COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

Rebeca Suárez-Álvarez
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0102-4472
rebeca.suarez@urjc.es
Universidad Rey Juan Carlos

Ana Pastor-Rodríguez
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1787-7939
ana.pastor.rodriguez@uva.es
Universidad de Valladolid

Influencer advertising on TikTok: advert formats and illicit product advertising. A study involving Germany, France, Spain and Italy

Abstract

Advertising by influencers on YouTube and Instagram has become a common practice, which includes the incorporation of advertising into their audio-visual productions as well. This study is being conducted to determine whether TikTok users from Germany, France, Spain, and Italy are using the social network to advertise products and services, and whether they are promoting products that are banned by TikTok. Using content analysis, 320 videos from 16 European tiktokers in Germany, France, Spain and Italy have been studied based on gender and nationality. The tiktokers ranged between 17 and 21 years of age with more than one million followers. The results confirm that tiktokers maintain a balance between the content they post and the advertising they insert. Both genders include a similar percentage of advertising and, based on nationality, French and Spanish tiktokers are the ones who use the most advertising in their work. Product placement is the most popular format for tiktokers of both genders in France, Spain and Germany, whereas branded content is preferred by Italian male tiktokers. None of the tiktokers of the four nationalities have violated the rules imposed by TikTok, as they have refrained from publishing illicit or dangerous products, either because of measures being taken by the social network itself to limit the exposure to these types of products, or as the result of self-regulation by the tiktokers in order to avoid being removed from the social network.

Keywords
Social networks, advertising, TikTok, advertising formats, young people, regulation.

1. Introduction

Social networks join together more than four billion people worldwide. These users spend an average of nearly two and a half hours a day on these platforms, accounting for 38% of the total time spent online (Kemp, 2023). With regard to Europeans, 58.15% use social networks on a regular basis. Specifically, in the countries under study, the percentage of people who access these platforms daily are as follows: 63.22% of Spaniards; 53.19% of Italians; 47.73% of Germans; and 44.46% of French people (Eurostat, 2023).

Digital investment in Europe amounts to 50 billion euros, and more than 50% is invested among four countries: Germany (12.4 billion), France (8.4 billion), Spain (4.3 billion), and Italy

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(4.4 billion). Social networks account for 25% of total investment (Interactive Advertising Bureau Europe [IAB Europe], 2022).

In the case of TikTok, it has experienced continuous growth since its launch in 2016 and has become the fastest growing app in the world (Emplifi, 2022; Mena Roa, 2021). It has 1 billion subscribers (13% more than the previous year), of which 38.9% are under the age of 24 (Kemp, 2023). These data have encouraged 36% of marketing specialists to increase their advertising investment on this social network by more than 23 percentage points over the previous year (Hootsuite, 2022).

Social networks are trusted by the public because the latter do not notice their persuasive nature (Woodroof *et al.*, 2020). On these sites, social media influencers offer more integrated advertising, which leads companies to increasingly rely on them to add value to their brand and raise awareness about their products (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2020). Thus, it is important to examine the following: whether influencers in Germany, Spain, France and Italy are using TikTok to incorporate content of a commercial nature; to reveal the type of advertising formats these creators use in their productions; and to discover whether TikTok believes this content is promoting illicit products, while bearing in mind possible differences depending on the gender and nationality of the influencers.

Schwemmer and Ziewiecki (2018) warn of the impact of influencers' advertising among young people and their high level of credibility among social media users (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019; Wai Lai & Liu, 2020). Among the different advertising formats, Bouton and Yustas (2012) affirm that product placement is the fastest growing strategy on social networks, which also appears to be the case on YouTube (Suárez-Álvarez, García-Jiménez & Montes-Vozmediano, 2021) and Instagram as well (Alassani & Göretz, 2019). Various studies point to an increase in branded content on social networks with the aim of achieving more product awareness, having a stronger impact on potential consumers, and fostering brand trust (Karpinska-Krakowiak & Modlinski, 2020; Ki, Cuevas & Lim, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019). In terms of regulation, Sixto-García and Álvarez-Vázquez (2020) highlight the need to monitor advertising content on Instagram that may be seen as misleading.

2. State of the issue

2.1. *TikTok as a social platform*

TikTok promotes video and music clips that are offered to users according to their likes and dislikes through the use of artificial intelligence algorithms. This differentiates TikTok from other social networks, which tailor their content based on the number of people who follow an influencer (Anderson, 2020; Haenlein *et al.*, 2020; Schellewald, 2021). Short video is the chosen format of expression and socialisation among users (Xu, Yan & Zhan, 2019), in which the creators engage in self-portrayal by talking, dancing, or lip-syncing (Ostrovsky & Chen, 2020).

Patel and Binjola (2020) highlight the ease of use offered by this platform in enabling influencers to share their talent and increase the number of followers. De Leyn *et al.* (2021) add that for pre-teens, the attraction of TikTok lies in its potential for self-portrayal, as well as maintaining peer relationships, and the opportunity to connect with the youth culture, which makes TikTok a platform that shapes their socio-cultural realm.

According to Schellewald (2021), the main reason for watching videos on TikTok is entertainment, as well as interactivity, which offers the challenge of mimicry for those who are watching. There is also the social aspect, as many of the videos are created in the company of friends and family, as pointed out by the author. In this regard, Kaye, Chen and Zeng (2021) highlight the ease with which TikTok converts users from passive consumers into active creators, in comparison with other networks. By merely touching the screen, users are given the option of creating videos with the same filters, audio, and special effects as the videos they are watching.

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2.2. *Product placement through influencers on social networks*

Influencers are able to achieve higher levels of attention and emotion in adolescents than spots published in traditional media, despite not having elaborate and sophisticated production methods (Ferrer-López, 2020). This has led to an increase in advertising on social networks (around 50% of the content), as well as the professionalization of video production and, in most cases, advertising that is somewhat hidden within the content or displayed using product placement (López-Villafranca & Olmedo-Salar, 2019). Along these lines, after analysing channels belonging to child YouTubers and Instagrammers, Feijoo and Fernández-Gómez (2021) determined that among the organic content there is a predominance of explicit commercial content, active product placement, and scripted stories about brands. For authors such as Yang, Zhang and Zhang (2021), the key is to present the product in the right place at the right time, thereby avoiding a situation in which the intensity of the advertising message, considered to be the total number of pixels in which the product appears during the video, has an incremental relationship to the sales of the product.

This makes product placement the leading format. In this sense, branded content is considered by Ferrer-López (2020) to be the format that achieves the best results, despite the fact that it is longer than formats used by the market, which are presumed to be more effective in getting the attention of the youngest audiences. Other authors conclude that formats such as product placement, which are based on embedding products in other productions, attain higher levels of involvement by children and young people because they are perceived as authentic, natural messages, and their truly persuasive nature is not taken into account (De Veirman, Hudders & Nelson, 2019; Núñez-Cansado, López-López & Somarriba-Arechavala, 2021; Tur-Viñes, Núñez-Gómez & González-Río, 2018).

Regarding *TikTok*, this network is highly regarded by users, as they identify with the videos uploaded by influencers. They prefer the spontaneity and naturalness of the content, as opposed to more polished and meticulous videos, such as those on Instagram, in which users feel less represented (Haenlein *et al.*, 2020; Quiroz, 2020). In addition, a study by Darmatama and Erdiansyah (2021) has found that tiktokers enhance a product's image and foster the perception of usefulness and quality.

Costa-Sanchez (2017) and Nie, Liu and Song (2019) assert that the future of online video in social networks is guaranteed due to its strong acceptance by users, in addition to being harnessed by corporations as a resource for increasing sales and user trust in products and brands. These two objectives have led to the hybridisation of advertising and public relations (Victoria Mas, Méndiz Noguero & Arjona Martín, 2013), the goal of which is to combine entertainment and commercial promotion with the aim of increasing the positive image of a brand through persuasion, along with digital and audio-visual communication that has been reinvigorated and become more creative (Costa-Sánchez, 2017).

2.3. Gender and nationality on TikTok

Regarding the gender of the video producers, Shutsko (2020) asserts that humour, music, and choreography with musical performances are the topics that go viral most often by both genders on this social network. In the case of females, the range of themes is wider, as they are more likely to share videos related to other topics such as beauty, do-it-yourself (DIY), and tutorials. On the other hand, this author found that 32.3% of the videos violated regulations by using content that infringed on copyright laws (30.4%) and displayed scenes that invaded personal privacy (2.3%). In her analysis, Shutsko did not find any videos that referred to drugs, sexual behaviour, or violence. Suárez-Álvarez and García-Jiménez (2021), who have studied content created and disseminated by Spanish and British tiktokers, agree with Shutsko (2020) regarding the topics. However, they go even further in stating that although entertainment is the main purpose of the videos made by tiktokers, the standardisation of the content that goes viral is striking, regardless of age and nationality.

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Along these lines, Sun *et al.* (2020) have detected cultural differences between the use of TikTok and Douyin, confirming that TikTok users are generally shown engaging in outdoor activities with both friends and strangers, while Douyin users prefer indoor activities with family members.

Bucknell Bossen and Kottasz (2020) have explored the ways TikTok is used and the gratification it provides to children and teenagers from 11 to 16 years of age, concluding that this social network is used more by females than males, and that pre-adolescents are more active on this social network than teens. They distinguish three levels of use: passive (watching, reading); participatory (interaction between users, or with the content); and contributory (creation, production, and publication of content). All three are directly related to entertainment and amusement. According to their analysis, passive use (watching and reading) dominates. Participatory use is related to seeking affection, identity building, social recognition and the desire to expand their networks of friends and acquaintances. Finally, contributory use (creating and posting personal content) is focused on displaying creativity, self-expression, experimentation with identity, and the search for fame.

Along these lines, Omar and Dequan (2020) conclude that in the consumption, participation, and production of videos there are no significant differences between the variables of age and gender. However, they have discovered that social interaction and escape from reality are directly related to watching and participating in TikTok videos. They also note that the desire to capture special moments of life has a correlation with the production and consumption of videos on this social platform as well.

2.4. *Restricted and/or dangerous advertising content*

According to EU Regulation No. 2022/2065 of the European Parliament, and of the Council of 27 October 2022 on digital services, Article 26 (Point 1) stipulates that advertising must be identified as such in a way that is clear, concise, and unambiguous. This reinforces Directive 95, which requires a repository of advertising content in order to monitor adverts that pose a risk to public safety and health, or that might cause harm due to illicit factors, among others. Moreover, throughout the text, "online platforms" are encouraged to develop codes of conduct, best practices, and in-house regulatory guidelines to improve the quality of online advertising.

Similarly, EU Directive 2018/1808 of the European Parliament, and of the Council of 28 November 2018 on audio-visual media services, encourages Member States to engage in self-regulation and co-regulation in order to promote best practices. As a result of the foregoing, each country has a self-regulatory advertising code, an example of which is the Self-Regulatory Code of Conduct (2019). In France, it is called the Autorité de Régulation Professionnelle de la Publicité (ARPP, 2021); In Germany, it is Deutcher Werberat (2007); and in Italy, it is known as the Istituto dell'Autodisciplina Pubblicitaria (IAP, 2021). All of these are affiliated with the European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA), an organisation that promotes and provides guidance regarding responsible advertising.

The EASA uses the Code of Advertising and Marketing Communications of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC, 2018) as its benchmark. Among ICC's content, which is relevant to the present analysis, Article 1 advocates lawful and decent advertising, along with other aspects; Article 17 states that advertising should not display practices and situations that are potentially dangerous to health, or to national and local security; and in Article C7 regarding minors, reference is made to the requirement of age restrictions in promoting alcohol, gambling and tobacco products (ICC Code, 2018).

In addition to the stipulations of the EASA, the codes of the countries analysed explicitly refer to the following: not inciting illegal behaviour (Autocontrol, 2019, in its seventh principle); not encouraging dangerous practices (Autocontrol, 2019, ninth principle; IAP, 2021, article 12bis and 11, and Deutcher Werberat, 2007); alcoholic beverages (IAP, 2021, article 22); and, in the case of Germany, weapons and death (Deutcher Werberat, 2007). Only two

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countries refer to influencers, which are mentioned by Spain through the Code of Conduct on the Use of Influencers in Advertising (2020), and France, in Point 3 of the section on practices within the ARPP (2021).

Regarding social networks, these sites publish limitations on the creation, dissemination, and sharing of advertising content by users on these platforms and, as pointed out by Gil Ramírez and de Travesedo Rojas (2020), on many occasions YouTube is not strict enough in controlling their content. With regard to TikTok, a report by the Bureau Européen des Unions de Consommateurs (BEUC, 2021) entitled, "TikTok without filters," which brings together 46 independent consumer organisations from 32 countries, points out that this social network fails to adequately protect the youngest users, and that content of a commercial nature with potentially dangerous messages is often found on the site.

Sacks and Suk Yi Looi (2020) emphasise these conclusions and state that the advertising of unhealthy food and drink clearly shows a lack of interest in protecting vulnerable audiences. Therefore, several authors including Agulleiro Prats *et al.* (2020), Martínez-Pastor, Cetina-Presuel and Castelló-Martínez (2022), Sixto-García and Álvarez-Vázquez (2020), and Tur-Viñes and Castelló-Martínez (2021), warn of the need to develop stricter regulations that consider the vulnerability of both the creators and their audience in order to achieve greater control over the insertion of influencers' content (De Veirman, Hudders & Nelson, 2019).

In its Community Guidelines section, TikTok clearly states the type of content it considers acceptable for dissemination by users in order to ensure a safe space. This regulation clearly prohibits the trade, sale, and promotion of dangerous or illegal products, such as weapons, drugs, alcohol, tobacco and gambling, as well as fraud and other activities that might violate people's right to privacy. This social network not only has the authority to remove content that breaks the rules, including video, audio, livestreaming, images, comments, links and text, but it can also temporarily or permanently suspend accounts and/or users who commit serious or recurring violations. Moreover, the site declares that in addition to possible breaches they might find on TikTok, they also look at similar activity and behaviour in which the same user may be involved on other platforms as well.

3. Research objectives and questions

Young people believe that influencers are reliable sources of information (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017), and their work has a greater impact on the purchase behaviour of youth than traditional celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2020). Therefore, the aim of this research is to determine whether TikTok has truly become an advertising channel by studying the audio-visual productions that young European tiktokers create and disseminate on this social network. Likewise, this study also attempts to delve deeper into whether the advertising that is viralised by tiktokers complies with or violates advertising regulations of the social network itself, and to reveal the advertising practices that these creators tend to use. To this end, we have studied the posts of European tiktokers from Germany, Spain, France and Italy by using their nationality and gender (male/female) as variables (Iguartua Perosanz, 2006). As such, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1. What volume and types of advertising can be found on the accounts of German, Spanish, French and Italian tiktokers?

RQ2. Is the gender and nationality of the tiktokers related to the types of advertising they use in their videos?

RQ3. Are the products they advertise considered forbidden by the social network?

4. Methodology

This research is an exploratory, descriptive, comparative study of an international nature. The methodology used is a cross-sectional quantitative content analysis that identifies the

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placement of advertising on the channels of the tiktokers with the highest number of followers in Germany, Spain, France and Italy. As stated by Krippendorff (2018) and Neuendorf (2017), content analysis is the most appropriate methodology for understanding and interpreting current social phenomena through the use of diverse variables, and is used in research to study the social reality that is shared on social networks (Castillo & González, 2018; Cohen *et al.*, 2019; López-Villafranca & Olmedo-Salar, 2019; Romero-Coves, Carratalá-Martínez & Segarra-Saavedra, 2020; Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018).

To develop the study, four work stages were established. The first focused on the selection of the countries with the highest number of active monthly users on TikTok in Europe, which clearly shows the magnitude and growth of this social network. In 2021, France had 14.9 million users, and in 2022 it sharply rose to 20.95 million; Germany had 10.7 million in 2021 and 20.65 million in 2022; Italy had 9.8 million in 2021 and 17.15 million in 2022; and Spain had 8.8 million users in 2021 and 16.63 million in 2022 (Kolsquare, 2022; Nasr, 2022; Kemp, 2022, 2023).

In terms of the countries with the largest advertising audiences over the age of 18 on TikTok, the Digital 2022 Global Overview Report (Kemp, 2022) confirms that Spain has 35.4%, France 33.8%, Italy 26.1%, and Germany 24.4%.

If we look at the figures that the company publishes about its regular users, defined as people who spend an hour each day using the application for a period of several months, the figures in France exceed 11 million regular users, Germany reaches 10.7 million, Italy stands at 9.8 million, and Spain has nearly 9 million (Stokel-Walter, 2020). Although the UK appeared in the statistics, it has been excluded due to the fact that it is no longer a member of the EU.

In the next stage, young tiktokers between 17 and 21 years old with more than one million followers from each country were identified. Regarding the other criterion, they had to be known for their activity on social networks, and not for other professions. In general, with regard to social presence, when influencers exceed one million followers they are referred to as mega influencers by the Interactive Advertising Bureau ([IAB], 2022), or macro influencers by Britt *et al.* (2020) and Vodák *et al.* (2019). To identify the tiktokers, the following platforms were used: https://tokfluence.com, which enables searches for the main TikTok influencers worldwide by number of followers; https://www.socialtracker.io, which offers updated reports of profiles on this social network; and https://www.socialblade.com, which offers updated statistics on tiktokers. Where possible, the ages of the influencers were confirmed by consulting their accounts, as well as on the Google and Bing search engines, and on websites that provided the updated ages and birthdates of the individuals studied, which included: https://allfamous.org/, https://es.famousbirthdays.com/ and https://celebs.filmifeed.com. In the third stage, 320 videos from 16 tiktokers of four different nationalities (Germany, Spain, France, and Italy) were viewed and recorded. Each video had more than one thousand views, a figure that guarantees audience interest, and is the point at which influencers can start to monetise their audio-visual content through Revenue per Thousand Impressions (RPM), which offers an earnings estimate when influencers reach 1,000 impressions. With regard to gender, four tiktokers (two males and two females) were studied from each nationality. For each tiktoker, the last 20 videos they had created and shared on this social network during 2021 were viewed. The fieldwork was carried out in December of 2021. In the fourth stage, we analysed the sample, as shown in Table 1.

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Table 1. TikTokers analysed (based on number of followers).

Name of the channel	Gender of the influencer	Age	Nationality	Number of followers
@naimdarrechi	Male	19	Spanish	28 M
@akamztwenty20	Male	20	French	18.9 M
@leaelui	Female	20	French	17.2 M
@paky__official	Male	18	Italian	16.3 M
@nilskue	Male	21	German	12.3 M
@lolaloliitaaa	Female	19	Spanish	11.2 M
@benoit_chevalier	Male	21	French	9.2 M
@Its.bellido	Female	18	Spanish	8.8 M
@jacob_rtt	Male	21	German	7.9 M
@dalia	Female	19	German	6.2 M
@Julesboringlife	Female	19	German	5.9 M
@majno	Female	18	Italian	5.8 M
@marcocellucci	Male	19	Italian	5.3 M
@marta.losito	Female	18	Italian	4.5 M
@rose.thr	Female	19	French	4.5 M
@sietexx	Male	17	Spanish	4 M

Source: Own elaboration.

4.1. *Coding the variables*

With regard to coding the variables, they were segmented into content variables and formal variables based on the methodology of López-Villafranca and Olmedo-Salar (2019) and Ramos-Serrano and Herrero-Diz (2016), which has been adapted in order to identify the advertising included in the TikTok productions. The content variables identify gender (male/female), and the formal variables register the following: i) the details of each account and the videos therein, including the name of the channel, number of followers, video title, date of publication, number of views, and its link; ii) the nationality of the tiktoker; iii) the advertising formats used in video productions; and iv) the advertising of products that are banned by the platform.

In order to categorise the advertising formats used by influencers on social networks, a review was carried out of the work of Suárez-Álvarez, García-Jiménez and Montes-Vozmediano (2021), who have studied the type of advertising that child YouTubers display in their videos, as well as a study by Kim, Lee and Lee (2019), who have researched the content linked to the type of products that influencers share on Facebook, and the work of Schwemmer and Ziewiecki (2018), who have addressed the growing importance of advertising on YouTube. The classification has been enhanced by the work of Álvarez Rodríguez (2020) and Martín García (2021), who have added hyperactive product placement as an advertising format in which the protagonist displays the product or brand by specifically referring to it and incorporating it into the narrative. Based on the literature studied, the following epistemic analysis sheet was created, which includes seven advertising practices on the channels of TikTok influencers (Table 2).

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Table 2. Advertising formats.

Type	Description
Active Product Placement (APP)	The product, service or brand takes an active role in the video. The product is part of the narrative, but the tiktoker does not mention it.
Passive Product Placement (PPP)	The tiktoker does not display or mention the product or brand. It appears on camera as part of the tiktoker's clothes, or as a product related to beauty, food, or beverages.
Hyperactive Product Placement (HPP)	The tiktoker displays the product or brand and makes specific references to it.
Display using graphics	The tiktoker uses graphics that are deliberately inserted into their videos, such as posters or speech bubbles with the name of the product, service or brand.
Repetition and emphasis	The tiktoker repeats the name of the brand, product or service, or raises the tone of his/her voice when mentioning it.
Branded content (BC)	The product, service or brand is the common thread and storyline of the audio-visual content.
Other	Other types of brands or products displayed in front of the camera.

Source: Own elaboration.

To identify advertising prohibited by the platform, we consulted the guidelines published by the social network itself (https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines?lang=en#30) with the rules and codes of conduct to which users must adhere. The following study sheet offers information regarding advertised products that are illegal or prohibited by the platform due to their possible danger to the audience (Table 3).

Table 3. Advertising of illicit products on TikTok.

Type	Description
Weapons	Content which: Shows firearms, accessories, ammunition, or explosive devices.
	Includes offers to buy, sell, traffic or solicit firearms, accessories, ammunition, explosive devices or instructions on how to make them.
Drugs, alcohol and tobacco	Promotes drugs or drug use, or encourages others to manufacture, consume or engage in the trafficking of drugs or other controlled substances.
	Includes offers to buy, sell, traffic or solicit drugs or other controlled substances, as well as alcohol and tobacco, including products related to vaping, smokeless or combustible derivatives of tobacco, synthetic nicotine products, e-cigarettes, and other electronic nicotine delivery systems.
	Provides information on how to purchase illegal or controlled substances.
	Describes or promotes the abuse of legal substances, or instructions on how to make homemade intoxicants for the purposes of inebriation.
Frauds and scams	Promotes phishing or identity theft.
	Encourages pyramid or Ponzi schemes, or multi-level marketing.
	Advocates risky investment plans with the promise of high returns, fixed-odds betting, and any other types of scams.
Gambling	Promotes casinos, sports betting, poker, lotteries, gambling-related software and applications, or other gambling services.
Privacy	Violates privacy rights and includes personal data or information that enables individual identification.

Source: TikTok Community Guidelines.

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The data analysis was carried out using the Real Statistics Resource Pack (Release 8.5). A one-factor ANOVA was applied to compare the groups by using one quantitative variable, which was further improved with the Brown-Forsythe statistical test to examine the equality of variance among the groups, in order to determine whether there were significant statistical differences between the gender and nationality of the tiktokers and the insertion of advertisements in their videos.

5. Results

For the present study, an analysis was carried out of 320 videos from 16 European tiktokers (eight males and eight females), from four nationalities (German, Italian, Spanish and French). For each tiktoker, 20 videos were studied for a total of 160 videos from each gender.

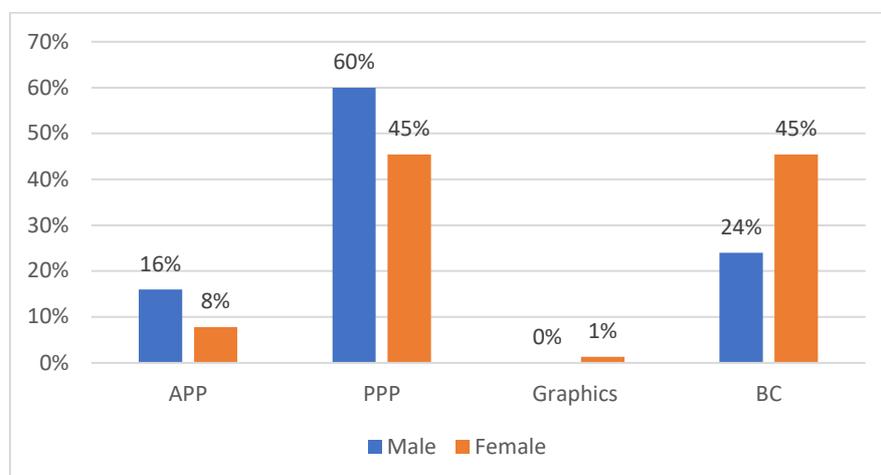### 5.1. *Volume and formats of the advertising on TikTok*

Of the total number of videos analysed, 52% (n=167) do not include advertising, while 48% (n=153) include adverts. Of the 48% that include advertising, 64% choose either passive product placement (53%), in which the product is neither mentioned nor used, but appears clearly in front of the camera, or active product placement (12%), in which the product takes centre stage in front of the camera but is not mentioned by the tiktoker. Another 35% present their products through branded content. The remaining advertising formats are miniscule, which include the use of graphics at 1%, or 0% in the case of repetition/emphasis and hyperactive product placement.

The fact that active and passive product placement are the formats of choice for displaying products shows that tiktokers do not want to be invasive with their followers, and prefer to use advertising techniques that allow them to show products in a more indirect way. However, this contrasts with the third most frequently used advertising technique, which is branded content, as it gives a leading role to the product by making it an integral part of the storyline.

5.2. *Gender and nationality as variables in the advertising practices on TikTok*

In terms of gender, which is an independent variable, we can see that the percentage of advertising included in the tiktokers' videos is similar. Females are the ones who insert the highest percentage of advertising in their productions at 49%, compared to 47% for males. Females mainly choose branded content and passive product placement (45% in both cases), whereas males use mostly passive product placement at the rate of 60% (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Advertising formats by gender.

Source: Own elaboration.

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To observe possible differences between the advertising formats and the gender of the tiktokers, a one-factor ANOVA analysis of variance (Brown-Forsythe test) was applied in order to ascertain whether gender is a determining factor in choosing among the various types of advertising formats. The results ($F(1.12) = 0.001, p > 0.05$) reveal that there are no significant differences between gender and the different types of advertising formats used in TikTok videos. These findings confirm that both genders use the formats according to their needs and interests, and display similar patterns of behaviour regarding the insertion of advertising in their profiles.

Regarding the nationality of the video creators, those who include the most advertising are the French, who include adverts in 63% of their videos, followed by the Spanish at 51%, with Germany and Italy falling behind at 39%, in both cases. However, although passive product placement is the most frequently used technique overall, when the data is disaggregated by nationality, it can be seen that French and Spanish tiktokers are the ones who choose this type of advertising the most. The Italians use branded content 48% of the time, while the Germans use active product placement at the rate of 39%. Advertising formats such as hyperactive product placement, as well as repetition/emphasis when presenting a product, service or brand, are not used in any of the cases (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Advertising formats by nationality.
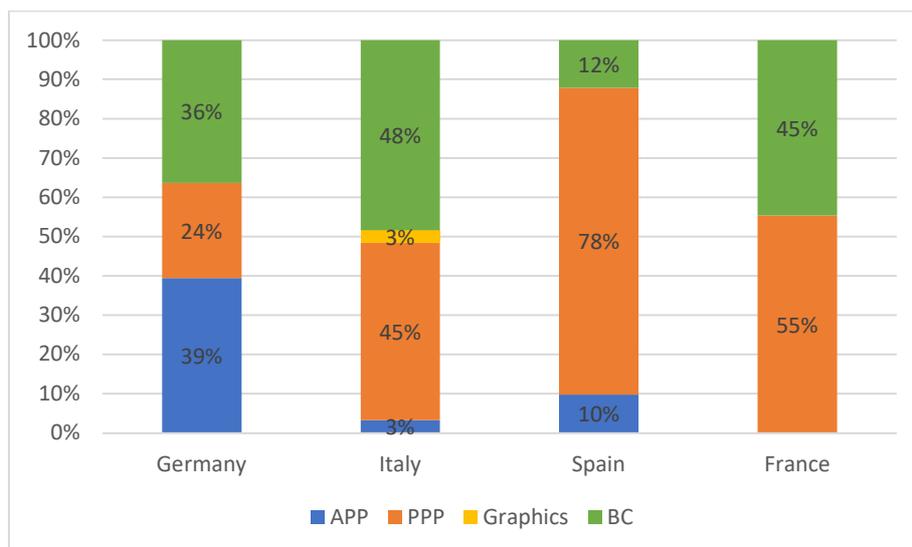
Source: Own elaboration.

In order to verify whether the nationality of the tiktokers is a determining factor when incorporating advertising in their productions, a one-factor ANOVA test (Brown-Forsythe) ($F(1,19)=0.0878, p>0.05$) confirms that it is not a decisive criterion, as there are no significant differences between nationality and the different types of advertising formats displayed in the TikTok videos. These results show that the age or gender of the tiktokers are not determinant in the selection of any specific advertising format. Moreover, they use them at random based on their interests.

Finally, to delve deeper into the insertion of different types of advertising in this social network, the variables of gender and nationality have been linked in order to observe the advertising format that European tiktokers prefer. In countries with more advertising, such as France and Spain, what stands out is that males are the ones who include more advertising in terms of percentage. Thus, 70% of French males and 60% of Spanish males include advertising in their videos, while 55% of French females and 50% of Italian females insert advertising in their productions.

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5.3. *Publication of illicit products on TikTok*

Both females and males of the four nationalities comply with the current regulations officially published in the Community Guidelines section of the platform, and none of them have included advertising content that violates the regulations. None of the audio-visual productions features products, services or brands linked to weapons, drugs, substances like alcohol or tobacco, fraud and scams, gambling, or infringement on the privacy rights of tiktokers or other people.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Advertising through influencers has become a common practice that has an impact on the buying decisions of users (Ferrer-López, 2020; López-Villafranca & Olmedo-Salar, 2019; Yang, Zhang & Zhang, 2021). Regarding the first research question, at the present time TikTok is not considered an influencer advertising platform when compared to other social networks such as Instagram (Fernández-Gómez *et al.*, 2021) or YouTube, which have high levels of advertising on influencers' channels, as pointed out by Suárez-Álvarez, García-Jiménez and Montes-Vozmediano (2021). The moderate use of advertising on this social network seems to confirm the preference of influencers for self-portrayal (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; De Leyn *et al.*, 2021), when creating short videos, which is typical of this social network (Nie, Liu & Song, 2019). In their videos, tiktokers appear to strive for a balance between the content they viralise and the advertising they include, in order to avoid advert saturation in their productions. The lower frequency of advertising on this social network might also be due to its more recent presence compared to other social networks with a longer history, which means that brands and influencers have lagged behind in their joint interest in benefiting from possible associations between brands, products, and influencers.

Active and passive product placement are the preferred advertising formats for young tiktokers, which allow them to display products and services on camera without altering the rhythm of the narrative or the plot, in order to be more persuasive, increase user willingness to buy (Darmatama & Erdiansyah; 2021; De Veirman, Hudders & Nelson, 2019), and enhance brand credibility (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). Curiously, the third most common format that tiktokers choose is branded content, which confirms previous studies that conclude two preferences: they either prefer to be discreet in the display of products and brands, or they prefer to show them clearly on camera (Ki, Cuevas & Lim, 2019; Karpinska-Krakowiak & Modlinski, 2020).

Advertising formats that create a link between the commitment of influencers to offer their followers entertainment, and the promotion of products and services on their profiles, may be giving rise to the hybridisation of advertising and public relations, which could result in new advertising formats, as pointed out by Costa-Sánchez (2017) and Victoria Mas, Méndiz Noguero and Arjona Martín (2013).

In response to the second research question, the amount of advertising found on the tiktokers' channels of the countries examined is inconsequential. The findings show varia-tions depending on the gender and nationality of the tiktokers. By gender, males and females incorporate a similar percentage of advertising content, which confirms behaviour that is comparable between the two groups on this social network (Omar & Dequan, 2020). In the selection of formats, passive product placement and branded content are the most frequently used by both genders. Although nationality is not a determining factor in the tiktokers' choice of a specific advertising format, differences have been observed. French tiktokers are the ones who insert the most advertising in their videos. Regarding German and Italian tiktokers, although they have fewer videos of a commercial nature, they use more explicit formats when they do so. The Germans choose active product placement in which the product is part of the plot, yet without mentioning it, whereas the Italians prefer branded content.

Regarding the final research question, it has been confirmed that the channels of the influencers in each country studied do not advertise dangerous or illegal products, and they

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comply with the regulations recommended by the Community Guidelines. The TikTok mega influencers (IAB, 2022) do not publish videos in which products such as weapons, drugs, alcohol, or tobacco are displayed or promoted, nor do they insert advertisements that could result in potential fraud or scams, nor promote casino offers or gambling, nor violate the right to privacy through the sharing of personal data. These results challenge the conclusions presented in the report entitled, "TikTok without filters" (BEUC, 2021), which states that this type of content is common on this social network. The findings herein also confirm that TikTok seems to be developing diligent control guidelines in order to protect young people, and that tiktokers themselves engage in self-regulation regarding the insertion of illegal or dangerous content, so as to avoid being removed from the network. However, according to Sacks and Suk Yi Looi (2020), regulations regarding the display of unhealthy food and drink on social media might not be as effective, due to the fact that such products are not considered harmful by TikTok, so influencers can openly advertise them on their profiles. Therefore, the proposals by Martínez-Pastor, Cetina-Presuel and Castelló-Martínez (2022), Tur-Viñes and Castelló-Martínez (2021), and Sixto-García and Álvarez-Vázquez (2020), which recommend implementing stricter regulations, should be taken into account. This becomes even more urgent if we consider that a third of European users are not able to discern between commercial and not-for-profit content in commercial posts that imitate the look and feel of the social network (*elmundo.es*, 2018). Moreover, we should also bear in mind the vulnerability of TikTok's audience, which is mainly comprised of young people under the age of 24 (Kemp, 2023).

7. Limitations of the study and future research

This study has a few limitations. The first is related to the nationalities of the tiktokers, as it would be useful to extend the research to other EU and non-EU countries. It would also be of interest to observe whether or not they include advertising, what advertising formats they choose, and whether they publish products or services that have been labelled as illegal or dangerous. The second limitation is related to the number of people who follow the tiktokers, which may have lowered the presence of forbidden products in the videos. As mega influencers with more than one million followers have been selected for this study, using a category with a lower number of followers might indicate different advertising practices, and could even reveal advertising related to banned, dangerous, or illegal products that do not comply with the social network's regulations. The third constraint is linked to the labelling of illicit and dangerous products, whose definition has been adapted to those of the social network itself, which may vary on other SNs.

For future research, it will be interesting to explore whether tiktokers continue to maintain a balance between narrative content and advertising without abusing the insertion of adverts into their audio-visual productions, or whether they follow along the same path as other social networks that have become advertising showcases. It will also be interesting to delve deeper into the possible hybridisation of advertising and public relations in social network productions, in order to clarify whether they should continue to be identified as different domains, or whether they should merge together on social networking sites. The incorporation of advertising on social networks raises certain ethical questions as well. Although its purpose is mainly for fun and entertainment, the advertising embedded in audio-visual content should be clearly labelled as such, which is a situation that encourages us to examine the need to increase these practices by means of hashtags in order to clearly identify advertising content which, on many occasions, is viewed by minors.

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