

Health and fitness influencers spreading misinformation within their community

Introduction

While health and fitness influencers on Instagram and YouTube promote active lifestyles and an ideal body standard through their online self-presentation, they are also accountable for spreading false information within their online communities. This paper is going to explore the online fitness community, the impacts of fitness influencers, and how misinformation on diets and workout plans spread within their community.

Social media's impact:

Social media has given people an outlet to share their creativity through photography, videos, and many more from their digital devices (Noonan, 2018). Visuals tend to draw people in because we are able to see as well as hear what is being presented to us. With that being said, anything can be shared onto social media from cooking to fashion, and from makeup to fitness. The creativity opportunity is endless and with social media, those with similar interests are able to form communities to interact with likeminded people. One of the most popular categories is health and fitness. These days there are constant trends going around that do not last long whereas fitness is a lifestyle. Throughout the years there have been countless ways to stay active such as taking exercise classes, going to the gym, walking the dog, and the list goes on. With technology and social media rapidly improving, it has made it a whole lot easier to fit in a quick workout from home without having to head to the gym. Nutrition and exercise can be confusing when trying to lose or gain weight. Having to learn about calories, macros, the different types of workouts such as, strength training, cardio, Pilates, etc. can be a lot to fully understand by yourself. Due to this exact reason, people tend to think about investing in a personal trainer who will help achieve their goals and understand how the body works. The only issue is not everyone has the time and money to invest in a personal trainer. Leading us to the wonderful creation of social media that has helped many people around the world stay active through the help of fitness influencers. Throughout the years, fitness influencers started to rise in popularity simply because they are able to fit in quick 10-20 minute workouts in their busy schedule from home. Social media has allowed those who are knowledgeable and experienced in health and fitness to share their workout plans and diets onto the internet for others to follow and thus gaining a large following. These fitness influencers post videos on social media sites such as YouTube, Instagram or blogs with routines designed to help others reach goals and some even provide a nutrition guide to healthy meals. Within the

past year, social media usage has increased significantly during the COVID-19 outbreak. With lockdowns, people all around the world were forced to stay at home to reduce the chances of spreading the virus and this is when the stay at home hashtag began to trend on social media (Siani, 2020). Social media was in the centre of people's attention and under that hashtag, was an array of activities for people to do while being stuck in lockdown (Siani, 2020). Sites like Instagram faced a 40% usage increase at the start of the pandemic which meant that influencers were gaining larger audiences (Siani, 2020). Having a large community means that these influencers are able to inspire others to do the same things. For example, fitness influencer Kayla Itsines is an Australian personal trainer who has accomplished many amazing achievements. She has a large Instagram following of 12.8 million followers, 386K subscribers on YouTube, and in 2016, her app called SWEAT with Kayla generated more revenue than any other fitness app (Itsines, 2017). With her large following, she has created a community of motivated, determined women to help one another become more confident through having a healthier mind and body. Especially during lockdown, following live streams, workout guides and meal plans from people's favourite fitness influencers has helped everyone significantly in maintaining an active lifestyle. Every day we are presented with endless amounts of information, news and advertisements. Just because someone claims they are a "fitness influencer" does not always mean they are qualified in that field. These days people are flooded with misinformation about diets and workouts. The reason is because everyone wants the shortcut to their ideal body image but we all know that it requires time, hard work and lots of determination to get there. This next section is going to discuss the problems within fitness community and the spread of misleading information.

The health and fitness community

The growth of the fitness community has accelerated from the help of influencers on the internet. A survey of adolescents aged between 15-29 years old revealed that females were 13 times more likely to search and follow fitness information online than men. This is most likely because the content found online is mainly aimed at young women as our social medias are bombarded with female celebrities and fitness models (Carrotte et al., 2015). Fitness influencers on social media have made great impacts on people's lives by helping us stay motivated and active from both at home and outside of home. A lot of workout guides are free so we are also able to save money without having to sign up for a gym membership or a personal trainer. Fitness influencers are not professionals. Some may have degrees in physiotherapy, exercise science or are a personal trainer, but a lot of fitness influencers are doing it purely because they enjoy an active and healthy lifestyle. Therefore, the advice and tips they are bringing into their community is based off their personal experience. Not everyone is the same height, weight, athletic level, age, etc. Which means that their specific diet plan may not work the same for others. It is tiring to see well-known celebrities such

as the Kardashians promote unhealthy products such as detox teas to their large audience. On the daily, young people open up their devices and scroll through many celebrities and influencers living their best lives with the best-looking body, and when they see their idol promote “health products” like detox teas they are then influenced to try it so that they can achieve the same body as their idol. Detox teas can be rather damaging to the body long-term and have a list of side effects such as stomach pains, diarrhea and dehydration (McNamara, 2019). A study was made and according to Sidhu (2018), 65% of the respondents expressed that they read tips for health on Facebook and Instagram. When it comes to applying the information on themselves, 25% agree that they follow the diet schedules and 70% did not deny but sometimes use the information for weight loss (Sidhu, 2018). These studies show that health and fitness related information circulate the internet everywhere and a lot of people who see the information on social media tend to follow it, further spreading it to more people. These days everyone is so fixated on their body image due to social media presenting unrealistic standards for young people. It creates toxicity within communities when people do not reach the standards and start developing eating disorders trying to “fit in”.

Issues within the community

As mentioned earlier, there is no quick route to weight loss or weight gain. Therefore, miracle weight loss pills or detox teas will not help anyone whatsoever. Another issue in the fitness community is that many people believe they can spot reduce fat in the areas that they want to lose fat from. We all wish that we can change certain parts of our bodies but in reality, it is not possible to only work out a certain part of your body and hope for a change. Sure, it will slowly help to your overall body fat loss but not only in that specific area. Fat loss is not simple so it is important to understand how it works. Triglycerides is stored fats in your body, which is then broken down into smaller sections called free fatty acids and glycerol (Kubala, 2018). When exercising, the free fatty acids and glycerol used as fuel can come from anywhere in the body not specifically the area being worked out (Kubala, 2018). For example, 24 people took part in a study exercising only the abdominal area for 6 weeks. The 6 weeks of abdominal training alone was not enough to reduce the abdominal fat but the exercise did increase the muscular endurance (Vispute et al., 2011). While scientific research has proven that we cannot spot reduce fat, fitness influencers on YouTube are creating 10-20 minute videos and workout guides to burn a specific area. This is extremely misleading to the people in their community as they will not see the desired results. Chloe Ting is a fitness influencer who began to rise to fame especially during the start of lockdown in 2020. She creates free workout programs, recipes and workout equipment to help with the fitness journey. While everything sounds amazing, a few of her workout programs are extremely misleading. For example, one of her YouTube videos is titled “Abs in 2 weeks” as discussed earlier, studies have proven that we cannot spot reduce fat, and

especially not in time as short as 2 weeks. Chloe Ting is not the only fitness influencer that makes these kinds of videos, but it seems to be a running trend in the YouTube fitness community. While misleading workout plans tend to be all over the internet for people to follow, another major issue is crash dieting.

Crash diets are designed for weight loss in a short span of time. Yes, it is possible to see a difference in that short span of time but is it healthy? Absolutely not. When a person is crash dieting, they are restricting their calories to below the recommended amount per day. The weight that is being lost during the short amount of time is mainly water weight because it is not safe to burn through that much fat in such little time (Kreitzman et al., 1992). After the short-term diet, and going back to eating like normal, people might gain even more weight than before (Kreitzman et al., 1992). This could lead into an eating disorder where people are constantly undereating with fears of gaining weight. When people look into dieting, they often try crash diets such as juice cleanses, strict vegan diets, low-carb diets and the list goes on. The reason why crash diets are popular is because it is being influenced by well-known figures on social media. Belinda Selene, a lifestyle content creator with a following of over 786K on both YouTube and Instagram combined, uploaded a video where she tried a juice cleanse for 3 days. The title consisted of the phrase “lose weight in 3 days”. Of course, everyone would like to find out how to lose weight so quickly but short term diets are never the answer. Diets that rule out entire food groups are dangerous because people need to eat from a variety of food groups in order to get the needed nutrients for the body (Zelman et al., 2005).

Conclusion

While fitness influencers have positively impacted society, there are many issues that people need to be aware of. In a day and age where everyone is so immersed in social media and trying to present themselves as perfect online, health and fitness influencers who have large platforms should spread body positivity and healthy ways to achieve personal goals within their community. Because in reality, no one is the same and therefore a specific beauty standard should not be expected among the online community as it creates more insecurities. Everyone is beautiful in their own way and just because someone does not have the picture-perfect body, does not make them any less than the people they see on social media. To make the health and fitness community even better, they should stop the spread of misinformation when it comes to dieting and exercising, or even call out celebrity figures who are promoting unhealthy products just for the money. Influencers should not feel the need to edit pictures because they are getting positive feedback from their audience. Everyone has days where they bloat or have imperfections and some days we are feeling the best. In the end, it is just exhausting to see unrealistic standards on social media and misleading information being spread within the health and fitness community.

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