

Sexual-affective education on Instagram: branded content in Spanish sex shops

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Modern day branded content generates engagement with users and this participation is taking place on social networks. This article uses methodological triangulation to analyze how the most popular Spanish sex shops manage branded content on Instagram and how much importance do they give to sexual education in their communication. It is important to analyze this scope in Spain where the values of Francoist dictatorship continue to survive in certain sectors of society. The results demonstrate that sex shops opt for a communicative model in which the product is relegated to the background, while the dissemination of content on sexual education constitutes the essential element of the branded content.

Keywords: Branded content; sex education; sexual-affective education; Instagram.

1. Introduction

With the popularization of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), users turn to the social networks to socialize and forge relationships in sexual-affective matters. Social networks have become a friendly and casual place where users talk openly. Since 2021, Instagram established itself as the second most important social platform (and most important social network) in Spain, behind only WhatsApp (We are Social & Hootsuite, 2023). With the appearance of these new platforms, new media now plays a crucial part in the configuration of identity, including the formation and discovery of sexuality (Cosimo Marco Scarcelli et al., 2021).

Globally, social networks not only act as a source of information on sex education, but have also modified the ways that people relate to each other and establish sexual-affective connections. The emergence of practices such as sexting (Gaia Cucci et al, 2023) or cybersex and dating applications such as Tinder (Samuel Morris & Amy Shields, 2023) are examples of this. In the Spanish case, two sides to sex education on the internet can be confirmed. On the one hand, informative content is evident, while on the other, sexual violence and pornography are also prevalent (Mercedes Durán & Carmen Rodríguez-Domínguez, 2020). Additionally, people in Spain, for the most part, are not able to discern between scientific and specialized information content and they have difficulty differentiating the veracity of the sources (Paula Herrero-Diz et al, 2019). In fact, 73% of them admit to having once believed to be true a message that was actually false (Charo Sádaba-Chalezquer & Ramón Salaverría-Aliaga, 2022).

The growing interest in the field of sex education on social media is a trend that is bolstered by the wide range of online personalities relating to sexuality on platforms such as Instagram (Ruby Sciberras & Claire Tanner, 2022). Some of the most relevant figures in the Hispanic context are @carolina.sexcoach, a sex educator with 3.6 million followers; @linabetancurtc, a sex coach with 1.2 million followers; and @mamacasquet, a journalist specializing in sexuality that has 536.6K followers. Behind of all of these profiles are women with a specific training in sexual education, providing rich content on sex education that is focused on enjoyment rather than just traditional prevention. They also provide information on the use of contraceptive methods and sexually transmitted diseases.

This form of interaction between users and sexfluencers (sexual health influencers) is not accidental but is based on the trends and consumption models typical of digital native media (Corey Baham et al, 2022) and on the consolidation of communication as a basis for the development of healthy and responsible sexual practices (Caridad Álvarez, 2010). In

general, Spanish people follow more socially/politically active profiles in which they see their personal values reflected (Santiago Giraldo-Luque & Cristina Fernández-Rovira, 2020). Content often relates to social campaigns such as the fourth wave of feminism (Nancy Mauro-Flude, 2021).

The Spanish context is especially significant. The Francoist dictatorship, in power in Spain between 1939 and 1975, promoted the idea of sexual education defined by men controlling their wives' sexuality and women satisfying male desires (Mónica García, 2017), while encouraging the idea of the married and procreative couple (Anne-Gaelle Regueillet, 2004).

Franco's dictatorship was profoundly Catholic in nature, imposing the segregation of roles between women and men and assigning stereotyped behaviors to each. The Catholic Church perpetuated a certain model of women throughout the dictatorship, re-embracing traditional values of Spanish society and projecting the values of national Catholicism onto education. Women were traditionally educated with a focus on domestic responsibilities, such as household chores, marriage, and motherhood (Teresa González, 2009). The Catholic Church imposed sexual ethics centered on indissoluble marriage and a sense of sexual shame, while the family served as a means of controlling and regulating sexuality.

While Francoist values persisted in Spanish society for years, the dictator's death and the beginnings of the political transition paved the way for the emergence of sexual liberation movements in Spain (Valentín Galván, 2013). Of particular significance was 'La Movida', a countercultural movement that emerged in Madrid and spread to other cities. The 1978 Constitution led to the repeal of sexist articles in the Penal Code, such as adultery and cohabitation, as well as the decriminalization of advertising contraceptive methods. Also, in 1978 same-sex sexual activity was decriminalized. In 1981, divorce was legalized, and in

1985, abortion was permitted under certain conditions (María del Mar López-Cabrales, 2000).

Therefore, sexuality is not experienced in the same way for those born and raised in the early years of Francoism as it is for those born during the baby-boom (born between 1957 and 1977), for millennials (born between 1982 and 1994) or for generation Z (born between 1994 and 2010). Not only do these different generations see life and interpret reality in different ways, but their consumption models also differ. Millennials and Generation Z, the predominant users of Instagram, opt for content in which social responsibility is prevalent (Ella Ben et al., 2022; Meg D. Bishop et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, families continue to be the first privatizing element of a free relationship with individual sexuality (Alfredo Oliva & Águeda Parra, 2001; Anna Page et al., 2023). Families and schools continue to be the most used channels for sexual-affective training, although there has been a significant increase in self-teaching on the internet in recent years (Alessandra Micalizzi, 2021; Kristian Daneback et al., 2012). Furthermore, the Spanish educational system shows weaknesses regarding sexual training for young people. Sexual education has traditionally focused only on sex and what is purely biological and genitalized (Esther Bellido, 2022). Among the main weaknesses are an insufficient and imprecise legal framework for adequate training in educational centers, and the lack of social and educational involvement in the promotion of inclusive sexuality education that is respectful of all individuals and identities (José Luis Martínez et al., 2014; Mario Mikulincer & Phillip R. Shaver, 2019). Although in recent years efforts have been made to improve sexual education, now that institutions have internalized that such improvements are essential for a full and safe life, inequalities continue to be noted in the allocation of resources and topics between different regions. It has also been discovered that encouraging students to

access educational media outside of schools can more effectively promote sexual health (Ulises Alfredo López et al., 2023).

Previous studies analyze the role of sexfluencers. However, there is no research that analyzes sexual education through sex shops in Spain. This begs the following questions: How is the branding strategy of Spanish sex shops defined and how much importance do they give to sexual education in their communication? (RQ1). How can we define the branded content that they publish on Instagram? (RQ2). These are the research questions that this study is based on. Firstly, the results of the analysis of each sex shop are presented, followed by the comparative results. The conclusions suggest that Spanish sex shops are developing an important role in sex education and that their use of Instagram bolsters their connections with people. This investigation constitutes an important contribution to the field as there are no previous studies that analyze branded contents for sex education disseminated by sex shops. Only one indirectly related piece can be found (Daneback et al., 2011) that analyzes the purchase of erotic merchandise over the internet.

2. Status of the issue

Engagement has acquired great importance as the consumer's commitment to the brand is a fundamental tool in the development of a company's strategy. Organizations are looking for new ways to connect with the public so as to create and maximize valuable engagement through acts of connection, affinity and conversation (Cristina del Pino & Ricardo Reinares, 2013), especially with the younger population (Thuy Nguyen et al., 2019).

Social networks play a fundamental role in the quest for engagement. In Spain, 85% of users between the ages of 16 and 70 have a social media profile to which they connect regularly (IAB, 2021). Networks have become one of the most propitious settings for the implementation of pull techniques (Valter Vieira et al., 2022) by allowing the consumer to

make the active decision to access content, containing advertising or not, that organizations make available to the public (Joaquín de Aguilera-Moyano et al., 2015).

Corporations have rejected advertising techniques that harass consumers. Rather, it is now the user who shows interest in the brand. Advertising in an informative or entertaining way is increasingly valued more than that based on motivational or inspirational messages (IAB, 2021). The appropriate management of engagement secures public loyalty: they are not only passive subjects who consume, but also other highly active ones who even act as brand advocates. The influence of the brand is increased without assuming an extra outlay in the advertising budget (Alba-María Martínez-Sala et al., 2019) because, on many occasions, it is the users themselves who advertise it, even if only to boost their own personal profiles' prestige.

As part of the transition from consumers to adprosumers, and whilst active in a constant search for fresh and dynamic content, consumers opt for corporate profiles that add value to their browsing experience (Małgorzata Bartosik-Purgat & Joanna Bednarz, 2021). In this context, strategies such as product placement, brand placement, custom publishing, advertising, content marketing, branded content or branded entertainment were found (de Aguilera-Moyano et al., 2015).

Branded content actions exemplify the importance of producing content created specifically to be consumed on networks, given its potential for the diffusion, assimilation and support of the brand by consumers (Millissa F. Y. Cheung & W. M. To, 2022). Active users are those who are more likely to develop their personality according to the type of products and brands they consume (brand engagement in self-concept). Therefore, it is this type of profile that is more likely to act as a brand ambassador (Christina Giakoumaki & Areti Krepapa, 2019).

In addition to the commitment of brands to create spaces that have a life of their own and that go beyond a message that communicates benefits in a conventional way, it must be added that brand content distances itself from traditional advertising strategies (Nermain Al-Issa et al., 2022), focusing on the relationship with the customer instead of the immediate sale. What is really sought is the transfer of the values of the brand to establish a link with the public that allows increasing the sales capacity and the positioning of the brand (Vikas Kumar, 2020).

71% of consumers say they are tired of brands' empty promises on social media (Havas, 2021), so some users have themselves become providers or digital brands: for example, someone who uses a webcam to offer live sex for subscribers (Paul Bleakley, 2014). On the other hand, audiences have changed and are increasingly demanding more from organizations. Engagement is only achieved when users feel that they are part of the group and, therefore, want the brand to take a stance in favor of social movements such as feminism, anti-racism or the fight for LGTBIQ+ rights (Trevor G. Gates & Mark Hughes, 2021) while people previously not involved in commercial sex have now started both providing and buying commercial sexual services in digital contexts as those environments seem to be safer and more discreet than offline ones (Nicola Döring et al., 2021).

The digital media landscape is constantly changing, and more people than ever are involved in sexual activities with their smartphones (Annalisa Anzani et al., 2018). The intensity of posting and sexual interaction depends on the characteristics of social media users, such as age (Lucia F. O'Sullivan, 2014). However, a positive attitude regarding ICT was associated with a more eager engagement in sexual interaction in digital contexts (Jessica M. Szczuka et al., 2019; Rudolf Stark et al., 2018).

This popularization of the social networks has differentiated sexuality from reproduction in the Western world in recent decades, promoting individual pleasure and a

more open conception of sex (Daniel Ruiz & Madeline Melchor, 2015). Related to this, the visibility of sex shops has been increasing in recent years as the stigmas surrounding the users of these products and spaces have faded away (Breanne Fash & Eric Swank, 2013). This occurs because how progressively sexuality and sexual activities have been normalized, and not only seen as something fully private (Roberto M. Goldstein, 2013). One of the ways in which sexuality has been normalized is by increasing its visibility on social media, though, for instance, the sex shops accounts. However, as much as this visibility has increased, their number of followers (through large Platanomelon at almost a million) are not comparable to other Spanish Instagram accounts. In this sense, the number of people following the Spanish sex shops is significantly lower compared to the number of people that follow Spanish celebrities like Georgina Rodríguez (54.6 million) or Rosalía (28.3 million). Numbers are also much lower than those of the companies at the top of the list of most-followed organizations, such as Zara (61.4 million) or Real Madrid (150 million).

In the branded content, the consumer has transitioned from being a passive subject to becoming an asset in the production and dissemination of the message (Miguel Carvajal & Iker Barinagarrementeria, 2021). The brands can act as decisive actors in the formation of public opinion because everything that they make visible in their profiles can be assimilated by their followers as a model. Meanwhile, *homo consumus* consume content related to their ethical values, in such a way that the brands they select become a reflection and an extension of their belief systems (Carla Rogel & Mar Marcos, 2020). Therefore, it is important that sexual education transmitted through social networks offers a comprehensive vision of sexuality that includes psychosocial elements, sexual diversity and gender equality (Sonia Barriuso-Ortega et al., 2022).

This explains why 53% of consumers are willing to pay more for a brand if it is involved in environmental campaigns or social causes like sex education, or why 64% prefer

companies with a certain social reputation rather than those that seek to reap economic rewards (Havas, 2021). For years it has been known that what makes the difference between one product and another is not its technical features, but the image and symbols that surround the brand. So, the branded content of today, including that known in Spanish sex shops, must consider the innovation, relevance, brand values, user experience, engagement and profitability of their products (Nathalie Dens & Karolien Poels, 2023).

3. Methodology

The main objective of this research is to analyze the branded content of the main Spanish online sex shops on Instagram and to verify if this business sector is committed to sexual-affective education through the content it disseminates. The analysis is based on methodological triangulation (descriptive method, qualitative method and quantitative method) (Sonia Aguilar & Julio Barroso, 2015) as it allows for the quality control of the results obtained beyond purely quantitative data, as this does not suffice when investigating social networks or sex education (Rogel & Marcos, 2020).

The sample is made up of the 8 most popular online Spanish sex shops (Table 1). As of 05/02/2022, their number of Instagram followers ranges between 969,000 and 2,126. Since the population is small and variable, a non-probabilistic sample is ideal for this research (Pedro López-Roldán & Sandra Fachelli, 2015).

Table 1. Sample of the sex shops analyzed, profile and number of followers

Source: Own elaboration

Company	Instagram Profile	Number of followers
Platanomelón	@platanomelon	969k
Diversual	@diversualshop	419k
ByPlay	@byplay	47k
EroticFeel	@eroticfeel_es	25.3k
EasyToys	@easytoys.es	13k
Vive Sexshop	@vivesexshop	10.2k
Be Lover Erotic Markets	@belovermarket	9,816
Divergente	@tiendaerotica_villalba	2,126

The investigation was developed in two phases. The first consists of an analysis that is both qualitative and quantitative to provide a description of the accounts according to variables linked to the organizational identity (user, verification, description, email, location, and brand values and attributes) and to the communication strategies (use of highlights, crossmedia dissemination, and use of reels and videos). Moreover, a comparative analysis was conducted to assess the company's presence on Instagram and corporate web pages, in order to verify the degree of coherence in their organizational image.

In this last part, only the qualitative methodology was used to analyze the brand values according to the following items:

a) The level of development (beginner/professional). Brands are defined as professional if they use proper terminology (biologically accurate terminology), instead of slang.

b) Dialogic genre (informative/entertaining/educational/popular/varied). Dialogic genres are categorized based on their purpose, encompassing those dedicated to transmitting information, providing entertainment, and offering educational content to the user community. They incorporate journalistic elements typical of network communication.

c) Diversity (inclusive/feminist/activist/linguistic). This criterion evaluates whether brands prioritize the integration of diverse perspectives, such as feminist or linguistic viewpoints, in their publications.

d) Type of content (chaotic/poor/graphic or visual/explicit/childish/elegant). The quality of content is evaluated by examining information visualization resources and the richness of sources.

e) Aesthetic appearance (discreet/modern/fun/striking/colorful/ornate). This takes into account the design, specifically whether it adheres to classic or modern aesthetics, and the use of color in posts.

f) Type of product offered (cheap/quality/safe). Products are assessed based on their safety and quality, relying on the sources used for recommendations. Products are categorized as either being reliable and higher-priced or cheaper and potentially less dependable.

g) Proximity (friendly or close/small site/local/global). Communication proximity is determined according to the journalistic criteria for information transmission.

These variables were conceived with an understanding that the qualitative analysis may highlight the need to incorporate new factors. The branded content of the posts was classified as advertising, informative/educational and entertainment. The analysis of the cases meant considering a fourth variable (mix) for those cases in which educational content is presented from a playful perspective.

In the second phase, a quantitative method was used to collect specific audience data from all posts (n = 76) by the different profiles over a one-month period (April 2022). Both the activity of the company and the interaction of the users through likes and comments were analyzed. Content analysis was also used to manually explore each permanent post. Permanent posts play a significant role in branded content strategies, as they are the first content that users see when accessing a profile.

4. Results

4.1 Individual results

4.1.1 Platanomelón

The brand profile is characterized by a casual and exuberant use of color and language (Figure 1).






Figure 1. Platanomelón Instagram posts

This communication strategy is consistent with the company's mission to challenge taboos surrounding the sex market, and to promote a more approachable, natural and enjoyable experience for the user (Table 2). Even the name of the brand (banana and watermelon) makes a metaphorical and humorous reference to the nature and mission of the company without being obscene or inappropriate.

Table 2. Platanomelón’s Instagram profile

Source: Own elaboration.

User	@platanomelon										
Verified	Yes										
Description	 Toys that #youwillplaywithagain  On YouTube we’ve already reached 1 million!  Thousands of happy people										
Email provided	Yes (hola@platanomelon.com)										
Location provided	No										
Crossmedia	Yes (Email, phone, online shop, blog, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok)										
Highlights	Yes										
Reels	Yes										
Posts	Yes										
Guides	Yes										
Videos	Yes										
Brand values and attributes	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>Web</td> <td>Instagram</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Professionalism</td> <td>Professional</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Modern</td> <td>Fun</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Informative</td> <td>Inclusive</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Varied</td> <td>Entertaining</td> </tr> </table>	Web	Instagram	Professionalism	Professional	Modern	Fun	Informative	Inclusive	Varied	Entertaining
Web	Instagram										
Professionalism	Professional										
Modern	Fun										
Informative	Inclusive										
Varied	Entertaining										

When comparing the values mentioned on Instagram versus those on the website, professionalism, modernity, the educational nature of the store and the variety of products all appear as core concepts. The image on the social network, of an informative outlet on sexual-affective education offered by sexologists and psychologists, is therefore consistent. Quantitatively, user interaction is favorable, since on average each post gets 18,667 likes and 284.23 comments (Table 3). Only one of the posts includes commercial and promotional content, so 92.3% of the posts are based on branded content. Those of an informational nature stand out above those focused on consumer entertainment.

Table 3. Posts, likes, comments and branded content features on sex shops' Instagram profiles

Source: Own elaboration (April, 2022).

Profile	Number of posts	Likes on average	Comments on average	Branded content feature			
				Product advertising content	Informative branded content	Entertainment branded content	Mix
@platanomelon	13	18,667	284.23	1 (7.69%)	8 (61.53%)	3 (23.07%)	1 (7.69%)
@diversualshop	8	8,681	2,364.5	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	4 (50%)	1 (12.5%)
@byplay	10	2,560	38.6	0	8 (80%)	1 (10%)	1 (10%)
@eroticfeel es	8	313.88	5.38	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	4 (50%)	0
@easytoys.es	25	134.64	35.8	13 (52%)	6 (24%)	6 (24%)	0
@vivesexshop	2	115	0	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0	0
@belovermarket	7	34.72	0	1 (14.28%)	2 (28.57%)	4 (57.15%)	0
@tiendaerotica_villalba	3	89.67	0	0	2 (66.67%)	1 (33.33%)	0

4.1.2 Diversual

Diversual's Instagram description highlights three key elements that define the brand: a commitment to improving sexuality, a global perspective and a focus on sexual-affective education. Like its closest competitor, Platanomelón, it is characterized by transparency and the use of crossmedia tools.

The name of the brand refers to diversity and sexual freedom, ideals that are reflected on both the website and the Instagram account (Table 4).

Table 4. Diversual's Instagram profile

Source: Own elaboration

User	@diversualshop	
Verified	No	
Description	<p>♥ Toys that improve your sexuality</p> <p>🌐 Shipping worldwide</p> <p>🏠 Sex education for everyone</p>	
Email provided	Yes (Web form)	
Location provided	No	
Crossmedia	Yes (Email, phone, online shop, blog, TikTok, YouTube)	
Highlights	Yes	
Reels	Yes	
Posts	Yes	
Guides	No	
Video	Yes	
Brand values and attributes	<p>Web</p> <p>Friendly/close</p> <p>Educational</p> <p>Professional</p> <p>Discrete</p>	<p>Instagram</p> <p>Friendly</p> <p>Educational</p> <p>Safe</p> <p>Striking/happy</p>

The company effectively communicates its values on social networks by using a casual color scheme and colloquial language, which helps them connect with their audience (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Diversual Instagram posts

Eight different images were posted, averaging one every 3.5 days. Although information based on sex education is evident, there are also other posts focused solely on the presentation of a product on their website. The only information that did not present brand content was the last one of the month (Table 3), in which a raffle for a kit of products from their online shop was announced. The post sought to secure the user's participation through likes and comments as the legal base to enter the contest. In fact, this is the only post that exceeds one hundred comments (18,324), which attests to the fact that the product giveaway was well received by the audience. 87.5% of the posts are based on branded content: educational content (62.5%) prevails over informative content (25%), while purely commercial or advertising content accounts for only 12.5%.

4.1.3 ByPlay

ByPlay differs from the aesthetics of its competitors and opts for a visuals based on dark colors and dull sub-tones. Lilac and green are the predominant colors in their communication strategy (Figure 3).






Figure 3. ByPlay Instagram posts

Among the organization's stated corporate values, as seen on both on their website and Instagram, are a commitment to inclusivity, education, and product safety and quality.

On Instagram, they emphasize their role as sexual and emotional educators and prioritize providing information over selling sex-related toys (Table 5).

Table 5. ByPlay’s Instagram profile

Source: Own elaboration.

User	@byplay_	
Verified	No	
Description	 To the orgasm and beyond  Sex education and sex-related toys  Sex shop, discover here	
Email provided	No	
Location provided	No	
Crossmedia	Yes (webpage)	
Highlights	Yes	
Reels	Yes	
Posts	Yes	
Guides	Yes	
Video	Yes	
Brand values and attributes	Web Inclusive Sex education Fun Safe	Instagram Inclusive Educational Graphic/visual Childish

ByPlay focuses on branded content and sex education in their social media posts. Many of their publications (Table 3) provide advice on improving sexual practices, while others promote social activism influenced by feminism. For instance, they challenge myths perpetuated by heteropatriarchal education (like that "having a lot of sex does not widen the vagina"). Other posts promote body positivity by contributing to normalize the presence of pubic hair in sexual encounters.

Across the ten posts collected, 25,603 likes were counted. All (100%) are based on branded content through pieces that have been designed to entertain the user (20%) or provide sex education (80%).

4.1.4 EroticFeel

EroticFeel is the first shop analyzed that contains a reference to the location of the company in the description/username (@eroticfeel_es) (Table 6). Like Platanomelón and Diversual, it uses tools such as Linktree and Smartlink to provide different links to profiles on social networks and web pages within the same space.

Table 6. EroticFeel’s Instagram profile

Source: Own elaboration.

User	@eroticfeel_es	
Verified	No	
Description	Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Is it an online sex shop? The new Karmasutra? A class in sex education? The door to your fantasies? Yes, to all 🍑 👉 Follow us	
Email provided	No	
Location provided	No	
Crossmedia	Yes (Website, YouTube)	
Highlights	Yes	
Reels	Yes	
Posts	Yes	
Guides	Yes	
Video	Yes	
Brand values and attributes	Web Activist Educational Fun	Instagram Activist Educational Chaotic

The contents are not presented in an orderly and continuous way in a visual sense. Rather, templates with significant aesthetic differences are mixed (sober compositions with heavily embellished ones). This may be somewhat confusing for the user (Figure 4).



Figure 4. EroticFeel Instagram posts

Generally, the posts are balanced between products based on branded content and others of a merely promotional or commercial nature. EroticFeel uploaded eight permanent posts to their profile that feature different formats in terms of image production and video editing. On average, every week EroticFeel uploaded two posts. During the third week of the month, new content was only published on the Instagram profile on a Monday (the 11th), with no additional posts until a week later. This indicates a potential gap in their content planning and a lack of consistent posting schedule during that period.

Regarding the presence of branded content in the permanent publications of the profile (Table 3), those of a ludic nature (50%) feature more often than those of an informative nature (25%). Compositions that do not provide particularly valuable information for the user are found in commercial or promotional content (25%). It is striking that their large number of followers (25.3K) only interact with the brand 319.25 times per publication on average.

4.1.5 EasyToys

EasyToys' visual identity is based, once again, on bright and vibrant colors (Figure 5).



Figure 5. EasyToys Instagram posts

The Instagram profile is unverified and has 13K followers (Table 7). The business location is not specified in the description of the account, though the name of the Instagram profile clearly indicates the country (@easytoys.es). The user lacking the ".es" domain in their email address is likely affiliated with the company's headquarters located in the

Netherlands. However, the Spanish delegation's influence is not properly reflected on the biography, which redirects users to different pages showcasing the original profile of the brand, in Dutch. Spanish users may feel disconnected from the brand due to the lack of effort to address the language barrier.

Table 7. EasyToys' Instagram profile

Source: Own elaboration.

User	@easytoys.es	
Verified	No	
Description	We love to help make your sex life even better! Thanks to all the best toys and to our professional advice.	
Email provided	No	
Location provided	No	
Crossmedia	Yes (shop, blog, Spotify, Facebook, Instagram)	
Outstanding stories	Yes	
Reels	Yes	
Posts	Yes	
Guides	No	
Video	Yes	
Brand values and attributes	Web Varied Cheap Elegant	Instagram Varied Quality Chaotic

EasyToys is a company with significant activity on Instagram, posting 25 times in 30 days. 48% of the publications feature branded content based on education or entertainment in relation to sexuality. As such, of the companies analyzed here, EasyToys is the sex shop that uploads the most promotional content to its feed (52%, see Table 3). In commercial publications, the average interaction, either through comments or likes, stands at 179, while in those with branded content it drops to 157. However, it is important to note that interactions in advertising content are altered by two raffles that compel users to interact with the publication.

4.1.6 Vive Sexshop

Vive Sexshop has 10.2K followers, a sign of the commercial purpose of the brand. Unlike other companies, at no time is social or outreach work valued. This is evidenced by the inclusion of only the website address, rather than any corporate profiles, as the only hyperlink on the brand's Instagram page, further underscoring its commercial focus (Table 8).

Table 8. Vive Sexshop's Instagram profile

Source: Own elaboration

User	@vivesexshop (vivelavita_es, now)	
Verified	No	
Description	Expert distributors of happiness 🍷 24h-delivery 🔗 Get to know us! 📍	
Email provided	No	
Location provided	No	
Crossmedia	Yes (website)	
Highlights	Yes	
Reels	Yes	
Posts	Yes	
Guides	No	
Video	Yes	
Brand values and attributes	Web	Instagram
	Striking	Colorful
	Explicit	Discreet
	Cheap	Educational

Regarding the publication routines, the lack of activity is the main characteristic of this sex shop (Table 3). With only two posts uploaded, one in the middle of the month and the other at the end, the company appears inactive on this platform. Despite the account's sizeable following, its use of Instagram appears to be minimal.

Of note among the sex shop's limited publication activity is a post dedicated to brand content, wherein various types of kisses that may occur during a sexual encounter are explained. Notably, this publication lacks any direct reference to products available on the website, thus precluding any promotional intent. The opposite is true of the second post,

which explains the function of a male masturbator sold on the site. In terms of audience engagement, the former has triple the number of likes as the latter, despite neither eliciting any comments.

4.1.7 Be Lover Erotic Markets

The bulk of this brand's activity focuses on face-to-face sales, something that is reflected in its corporate communication. Contrary to the other profiles analyzed here, no information is found in the Instagram description (Table 9) regarding the online sale of erotic toys, nor is there any mention of participation in sexual-affective education.

Table 9. Be Lover Erotic Markets' Instagram profile

Source: Own elaboration

User	@belovermarket	
Verified	No	
Description	Santa Brígida, 4 📍 Metro Tribunal. Hortaleza, 30 📍 Metro Chueca. Mesonero Romanos, 3 📍 Metro Callao. TikTok: belovermarkets	
Email provided	No	
Location provided	Yes	
Crossmedia	Yes	
Highlights	Yes (website)	
Reels	Yes	
Posts	Yes	
Guides	No	
Video	Yes	
Brand values and attributes	Web	Instagram
	Feminist	Inclusive
	Professional	Poor
	Overdone	Overdone
	Educational	Educational

While the Instagram feed of this brand may showcase pink tones, which are consistent with their signature corporate color, the profile contains a significant number of disruptive and decorative elements in their posts. This could potentially cause confusion for the user, as

the inclusion of seemingly unrelated elements such as flowers and animals may not align with the company's mission (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Be Lover Erotic Markets Instagram posts

Seven posts were uploaded throughout the month. All of them were distributed continuously, so there were no weeks without activity. No post registered a single comment and the average number of likes is 34. Most of the publications (85%) are based on branded content, specifically entertainment, cultural recommendations and social movements. such as the line of feminist thinking that stresses the importance of sexual consent (Table 3).

4.1.8 Divergente

This account has the smallest following of all those studied. With 2,126 followers, it is an emerging brand. Nonetheless, in terms of average number of likes, Divergente actually surpasses other companies (Table 3). Pink is once again the corporate color of reference, so the color range is similar to that of Diversual or Platanomelón.

Table 10. Divergente’s Instagram profile

Source: Own elaboration

User	@ tiendaerotica_villalba	
Verified	No	
Description	§ Learning to orgasm ⌚ Timetable—>11-14h / 17-20:30h 😊 Tiktok +155k 🚚 Deliveries to the peninsula and the Balearic Islands 📦	
Email provided	No	
Location provided	No	
Crossmedia	Yes (website)	
Highlights	Yes	
Reels	Yes	
Posts	Yes	
Guides	No	
Video	No	
Brand values and attributes	Web	Instagram
	Fun	Poor
	Cheap	Beginner
	Small	Local

Divergente only posted three times, two of which were in the first week of the month. This limited frequency suggests a lack of consistent content management and suggests that the company does not adhere to a regular posting schedule on this social network. Consequently, their Instagram profile is relegated to a supplementary element within the brand's overall strategy.

The content presented is entirely derived from branded materials, and is underpinned by a strategy focused on sexual-affective education (Table 3). Throughout all publications, there is a consistent use of the brand's visual identity, including a cohesive use of colors and stylistic elements. These visual elements are further bolstered by graphic elements, such as various fonts, and sexual references that are often conveyed through food (Figure 7). Additionally, the brand employs a humorous approach through comic-satirical references, which successfully capture the attention of their target audience. It is worth noting that feedback from users is infrequent, and on average, each post receives 28 likes.



Figure 7. Divergente Instagram posts

4.2 Comparing results

In general terms, Instagram profiles show a clear relationship between the number of followers, the frequency with which content is published and the degree of interaction evidenced by users (Table 11). Plátanomelón and Diversual stand out, easily surpassing the others in terms of followers and engagement.

Table 11. Relationship between the number of followers, posts and interactions of the various sex shops

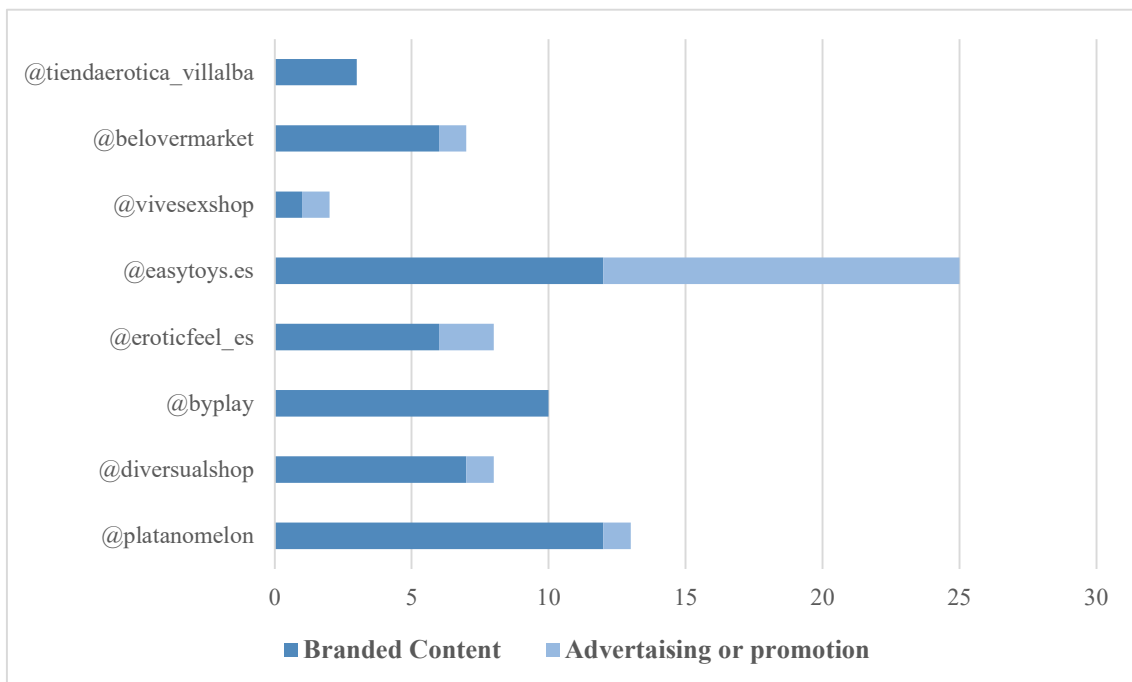
Source: Own elaboration.

Profile	Number of followers	Number of posts in April	Total interactions	User-interaction relationship
@platanomelon	969k	13	246,363	25.42%
@diversualshop	419k	8	88,362	21.08%
@byplay	47k	10	25,989	55.29%
@eroticfeel_es	25,3k	8	2,554	10.09%
@easytoys.es	13k	25	4,261	32.77%
@vivesexshop	10,2k	2	230	2.25%
@belovermarket	9,816	7	243	2.47%
@tiendaerotica_villalba	2,126	3	269	12.65%

It is apparent that accounts that post between 8 and 13 times per month (i.e., two or three times a week) achieve the highest level of engagement. Consequently, despite the fact that all of Divergente's posts are branded content, the lack of consistency in posting appears to be hindering engagement. In terms of content, a clear dedication to branded materials is observed, although it is important to differentiate between materials that are geared towards entertainment and those that are more informative in nature (Chart 1).

Chart 1. Comparison of the themes explored in the posts

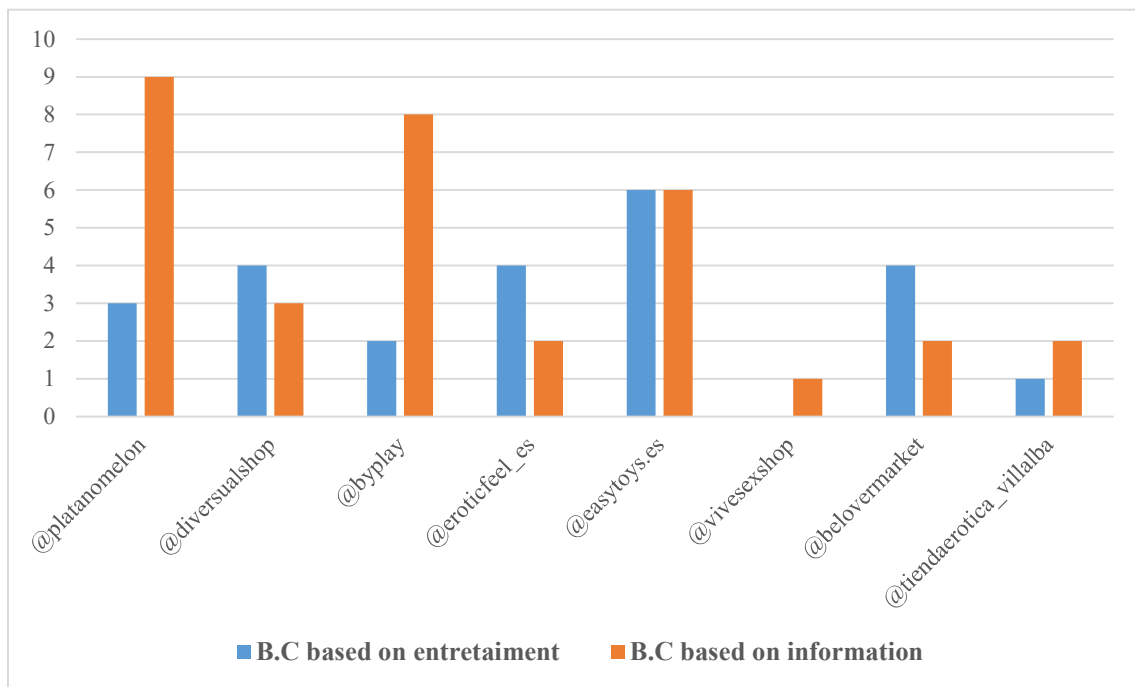
Source: Own elaboration.



Instagram is a fundamental piece of the communication strategies of sex shops. It can be confirmed that the majority of the profiles present a common trend in which branding content is more prevalent than advertising content. It is also undeniable that informative or educational information and content prevails over that which, despite having educational overtones, is essentially entertainment based (Chart 2). This suggests that there is a broader mission beyond merely stimulating purchases or entertainment. Specifically, there is an outstanding commitment to promoting the education and dissemination of content related to sexual-affective education.

Chart 2. Comparison of the nature of branded content on each profile

Source: Own elaboration.



5. Discussion and conclusions

The communication of Spanish sex shops on Instagram emphasizes sexual-affective education (RQ1). The branded content posted by these shops offers an effective avenue for promoting sex education both on Instagram and on their websites (RQ2). This is achieved by maintaining a focus on content related to sexual health and well-being, which is presented in both informative and entertaining styles.

Out of the 76 publications analyzed in April 2022, 57 (i.e., 75%) contained branded content. It was found that the public engages more with posts that feature branded content than those that only include a slogan or promotional message. However, there is an exception to this rule. In instances where the advertising content is linked to a raffle, and the legal terms and conditions mandate interaction through likes or comments, the level of engagement far surpasses that of branded content.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the information provided to users regarding sex education is not always appropriately verified. Only Platanomelón provides bibliographic references to support the data in its publications. EroticFeel features professionals responsible for disseminating information in its reels section, while Be Lover Market's long video section features interviews with qualified professionals such as sexologists and psychologists. Thus, only 37.5% of the companies analyzed mention, in some way, that the information they use in their posts based on branded content is derived from documentary or expert sources that ensure its accuracy.

Most sex shops rely heavily on branded content related to sex education in their posts. ByPlay and Divergente (100% brand content), Platanomelón (92.3%), Diversual (87.5%) and EroticFeel (75%) in particular stand out. For example, there are posts about squirting, and penis vs. Platanomelón clitoris; about love bombing or cubbing in ByPlay; or Diversual's basic sexual education guide.

All sex shops use reels to address issues related to sex education, so that the publications in the feed and the reels are the most common formats for sexual-affective branded content. While infographics are commonly used in feed posts, reels tend to adopt a more interactive approach, with 87.5% of cases featuring explanations from company members. The language used in these posts is often friendly and humorous, directly appealing to the user. Be Lover Markets stands out as the only company that adopts text-based videos, for example about fingering, ghosting or the 'Singapore kiss' (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Be Lover Instagram posts

The companies with the most significant number of followers maintain updated profiles with an aesthetically pleasing design that aligns with the brand's visual identity. Each account provides convenient tools to facilitate navigation to the company's website and online store. The presence of a link to the company's store in the Instagram description and through highlights is particularly noteworthy. Furthermore, 75% of the sex shops offer free access to a blog on their website, focusing on health and sex education.

This study confirms that the use of branded content by Spanish sex shops contributes to users' education (RQ1). This finding is consistent with Durán and Rodríguez-Domínguez (2020), who argued that in a context where the first contact with sexuality is often through pornography, it is beneficial to have platforms that provide sexual-affective education in an informative manner, free from filters, restrictions, or metaphors, and on a social network that is widely used by the Spanish youth. These Instagram users are closely connected with the profiles of sex because they address issues that resonate with them, such as feminism (Mauro-Flude, 2021).

Instagram brands are clearly targeting their products to millennials/older Generation Z, so the main limitation of this study is that it seems to restrict sex education to young people when, in reality, it is an issue that affects the entire population, be it men, women or anyone regardless of their gender identity. There are also adults who have not explored their

own sexuality in depth. In order to promote a healthy sexual development and well-being among people, it is crucial for them to learn about key issues such as consent, and the importance of respecting diverse identities, orientations, and sexual preferences.

Consequently, future research should explore this same issue on other social networks or spaces oriented toward different public profiles.

In conclusion, in a situation in which schools rarely provide the basics of sex education (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019), in which not all families are informed on issues related to sexuality (Oliva & Parra, 2001; Page et al., 2023) and in which pornography (Durán & Rodríguez-Domínguez, 2020) is the main tool used by minors to investigate and take their first steps in their sexual development (Micalizzi, 2021; Daneback et al., 2012), the existence of corporate profiles with trained professionals dedicated to sexual-affective education serves as an opportunity, rather than a threat, for today's society.

The construction of identity is a process that requires support. Considering the Spanish context, it is crucial to underscore that through professional, educational, aesthetically pleasing, and securely branded content, individuals in Spain are gradually shedding the prevalent sense of shame. Even when a member of Generation X engages with these posts, the exposure remains highly beneficial, as the influence of Franco's dictatorship still persists within society.

Sexual-affective branded content makes it possible to establish a strong connection with the public, which could even lead to brand engagement in the process of self-discovery if the commitment between the brand and the user is really convincing, as previously pointed out by Giakoumaki and Krepapa (2019). This would help to consolidate other support models for people who search on Instagram for informative resources about sex education.

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