

The Influence of Social Media Influencers on Young Consumers' Health Supplement Purchases: A Cross-sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

Background

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube have become integral to consumer behavior, particularly among younger demographics. Social media influencers, particularly in the health and wellness domain, play a crucial role in promoting dietary supplements. However, concerns persist regarding the authenticity of health claims, the potential risks associated with supplement use, and the ethical implications of influencer-driven marketing.

Materials and Methods

A cross-sectional study was conducted over six months with 200 participants aged 18–40 who regularly consume health supplements. Data were collected through an online survey using Google Forms. The inclusion criteria consisted of individuals who use health supplements and were willing to participate, while non-consumers and unwilling participants were excluded.

Results

The study found that 59.7% of respondents identified Instagram and TikTok as the primary platforms for supplement promotion. While 41.1% admitted that influencers influenced their purchasing decisions, 56.5% preferred consulting healthcare professionals before making a purchase. Concerns about misleading claims (49.5%) and supplement safety risks, including vitamin overdoses (62.4%), were prevalent. Consumers showed a preference for plant-based supplements (51.3%) and valued third-party certifications (56%) as indicators of product quality.

Conclusion

Social media influencers significantly impact consumer behavior regarding health supplements. However, ethical concerns and regulatory challenges necessitate improved transparency and scientific validation of promotional claims. Young consumers value authenticity, medical guidance, and verified product claims, highlighting the need for responsible marketing strategies. The success of influencer marketing hinges on fostering trust and ensuring informed decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media has transformed how individuals interact, access information, and make purchasing decisions, particularly among younger generations. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have become hubs for health and wellness content, where influencers leverage their reach to promote various products, including dietary supplements (1-3). Their personal narratives and perceived authenticity make them effective marketing tools, yet their influence raises critical concerns about misinformation, ethical marketing, and consumer safety.

Dietary supplements, including vitamins, minerals, herbal products, protein powders, and omega-3 fatty acids, are widely marketed for their purported health benefits. These products often serve as nutritional adjuncts or targeted health interventions (4). However, improper usage, lack of regulation, and overconsumption pose risks of adverse effects and long-term health implications. The role of social media influencers in shaping consumer perceptions and purchase behaviors remains a topic of debate (5,6).

Young consumers often trust influencers over traditional advertisements, yet many still seek guidance from healthcare

professionals. This presents a challenge in influencer-driven supplement marketing: the necessity of transparency, scientific backing, and ethical responsibility. Without proper regulation or disclosures, influencers may inadvertently contribute to misinformation, posing risks to public health (7,8).

This study examines the extent to which social media influencers shape young consumers' perceptions and purchasing decisions regarding health supplements. It explores consumer trust in influencer endorsements, their preferences for supplement types, and their awareness of potential risks. The findings aim to inform regulatory bodies, brands, and influencers about ethical marketing practices and the need for greater consumer education in health-related purchasing decisions.

Methodology

Study Design: A cross-sectional study was conducted among the general population in an urban setting.

The study included 200 participants aged 18 to 40 years who actively consumed health supplements.

Inclusion Criteria

- Individuals aged 18-40 years.
- Participants who regularly consume health supplements.

- Participants willing to provide informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals below 18 or above 40 years of age.
- Non-consumers of health supplements.
- Individuals unwilling to participate in the study.

Sampling Technique: Participants were selected randomly from an urban population. The survey was disseminated via social media platforms, and respondents were encouraged to share the survey link with their social circles to achieve the target sample size (snowball sampling).

Data Collection: A structured questionnaire was designed in Google Forms and was made available in the vernacular language of participants. The survey was conducted from July 2024 to September 2024 through various social networking channels.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee before data collection. Participants provided informed consent, and responses were anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

Results

A total of 200 participants were included in the study. Among them, 59.7% identified social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok as their primary sources of health supplement recommendations. 41.1% admitted that influencer recommendations influenced their purchasing decisions, while 56.5% preferred consulting healthcare professionals before making a purchase.

Concerns regarding misleading claims were prevalent, with 49.5% of participants expressing skepticism about supplement advertisements. Additionally, 62.4% recognized the risks associated with supplement overuse, including potential vitamin or mineral overdoses. 51.3% of respondents favored plant-based supplements, and 56% actively sought third-party certifications such as FDA or NSF approvals for quality assurance.

When evaluating influencers' credibility, 33.2% of participants found healthcare professionals acting as influencers more reliable than other social media personalities, while 22.6% believed credibility depended on the content. Influencers' content quality (35.3%) was a more significant factor in consumer trust than their follower count (18.9%).

Regarding supplement safety, 48.7% of respondents associated potential side effects with vomiting, 44% with rashes, and 38.7% with headaches. 33% of participants reported experiencing side effects from supplement use, highlighting the potential health risks of unregulated marketing.

Among social media platforms, YouTube (48.9%) was considered the most reliable source for supplement information, followed by Instagram (23.7%), Twitter (15.3%), and WhatsApp (12.1%). Additionally, 43.2% of participants reported that they always check supplement content before purchasing, whereas 18.9% admitted to never verifying product details.

These findings highlight the significant impact of social media on health supplement purchasing behavior, emphasizing the need for transparency, ethical marketing, and consumer awareness regarding product safety and authenticity.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that while social media influencers significantly impact consumer perceptions, a substantial proportion of young consumers remain skeptical of their claims and prioritize professional guidance.

The study aligns with previous research demonstrating that expertise and transparency are critical determinants of trust in health-related marketing (9,10). While content quality plays a more significant role than follower count, the prevalence of misleading claims highlights the need for stricter regulations on influencer-driven health promotions (11,12).

Despite the growing dominance of digital marketing, 56.5% of participants prioritized consulting healthcare professionals before purchasing supplements. This suggests that while influencers can drive awareness, they are not the sole decision-makers in health-related purchases. The preference for certified products further emphasizes the need for regulatory oversight to prevent the dissemination of unverified health claims.

Additionally, concerns about supplement safety were prominent, with 62.4% of respondents acknowledging the risk of overdosing

on vitamins or minerals. This reinforces findings by Catalani et al. (2020), who emphasized the risks associated with unregulated supplement use. Moreover, 33% of respondents reported experiencing side effects from supplement consumption, further underscoring the importance of informed decision-making.

These findings suggest that regulatory bodies should enforce stricter guidelines on influencer marketing to ensure consumer safety. Brands and influencers must adopt ethical marketing strategies, including transparent disclosures, scientific validation, and responsible promotion practices.

CONCLUSION

Social media influencers play a pivotal role in promoting health supplements, but their credibility is constrained by concerns over misleading claims and safety risks. While young consumers are influenced by digital promotions, many prioritize professional guidance and product authenticity. Ethical marketing practices, regulatory oversight, and consumer education are essential to ensure informed decision-making in health-related purchases.

Future research should explore demographic variations in consumer responses to influencer marketing, assess the long-term impact of digital health promotions, and examine the effectiveness of regulatory interventions in mitigating misinformation.

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