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A Systematic Review of Influencer Marketing's Role in Shaping Consumer Health Behaviors Across Digital Platforms

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Abstract

These days social media influencers act as unannounced health communication agents for the young and middle age audiences, and this phenomenon is seen all across the globe. This phenomenon has achieved levels quite similar to national public health campaigns. Despite this, scholarly research on this trend remains conceptually fragmented and empirically inconsistent.

There are three reasons that led to this systematic review: there wasn't a systematic review that looked at influencer marketing and health communication from an advertising theory view; there was conflicting evidence about whether influencers had net positive or negative health effects; and there wasn't a classification framework to help researchers, practitioners, and regulators.

This systematic literature review synthesises 133 peer-reviewed empirical studies (N = 189,520 participants; 34 countries; 2018–2025) sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and EBSCO, following PRISMA 2020 protocols and narrative synthesis methodology. Four advertising theories viz., the Persuasion Knowledge Model, Source Credibility Theory, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, and McCracken's Meaning Transfer Model are deployed as an integrated four-stage persuasion architecture mapping reception, evaluation, processing, and internalisation.

Parasocial trust, meaning transfer, credibility, and virality are some of the persuasive strategies that make influencers good at promoting health. Now, these same set of influencing methods also make it easier to spread misinformation or false information, This paradox is more of structural rather than incidental. It cannot be resolved by regulation related with disclosure alone. From here, three conceptual aspects result: credibility paradox that extends Source Credibility Theory. Relational authenticity trumps institutional authority for sensitive health issues; A disclosure paradox that integrates the PKM with signaling theory. Here disclosure simultaneously provokes skepticism and grants an honesty premium. And finally a platform-moderated ELM where platform architecture constrains processing pathways irrespective of message complexity or audience motivation.

Recent scholarship (2024–2025) on AI-generated health influencers, platform-specific misinformation dynamics, and adolescent vulnerability is integrated throughout. The review produces five evidence-based propositions for future research and the Health Influencer Communication Typology viz., a diagnostic instrument classifying content along evidentiary quality and commercial intent, for use by researchers, practitioners, and regulators. Implications for advertising regulation, platform governance, and ethical influencer practice are developed throughout.

Keywords: influencer marketing · health communication · systematic review · wellness paradox · persuasion knowledge model · source credibility · elaboration likelihood model · meaning transfer · platform architecture · misinformation · adolescent vulnerability