European Advertising Standards Alliance

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EUROPEAN INFLUENCER MARKETING SWEEP 2026

Methodology
Overview

Ad Ethics

SECTION ONE

01 Purpose and methodological approach

The EASA Influencer Sweep 2026 uses an AI-assisted, rule-based methodology to analyse social media publications at scale and answer two questions: (1) what strength of evidence of commercial activity is observable in a publication; and (2) in the high-confidence commercial population, whether an advertising disclosure can be detected.

The Sweep monitors publications from January to March 2026 across Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands and Romania, on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube Shorts. Publications are compared between AdEthics and Non-AdEthics datasets. The findings presented in the accompanying report are restricted to creators with at least 10,000 followers, based on their highest observed follower count within each dataset.

Given the volume of content, manually assessing every publication is impracticable. Artificial intelligence is used to extract a predefined set of potentially relevant characteristics from publication text and available visual or platform information. The extracted signals are combined through predefined classification rules. The AI model's overall commercial judgement does not independently determine the final classification.

- AI-extracted characteristics from publications, together with available platform data;
- normalised disclosure wording and platform-native Paid Partnership status;
- derived evidence indicators and corroboration rules;
- hierarchical, rule-based classification; and
- automated consistency checks and human validation of a sample.

ANALYTICAL STAGE	QUESTION	REPORTED OUTPUT
1. Commercial-evidence classification	How strong is the observable evidence of commercial activity?	High-confidence, Low, Residual or No Commercial Evidence
2. Disclosure detection	Within the high-confidence commercial population, was disclosure wording and/or a platform-native Paid Partnership label detected?	Detected disclosure / No detected disclosure

SECTION TWO

02 Commercial-evidence classification

2.1 Classification framework

Each publication is assigned to one of four mutually exclusive evidence levels. The high-confidence category includes publications identified through disclosure signals and publications without disclosure but with sufficiently corroborated commercial evidence.

CLASSIFICATION	INTERPRETATION
High-Confidence Commercial Evidence	Disclosure is detected, or (in the absence of disclosure) sufficiently strong and corroborated commercial evidence satisfies a high-confidence rule.
Low Commercial Evidence	A pattern of commercial indications exists, but does not meet the high-confidence threshold.
Residual Commercial Evidence	Some possible promotional or commercial signals exist, but they are weak, isolated or ambiguous.
No Commercial Evidence	No preceding commercial-evidence rule is satisfied; no meaningful commercial pattern has been identified.

> These levels describe the strength of the evidence available to the methodology. They are not legal determinations of commerciality and should not be interpreted as probabilities of a contractual relationship. In particular, the Low and Residual levels are not included in the published disclosure-rate denominator.

2.2 Types of commercial evidence

EVIDENCE FAMILY	ILLUSTRATIVE SIGNALS
Commercial relationship	References to brand collaboration, product receipt, sponsorship support or ambassador/ongoing partnership arrangements.
Monetisation	Affiliate mechanisms, explicit affiliate references, promotional or discount codes.
Strong promotional signals	Sales pitches, calls to action, urgency/scarcity claims and similar promotional activity.
Supporting promotional signals	Prominent product presentation, unboxing/reveal, advertising-style execution, promotional language or prominent brand tagging.
Identifiable object/activity	Identifiable brand, company, product, service or commercial activity.

These signals are not interchangeable or individually conclusive. For example, product receipt, unboxing or a brand mention can occur in organic content. Supporting signals are used principally to corroborate stronger evidence; related supporting indicators are grouped to reduce double-counting.

2.3 High-confidence classification rules

A. Disclosure detected

A publication is included in High-Confidence Commercial Evidence when the platform-native Paid Partnership label is activated and/or relevant disclosure wording is detected. The disclosure signal is treated as evidence of commerciality for monitoring purposes; its detection is not a judgement that the wording or placement satisfies national law.

B. No disclosure detected: corroborated commercial evidence

Without a detected disclosure, the methodology applies a more conservative threshold. The publication must contain an identifiable brand, product, service or activity, and satisfy at least one of three high-confidence evidence rules:

RULE	REQUIRED PATTERN	HYPOTHETICAL ILLUSTRATION
A. Corroborated commercial relationship	A relationship signal (e.g. collaboration, product arrangement or ongoing relationship) plus a corroborating commercial/promotional or monetisation signal.	*A creator mentions a working relationship with a brand and includes a sales-oriented recommendation.*
B. Affiliate / promotional monetisation	Cleaned explicit monetisation evidence, or a promotional-code/affiliate signal supported by other specified evidence.	*A creator shares an identifiable product and a promotional code, supported by other commercial indications.*
C. Converging strong promotional signals	At least two specified strong promotional signals, with an AI commercial assessment and without the specified conflicting personal-content signal.	*A publication promotes a product with a sales pitch and purchase call to action in an advertising-style context.*

These are simplified illustrations; they are not verified cases from the monitored dataset. The full Boolean rules govern actual classification. The rules are evaluated in priority order A, then B, then C, for assignment to a primary route. A publication can nonetheless satisfy more than one of these rules. When analysis concerns prevalence of evidence types, independently met rules can be counted without forcing each publication into a single route; the resulting categories overlap.

> The approach prioritises precision over identifying every potentially commercial publication: ambiguous cases are retained in Low rather than automatically classified as high-confidence commercial content.

2.4 Low Commercial Evidence

This category captures publications without a high-confidence route but with a combination of commercial indications, such as a possible brand relationship with support, potential affiliate mechanisms, or combinations of promotional signals. The detected patterns remain insufficient to classify the content as high-confidence commercial evidence. They should not be described as confirmed commercial advertising.

2.5 Residual Commercial Evidence

This category captures weak, isolated or ambiguous commercial/promotional signals. The indicators do not provide a sufficient basis for concluding that the publication is commercial.

2.6 No Commercial Evidence

This category applies where none of the preceding evidence rules is satisfied. It does not establish that no commercial relationship existed outside the observable content.

03 SECTION THREE Disclosure detection

The Sweep results report whether a disclosure signal was detected in high-confidence commercial publications.

3.1 Sources of disclosure evidence

- Platform-native Paid Partnership functionality, where its activation is available in the dataset.
- Publication-derived text, included in captions.
- AI-identified wording extracted from available images or video, that appears to indicate disclosure in the publication.

Publication-derived and AI-identified text are analysed as complementary inputs to reduce reliance on one extraction source. Relevant text is normalised for casing, punctuation, hashtags, spacing and comparable formatting differences. Keyword matching uses controls for ambiguous word fragments and exclusion expressions, including expressions that negate advertising or sponsorship.

3.2 Reporting categories

DISCLOSURE RESULT	MEANING
Disclosure wording only	Relevant disclosure wording is detected, but the platform-native Paid Partnership label is not.
Paid Partnership label only	The platform-native label is detected, but no relevant disclosure wording is found.
Both methods	Disclosure wording and the platform-native label are detected.
No disclosure detected	Neither method is detected in the available inputs.

The three detected-disclosure methods are mutually exclusive, and together make up the publications with a detected disclosure. Each can be reported as a share of all high-confidence commercial publications, or as a share of disclosed high-confidence commercial publications.

04 SECTION FOUR Reporting population and comparisons

Published disclosure rates use only High-Confidence Commercial Evidence publications. Both disclosed high-confidence publications and undisclosed publications meeting a high-confidence evidence rule are included in the denominator. Low, Residual and No Commercial Evidence publications remain in the overall content-classification analysis but are excluded from disclosure-rate calculations.

The unit of analysis is a publication, not an individual creator: a creator may contribute multiple publications. AdEthics and Non-AdEthics findings describe observed differences between populations that may differ by follower size, country, platform and publication characteristics.

05 SECTION FIVE

Validation and methodological safeguards

- **Structured evidence rather than unrestricted AI judgement:** the AI extracts signals, while predefined logic establishes classifications.
- **Corroboration thresholds:** without disclosure, high-confidence classification requires stronger and/or combined evidence.
- **Conservative treatment of uncertain content:** Low and Residual classifications are excluded from the disclosure denominator.
- **Controls against double-counting:** closely related supporting signals are grouped rather than treated as independent corroboration.
- **Complementary sources of disclosure text:** publication-derived and AI-extracted wording are both checked.
- **Keyword false-positive controls:** text normalisation, whole-word matching where relevant and exclusion expressions.
- **Automated checks and human review:** samples and anomalous results are reviewed to assess methodological reliability.

06 SECTION SIX

Limitations and interpretation

- High-confidence is an analytical evidence threshold, not a legal finding that a commercial agreement exists. Some undisclosed arrangements may leave insufficient observable evidence to be detected.
- AI-assisted extraction and platform data can contain missing information, false positives, false negatives and contextual interpretation errors. Rule-based safeguards reduce but do not eliminate these limitations.
- A detected disclosure is not necessarily a legally sufficient disclosure. Conversely, an absent detected disclosure is not, by itself, a legal infringement.
- The reported disclosure rate is a publication-level detection measure, not a creator-level consistency.

ANNEX 1

A1 Methodological process overview

1

Collect publication and platform data

Publication text, available visual/video material, Paid Partnership status, relevant metadata.

2

Extract evidence using AI

Commercial relationship, monetisation, promotional and supporting signals; disclosure wording.

3

Prepare and normalise evidence

Group related indicators; normalise text; apply exclusions and create derived indicators.

4

Apply hierarchical commercial-evidence classification

Assign High-Confidence, Low, Residual or No Commercial Evidence. High-Confidence includes disclosure-detected content or sufficiently corroborated undisclosed content.

5

Select the reporting population

Include only High-Confidence Commercial Evidence publications in disclosure-rate calculations.

6

Detect disclosure methods

Identify wording only, Paid Partnership label only, both, or neither.

7

Validate and interpret

Use automated checks and human review; report observational results with limitations.

European Advertising Standards Alliance

The European Advertising Standards Alliance, EASA, is a network of 45 organisations representing 28 advertising self-regulatory organisations from Europe, 14 european and global organisations representing the advertising ecosystem (advertisers, agencies, media) and 3 digital pure-play companies. EASA coordinates the AdEthics framework programme.

AdEthics

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