Mental Health and Social Capital: How Influencers Use Mental Health Topics to Promote Products and Drive Engagement

Abstract

Drawing on social capital theory, this study examines how mental health is used in sponsored influencer posts and whether different mental-health-related promotional topics are associated with Instagram engagement. Using 3,872 sponsored Instagram posts collected through Brandwatch, the study combines LLM-assisted text cleaning, BERTopic modeling, and OLS regression on log-transformed engagement outcomes. Results show that influencer mental health promotion is concentrated in therapy/wellness, mental-health-framed lifestyle content, and anxiety/sleep products. Topic significantly predicted Engagement Score, Likes, Comments, and Total Engagement. Higher-capital topics, which provide clearer informational, relational, or symbolic value, such as book/reading promotions and anxiety/sleep wellness content, were associated with higher engagement, whereas lower-capital topics were associated with lower engagement. The findings position mental health promotion by influencers as a double-edged strategy whose effectiveness depends on the social value followers derive from the content.

Keywords: mental health; influencer marketing; social capital; Instagram; engagement