engagement rate (3.97%) of the profiles being considered good engagement (Schl & Tien, 2023). This finding is even more remarkable when we consider that a third of the

analysed accounts had an engagement rate above 10%, surpassing the optimal value by more than seven points (Sehl & Tien, 2023).

Therefore, we can confidently claim that the followers in our analysis have a genuine involvement with and appreciation of these influencers' political content, which aligns with the arguments of Dekoninck and Schmuck (2022). The question that remains is whether this engagement with political influencers on Instagram can transition from online into offline participation in Spain and thereby validate the gateway hypothesis (Conroy et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2017).

A significant outcome that warrants special discussion and examination concerns to the demographic composition of political influencers' followers. We found that 78% of these followers are fairly young, under 35 years old, and that a considerable number of them were minors; despite not having the right to vote, they already feel the impact of political infotainment. This finding emphasises the profound influence wielded by political influencers over individuals who are not yet eligible to formally participate in the political process. At the other end of the spectrum, over-65s barely follow political influencers on Instagram. This group represents a mere 0.01%, although the total number of Instagram Spain users in this age group accounts for 4%, according to statistics provided by the application. This generational imbalance may derive from the audiovisual and discursive codes of politainment in social media, which are aligned with the political content creation trends that young people identify with.

Although they are not activists per se, political influencers pay special attention to issues related to activism (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Navarro & Villegas-Simón, 2022; Riedl et al., 2021; Suuronen et al., 2022), a notion that is substantiated by our results. The significance of the content topic lies in the persuasive role influencers play in stimulating increased political engagement among the younger generations, and how they have the power to portray socio-political subjects in a motivational and captivating manner (Zimmermann et al., 2020). While 'hot' news and current events are the main factor in generating content, influencers set their own agendas. These digital opinion leaders attempt to foster a collective conscience around an issue and they adeptly employ interpretive strategies to guide and mobilise their audience towards adopting a specific standpoint, thus aligning with Muñoz's (2021) findings. In the case of Spanish political influencers, identity politics, feminism, LGTBIQ+ rights, and anti-racism predominate; however, Spanish

influencers do not share the same level of concern for environmental issues as their counterparts in Northern European countries, as mentioned above.

The fact that in their self-descriptions they do not directly define themselves as influencers, activists or content creators engaged in political commentary, infotainment, politainment or a similar activity suggests that there is no sense of group identity. Although Muñoz (2021) acknowledges collaboration among digital activists, this collaboration has not yet materialised or been organised in a formal group on Instagram. Riedl et al. (2021, p. 5) made the same observation with regard to the novelty of the phenomenon and the lack of empirical evidence for a cohesive group. In fact, political influencers use labels related to their profession or education, such as journalist, lawyer, writer or economist, in an attempt to legitimise their work in political content creation or to gain credibility as experts.

As the results reveal, these political influencers are highly educated young professionals with affiliations in the field of social sciences; however the vast majority of them do not possess the blue Instagram verified badge, nor do they seem to have a significant presence on mainstream media.

Several studies have addressed the significance of online anonymity, particularly in politics (Barnidge, 2017; Ma et al., 2016). Our study was limited by the anonymous nature of the profiles and the resulting inability to collect demographic data on the influencers. Nonetheless, this limitation has uncovered an intriguing tendency. The use of anonymous accounts by political influencers appears to indicate a reluctance to personally engage in the controversies arising from their posts, which coincides with Zhang and Kizilcec's (2014, p. 643) assertion that controversial content is 3.2 times more likely to be shared anonymously. Conversely, those political influencers who choose to openly disclose their identity seem to be committed to cultivating their personal brand and positioning themselves as relevant figures in the public debate. This openness demonstrates their confidence in the potential of the Internet to revive public debate and contribute to conversational diversity (Papacharissi, 2004).

The question of anonymity is significantly linked to the high levels of censorship of these profiles revealed by the research, although this aspect was not contemplated in the initial study. Political influencers resort to secondary accounts to continue their activity on Instagram, or abandon Instagram while keeping their influencer accounts active on Twitter, YouTube or Telegram.

We therefore suggest that political influencers consciously or unconsciously adopt this format to effectively engage with their young audiences, employing simplification as a persuasive strategy and promoting youth activism.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research have successfully identified and substantiated the presence of influencer profiles actively involved in politainment. This study has attributed remarkable significance to these profiles, acknowledging their role as influential digital opinion leaders among youth due to their prominent engagement and impact on the Instagram platform. Furthermore, the study has shed light on the intersection of these profiles with the political infotainment genre, emphasising the consequential implications of their content.

By delineating the existence and influence of these profiles, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics within the digital field, particularly in relation to activism, political communication and the dissemination of information.

Moreover, the rapid growth of some accounts, which have gained more than 100,000 followers in only two years, indicates an upward trend in these profiles and the acceptance of this type of digital activist among younger generations. This notable growth can be attributed to the effective deployment of network-specific formats and the strategic incorporation of the characteristic elements of politainment. By leveraging these elements, content creators adeptly captivate and engage their young audiences, thereby augmenting the potential for widespread dissemination and viral propagation.

In conclusion, this paper suggests that political influencers are likely to be the next social media opinion leaders, owing to their extensive followings, their considerable generation of political content that mediates the traditional flow of information (Katz et al., 2006), and the interest shown by their community in the form of engagement (likes, comments, shares and saves), thus creating a new way for parasocial interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This theoretical framework underscores the potential of political influencers to act as pivotal nodes in the dissemination of political information and the shaping of public discourse in the digital age.

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