

Influencers on Instagram Play an important role In Spreading Dietary Supplement Related Misinformation

Abstract

Technology advancement is a major aspect of life as we know it today because it is through the diversity that technology has to offer that life is made simple in so many different ways. With technology, there is the era of the internet space which further leads to social media platforms. These are internet-enabled applications that allow people from different parts of the world to be able to connect and share virtual information regardless of distance and time. As such, it is through the use of social media that people are embracing the need for virtual communities. Out of social media came the birth of influencers as people who are in a powerful position to convince their followers on the good or bad of literally anything.

Given this understanding, this paper explores the important role that dietary supplement influencers play as far as the dilemma of spreading misinformation about dieting is concern. It argues that in as much as these influencers have absolute power in promoting an ideal image via their social media presence, they also can misinform their audience on a dietary supplement. Given the kind of power that they have as well as the obsession to have the ideal image, more and more people are accessing this misinformation, sharing it, and thus a cycle of continual misinformation on dietary supplements. To this extent, this paper seeks to address this by looking into the credibility of the information shared, the one for all approach on dietary supplements, and the power of imagery as a negative influence.

Keywords: *#Dietary supplements, #Dieting, #Ideal body image, #Dietary-supplement influencers, #Social media influencers*

Introduction

Over the years, in as much as there have been several changes to the human way of living life, there are some things that have remained constant. One such thing is the aspect of an ideal body image. As it is evident everywhere, human beings are somewhat obsessed with the idea of having to look or to have a specific body image. This is perhaps as a result of societal configuration as to what is beautiful and acceptable. To this extent, people are often willing to go the extra mile just to fit in with the norms that society is pinning on us. One sure way that has been tested over the years is that of dieting. Dieting has to do a lot with controlled eating in that people choose to eat foods of specific nutrients and or specific amounts to achieve some form of results that will eventually mean that they have the ideal body image (Suciu, 2021).

About the above and the modern world of technology and internet capabilities, there are several ways through which dietary supplements as a program for an ideal image can be obtained. As technology and the use of the internet continue to grow, the era of social media influencers was born. Social media today is a tool that is used daily by millions of people throughout the globe to share if not consuming information with is very critical for any community (Kim & Hastak, 2018). Furthermore, the power of social media continues to grow and Kavada (2018) explains that is it through that power that the movement of social crowds towards various beliefs is encouraged and prosperous. In return, we now have the social media influencers who are as a result of large numbers of people following a specific person's social media footprint.

According to Bauer (2020), social media influencers are personalities or celebrities that have large social media followers on different platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and the like and as Parks (2010) explains, social media is now a virtual community. It is therefore due to the number of followers that they have that these social media influencers are in a position to contribute towards the perception of different things including dietary supplements. With dietary supplements, there are influencers who today play a critical role in encouraging people to use specific dietary programs.

It has now become adamant for people to follow specific social media personalities as a means of gaining information on dieting. As social media continues to grow and become part of our daily lives, so is the need to follow some of the popular people. Wielki (2020) explains that with a good following, everyone assumes that this person is in a position to know some of the answers to achieve the ideal body image. Most of these influencers are people who have beautiful bodies that everyone else is craving. As such, they make it easier for everyone to try and copy into their lifestyle by willingly sharing information about what they do and eat.

Given the above, it is evident that people are using the information from these dietary supplement influencers to get the kind of results that they are looking for. Under most circumstances, people have given good reviews on some of the supplements that influencers have been using or encourage people to use. This in return gives the influencers a great number of powers as far as influencing the dietary choices of people. However, this is not entirely true in that although dietary supplement influencers on Instagram wield a major deal of power in promoting an ideal body

image through their online self-presentation, they also play a key role in spreading dietary supplement-related misinformation within social networking communities.

To further analyse this thesis statement, looking into how social media influencers can spread misinformation, looking into these key areas is important: the credibility of the information, dietary concerns for different people, and the general power of imagery in the era of advanced technology.

Credibility of Information

To begin with, Lofft (2020) explains that some of the information on dietary supplements as shared by social media influencers is misleading because they give such information as facts as opposed to opinions. In today's world, freedom of speech has become so great that everyone can easily share what they feel and this is a good thing. However, with such power comes great responsibility in that people ought to be extra careful with the kind of information they are willing to share. Partner this with the power of social media which has the potential to reach millions of people through the global and misinformation can easily travel thousands of miles within seconds. Due to being able to influence a lot of people, dietary supplement influencers often fail to give a disclaimer that the information they are sharing is of personal opinion and not facts (Lofft, 2020). As such, people end up believing in half-truths and finding themselves spending so much on dietary supplements or programs that may not work for them.

There is also the issue of social media influencers being used for marketing and advertising gains by dietary-related organisations. As mentioned above, these influencers hold so much power when it comes to convincing people and this is what marketers are looking for when they want to move their products. Due to the power that they have, influencers are now well sought after when it

comes to creating public awareness of products, services, and anything that needs to be marketed (Wielki, 2020). In return, they are paid handsomely for the influence they have and by so doing, some of them tend to promote dietary supplements that they do not fully know of. This means that they take on the promotion of a dietary program or supplement as a job thus giving the information they have been asked to share. The downside to this is that some of the information given is misleading from what the program and or supplement can do or deliver.

Another look into how credible the information given by dietary supplement influencers can be misleading is due to lack of evidence. As mentioned above, some of this information lacks in being factual but in addition to this, there is also the aspect of being outdated, transparent, and unbiased. Dietary supplement influencers can easily make the mistake of not doing great research into a diet program or supplement before sharing any information and as such, mislead their audience. Furthermore, Forrest (2019) contributes to this point by explaining influencers can be biased in the information they choose to share by looking to only promote specific diets.

Dietary Concerns for Different People

One of the major mistakes that influencers make that continue to lead to the spread of dietary supplement misinformation is the promotion of one diet for all. We are all built differently, be it genetically, physically, and how bodies metabolise nutrients (Qi, 2017). Influencers make it look so easy in that by choosing to eat specific nutrients, we can all lose weight or gain muscles in search of the perfect image. This is also true in terms of skin and hair care through diet. What influencers do not understand as explained by Qi (2017), is that our genetic composition as well as how our bodies respond to dietary nutrients will differ per person. This is largely because our

bodies are all different and function differently. As such, there is no one specific diet supplement that will work the same for everyone. The misinformation in this needs to be addressed to allow people to understand the need for personalised dietary needs.

Furthermore, there is that continual talk of how carbohydrates are bad for you. Foods such as potatoes, wheat, rice, and kinds of pasta amongst others have been tainted as bad and therefore need to be eliminated. Seid and Rosenbaum (2019) in their article explain that there is a growing concern over the number of people who have been misinformed on the dangers related to consuming carbohydrates and fatty nutrients. Influencers now use their platforms to show that a plant-based diet is more ideal than one that has several forms of carbohydrates in it. This could not be further away from the truth given that we all need some form of carbohydrates and fats in our diet. It is from these foods that our bodies can produce the energy that it needs to function (Seid & Rosenbaum, 2019). Therefore, to insinuate that eliminating these nutrients from one's diet will eventually make the body burn off its fats thus leading to loss of weight is a true misinterpretation of how different nutrients play key roles in our bodies.

Given the above, it is, therefore, true that the public can be misinformed into thinking that the same dietary supplement works the same way for everyone. To further explain this, there is a need to consider how people metabolise nutrients through the foods they eat. Metabolise is the body's mechanism of breaking down foods in the digestive system to be absorbed as nutrients. It is, therefore, something that we can all do but the problem is that our bodies will either have a high or low metabolism rate and this will eventually have an impact on our body images. By not taking this into account to explain to their audiences that even with the same dietary supplement, different

results are to be expected; dietary supplement influencers contribute to the spread of misinformation which can easily lead to health-related consequences.

General Power of Imagery in the Era of Advanced Technology

Technology has allowed us to be in a position to achieve so much in different sectors. With regards to social media and more so with platforms that have to do with a lot of photos sharing such as Instagram, presenting the best image is very critical. And because dietary supplement influencers rely on the images they share, they constantly have to ensure that they are top-notch for their audience to see that what they are saying is true. To achieve the perfect image to share, these influencers rely heavily on great photography as well as the art of photo-shopping. Jennings (2019) explains that there is always the pressure to touch up pictures so that the final image to be present to the public meets the standards of society. By so doing, influencers have been known to give their photos some slimming effect with the perfect skin and even hair all in the name of selling a dieting program or supplement. Worse off, is that the audience ends up wanting to achieve an ideal body image that is enhanced via technology and does not exist in real life.

There is also the argument that some influencers have achieved the ideal body image not via the diet supplements that they strive to promote regularly but through cosmetic surgery. The cosmetic industry, more so concerning surgeries, is growing on an annual basis simply because people are obsessed with the need to look a specific way (Meeson, 2020). Influencers know too well that to achieve the perfect body that has been depicted on us all by society is near impossible even with proper dieting and exercising and this is due to our genes. Therefore, to have the ultimate power to influence, as it is now considered as a career path, some influencers choose to have surgeries

and use the achieved results to market dietary supplements and dietary opinions and this is quite misleading.

Lastly, there is the understanding of proper photo taking with regards to lighting, posture, and positioning. Benwell (n.d.) explains that ever since the Instagram hash-tag #Instagram vs. Reality began to trend, it is only then that people are starting to become aware that influencers are just ordinary people with ordinary bodies. The only advantage they have is the knowledge on how to pose, use light and take photos that make their bodies appear ideal. There is also the use of professional photographers who know all about these facts. Therefore, by posting pictures that capture their bodies at the best postures, dietary supplement influencers can play an important role in misinforming their audience by making it look that their bodies are as a result of using the diets while in actual reality this will never be the case.

Counter Argument

A counter-argument for all this will be to acknowledge that there are those dietary supplement influencers who have made it mandatory to not only give evidence-based information but to work with professionals in this particular field. These influencers have come to the understanding that misinformation can easily be accessed through the internet but also through them, who have a large following. As such, Benwell (n.d.) explains that social media influencers understand that they are in a position to motivate and empower people's choices on different things and therefore have to be aware of what they are asking their audiences to use or do.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to note that dietary supplement influencers have power in promoting an ideal image through their various social media platforms but also, it is important to understand just how they too can spread misinformation. They can do the latter from the ability to give information whose credibility is questionable to the poor understanding or acknowledgement of how individual bodies react differently to diets and also the fact that they can use misleading images to pursue their audience. Dietary supplement influencers are therefore in a position to misinform thus the need for them and their audience to be more aware of the information they choose to share and consume. By choosing to work with professional dietitians and or ensure that the information they give is not misleading by having adequate evidence can help with this issue of misinforming the public. Furthermore, there is the need for their audience to accept that not all information they consume from the influencers is entirely true thus they too have the responsibility of verifying such information beforehand. This is something this article has not addressed thus a limitation to it with room for future research on the issue.

Social media platforms can be viewed as virtual communities where people from different ethnicities and global regions come together to share and consume various information. It is through the ability to connect people in different places that social media gains its power from and it is the same power that is then transferred to diet supplement influencers and other forms of social media influencers. In such a connected web of people and with the increased freedom of speech, it becomes quite easy for misinformation as opposed to the truth to reach the millions of people who use social media daily. As such, the need to educate the public on the potential misinformation they are getting from their influencers through social networking communities becomes important in trying to curb and control the spread of such information. In conclusion, we all have a role to

play but due to the influence they have on the great population of social media users who follow their lives daily, dietary supplement influencers ought to be more aware of the role they play in spreading misinformation thus be held accountable where applicable.

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