

TikTok Influencers Spreading Bad Health Habits and Promoting a Starving Gen Z

Abstract: Social media has enabled an era of misinformation, where content that is false or lacks scientific evidence is spread rapidly, reaching a vast audience. Although misinformation isn't exclusive to TikTok, the rise of influencers on this platform has meant that the dispersion of misinformation is believed by vulnerable audiences. Generation Z are the most common TikTok users and are the most vulnerable to the spread of misinformation, specifically misinformation about health and wellness. Health and wellness on TikTok is a popular subject and videos such as 'what I eat in a day', 'how to lose weight fast' and 'exercises to lose body fat' are commonly influencing Generation Z to emulate this culture. Through my studies, I have found that the affordances of TikTok, such as the copycat nature and algorithms has meant that misinformation can thrive. Influencers on this platform play a vital role in spreading this information due to their perceived trust and credibility. Through the case study of Rae's metabolism drops, it is revealed that misinformation is prevalent on this platform and this can have real-life health implications. Generation Z are increasingly becoming victims of a toxic diet culture, resulting in body image issues, low self-esteem and eating disorders. The information silos that have the potential to create a positive knowledge community also have the potential to spread misinformation.

Keywords: Generation Z, Influencers, TikTok, health and wellness, identity, online advocacy, misinformation.

Introduction: Social media, in specific the newly emerged platform, TikTok has created a knowledge community for health and wellness. TikTok reaches millions of people and encompasses the sharing of personal user-generated content, leading to the distribution of all sorts of different content, including that related to exercise and health (Marocolo et al., 2012, p. 2). Influencer identity can create online advocacy, but this potential for advocacy can be used in an incorrect and non-beneficial way (Abidin, 2021, p. 6). Information on TikTok isn't always accurate or backed up by scientific evidence and is merely based on individuals' beliefs and opinions (Chou et al., 2018, p. 2417). Misinformation on social media isn't new nor exclusive to TikTok, although the introduction of this platform and the emergence of influencers on this platform has led to misinformation to disseminate rapidly (Wang et al., 2019, p. 1). This directly targets Generation Z, as according to Yang and Zildberg, 2020, "In the U.S., 60% of the TikTok active users are aged 16–24-year-olds" (p. 5). This generation is said to be a specifically risky time period for the development of poor exercise and diet habits (Nelson et al., 2008 as cited in Vaterlaus et al., 2015, p. 152). Health and wellness influencers on TikTok play a key role in influencing how Generation Z behave in terms of diet and lifestyle, and this potential for social change has resulted in the spread of diet-related misinformation and in turn this has had various health implications for Generation Z.

The affordances of social media platforms like TikTok enable misinformation to flourish and target those who are specifically vulnerable to this false information. The vast spread of information on TikTok has a larger effect and there are more likely false facts within the large and vast information pool. It also means that misinformation can be resistant to correction, due to virality and the copycat nature of the platform (Wang et al., 2019, p. 2). Zhou discovered that on Tik Tok, users are more likely to copy, repeat and imitate content produced by others that have influenced them (Tang & Zildberg,

2020, p. 5). The algorithms of TikTok mean that there are sequences of information spread, leading to exposure being selective to those that are seeking it or that are interested in it (Lofft, 2020, p. 58). The spread is exacerbated by echo-chambers and information silos (Chou et al., 2018, p. 2417). This means TikTok feeds are personally curated, through the selecting and sharing of content related to the specific narratives people follow and ignore (Lofft, 2020, p. 58). Feeds are tailored to individuals' personality, identity and interests meaning information silos are created consequently decreasing the likelihood for the exchange of differing viewpoints and the amplification of misinformation within a closed network (Chou et al., 2018, p. 2417). This also means the vulnerable targets, being Generation Z who are constantly watching health and wellness related videos are being misled by this false information. Some may argue that technology could be perceived as a motivator for exercise and that TikTok could expand food choices through the sharing of recipe videos, the showcasing food other young adults eat and the sharing of exercises for weight loss (Vaterlaus, 2015, p. 151).

Although TikTok has allowed for immense opportunities for people to engage with others in a beneficial way, the user-generated nature of this platform has meant that users, whether they are pseudo professionals, influencers, celebrities or just the general public can be publishers and are subject to no form of factual verification or accountability (Wang et al., 2019, p. 2). Information can be exaggerated, oversimplified, non-specific and inaccurate but is still distributed virally through TikTok (Vaterlaus et al., 2015, p. 153). The main function of TikTok is the, 'For You' page in which constantly pushes content to users based on popularity. Therefore, content focused on weight loss such as workouts for 'super easy thigh reduction', 'what I eat in a day' videos, and hacks to 'lose six pounds in two days' are prevalent. Reau (2013, as cited in Vasconelos, 2019) concluded during his research, "46% of people check food news and new trend diets only online and more than 30% claims that check both online and offline" (p. 73). This is an issue because the majority of those who promote healthy eating on social media don't hold a degree in nutrition, but yet are considered health and wellness influencers due to their popularity and personal brand they have created that gives them power (Vasconelos, 2019, p. 2).

Influencers are people who influence a large number of their peers and they do this on TikTok through the continuous production of video content allowing them to gradually gain more followers or community recognition (Yang & Zilberg, 2020, p. 4). When influencers promote health-related misinformation, the public tend to believe it and this is specifically effective when consumers directly identify with the influencer (Myrick & Erlichman, 2020, p. 386). This is due to popularity-based credibility and the emotional trust built between influencers and their audience through engagement and perceived transparency through the sharing of their personal lives (Myrick & Erlichman, 2020, p. 367). Success of an influencer depends on follower count, and this count determines their amplification ability (Abidin, 2021, p. 6). Many followers of influencers perceive them as their friends, and therefore take their advice and recommendations about health and wellness seriously (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p.5). Numerous TikTok health influencers also have sought-after body types, making followers curious as to how they achieved this physique and encouraging them to follow the diet regime they are promoting in order to emulate them (Lofft, 2020, p. 57). This is a pressing issue as these influencers are generally unqualified and are spreading unsubstantiated claims about nutrition and fitness to vulnerable consumers who are trusting them as experts

based on aesthetics and popularity only (Loft, 2020, p. 56). Mass followings and trusting relationships gives influencers power, making them feel like they can inform others about nutrition and exercise (Lofft, 2020, p. 57). It also sets up business opportunities in health and fitness such as apps, e-books and meal plans, making their claims come from a business-focused background, despite not necessarily having medical evidence to back their claims (Lofft, 2020, p. 57).

A lot of the time, TikTok influencers endorse cleanse diets that supposedly help them lose weight and gain energy, but the medical community claim these diets aren't effective and can even cause health damage when prescribed to the wrong body type (Berman & Boguski, 2014 as cited in Myrick & Erlichman, 2020, p. 367). Many influencers promote one-size-fits-all diets when in reality this it isn't how works (Lofft, 2020, p.60). For example, influencers who build their brand around a specific dietary pattern, such as veganism, aggregates a community who follow the same beliefs about food and these ideas are reinforced, whether accurate or not and whether they are suitable for all people or not (Lofft, 2020, p. 60). Low quality information regarding health and exercise may influence followers to adopt a damaging behaviour or learn incorrect diet and exercise related habits (Marocolo et al., 2021, p. 3). Studies show that children and adolescents are most likely to engage with health information through social networking sites and on these sites, this information is received through influencers (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 2).

Potentially thousands of TikTok users are sharing videos, and a lot of this content is surrounding health and wellness (Dempster, 2020, para 6). This content includes videos that count calories of every meal or offer recipes for water-based weight-loss drinks, both of which can be harmful activities when put into the hands of adolescents (Dempster, 2020, para 6). While there are dangers to restricting calories and these extreme diets to anyone at any age, the adolescent years are a particularly sensitive time for undernutrition, said Abbey Sharp, a dietitian who reviews online nutrition misinformation on a dedicated YouTube channel (Coda, 2021, para 14). An example of spread of misinformation about health and wellness on TikTok is a trend that arose surrounding metabolism drops (Flynn, 2020). Rae, a wellness company came out with metabolism drops for adults (Sydney Gore in Life, 2020, para 3). But the brands popularity on TikTok meant that teenage girls are using them (Sydney Gore in Life, 2020, para 3). The product uses ingredients that enhance natural metabolism in women, and according to the site, these are only designed for women 18 and older (Landsverk, 2020, para 5). TikTok fans understood the product to suppress appetite and create fast weight loss and were using it excessively for this (Landsverk, 2020, para 18). High amounts of this product can cause diarrhoea, cramping, nausea if used incorrectly and excessively (Landsverk, 2020, para 6). These drops went viral and were spread by those on TikTok with high followings, exposing them to many vulnerable teenagers. This misinformation led to teenagers to consume excessive amounts of the product and this was proven to be ineffective and have negative health effects (Sydney in Gore, 2020, para 13).

TikTok is widely popular among Generation Z and the prevalence of health and wellness misinformation on this platform has led to a toxic diet culture and negative health implications among teenagers and adolescents (Coda, 2021, para 13). A lot of the health influencers on TikTok post stylised content that show 'magazine' ready shots

(Bak & Priniski, 2020, p. 2). This is a self-promotional act that presents online identity as performative (Abidin, 2021, p. 6). It lacks scientific basis and promotes thin ideals to followers (Bak & Priniski, 2020, p. 2). A lot of the influencers also have the sought-after body type, promoting the idea that a thin body means for a healthy body (Bak & Priniski, p. 4). Strictly controlled diet and exercise routines promoted on TikTok are then understood as the means to achieve the defined body image (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 4). This constant display of thin body types also increases social comparison among Generation Z, leading to them wanting to encompass the habits being promoted by influencers (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 5). This misinformation not only misleads teenagers to performing incorrect diet and exercise habits, but also leads to concerning issues surrounding mental health such as low self-esteem and eating disorders (Bak & Priniski, 2020, p. 3). Research suggests that there are negative health effects from health influencers posting content, such as promoting thin-body ideals and health cures that can potentially harm the body if not prescribed correctly (Bak & Priniski, 2020, p. 4). The Butterfly Foundation's annual body esteem survey found that due to the increase social media and TikTok use in 2019, 5000 Australians showed alarming results that year, demonstrating the influence this platform can have on how young people view their bodies (Dempster, 2020, para 14).

TikTok claims they have bans on 'triggering' behaviours that surrounds eating disorders, but there are identified loopholes allowing influencers to still post health-related content, allowing adolescents access to harmful content (Dempster, 2020, para 24). They have blocked some hashtags related to inappropriate content surround health and fitness, but this hasn't limited the ability to search the same words into the search bar and bring up the same content that is promoting eating disorders (The Guardian, 2020, para 3). Dr Jon Goldin from the Royal College of Psychiatrists urges that social media company regulators need to do more to sanction inaction and prevent feelings of body insecurity and starvation ideals (The Guardian, 2020, para 3).

In conclusion, TikTok health and wellness influencers have contributed to the spread of misinformation about diet-related practices to Generation Z. The algorithm of TikTok has allowed for this spread of misinformation and the emergence of influencers on this platform has meant that this content is believed by Generation Z, due to the credibility influencers gain through popularity and trust. This in turn has had negative effects on Generation Z as they are being misled and are gaining false information that is leading them to have body image issues and inhabiting unsafe diet practices. The online advocacy social media and influencers allow for can have negative implications when it comes to inaccurate information being shared.

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