Health and Fitness Influencers on TikTok are Spreading Misinformation to Young and Impressionable Audiences within their Community

Abstract:

This paper discusses how the emergence of health and fitness influencers on the social media platform TikTok have negatively contributed to the spread of misinformation within online communities. Although this is not a new issue within the world of social media, it does however pose as a pressing issue as unsubstantiated claims and misleading content is put out by unqualified influencers which younger, more vulnerable audiences are consuming and believing. Through my studies I have found that TikTok's affordances and the highly effective algorithm has in fact exacerbated the spread of misinformation. As well as this, health and fitness influencers are building up large, loyal followings, where a sense of trust and credibility is being conveyed to their online communities which is causing younger audiences to become heavily influenced by their views, beliefs and opinions regarding diet and exercise habits. Consequently, these impressionable audiences are subconsciously becoming exposed to toxic diet and exercise culture, resulting in the increased risk of developing disordered eating habits and body image issues.

Key Terms: Social Media, TikTok, Health and Fitness, Influencer, Community, Misinformation, Fitspo, Community.

Introduction:

Have you ever caught yourself (either consciously or subconsciously) comparing what you're eating or how you're exercising to that of a #Fitspo TikTok influencer only wishing you had their toned stomach or their seemingly perfect, cellulite-free legs? Well, you're not alone. The sad reality is that approximately 90% of women critically analyze and compare their bodies to often highly edited images posted on various social media platforms (King University, 2019). Over the last few years, social media platform TikTok

has gained massive traction within the health and fitness industry with roughly 1 billion active annual users in the year of 2021 alone (Iqbal, 2022). The application relies entirely on user generated content where individuals create, distribute, and consume content that has the ability to reach large scale mass audiences interested in a particular topic or industry. Therefore, it is no surprise that TikTok has fostered a culture of creating knowledge communities within the platform, which is apparent within the health and fitness space, known as the 'Fitspo' community (Pritchard et all, 2020). Self-proclaimed health influencers entertain online identities that promote this notion of body positivity through various diet and exercise programs/regimes and ways of living. However, with a majority of the information shared to these platforms being opinion-based beliefs drawn from personal experience rather than from an educated and professionally qualified perspective, this results in the spread of misleading and factually incorrect information circulating within these online communities (Infurna, 2021). This is a significant issue when such information is presented to highly vulnerable and impressionable younger audiences who are the group most at risk in developing extremely damaging habits and belief systems regarding nutrition and exercise (Vaterlaus et al, 2015, p.152). This paper will explore the impact health and fitness influences on TikTok have on their followers and the role they play in spreading misinformation to vulnerable audiences within their communities and how this in turn, has led to the development of serious health problems.

TikTok is yet another social media platform which gives users an outlet to create, consume and distribute user generate content of all types ranging from fashion hauls, daily vlogs, finance tips, business ideas, the list goes on. The platform creates echo chambers as individuals interact, connect with and form communities of like-minded people within one platform. Echo chambers are "situations in which beliefs are amplified or reinforced by communication and repetition inside a closed system" and they can quickly turn into dangerous spaces as individuals fail to hear messages that challenge their views/beliefs (Carson, 2021, p.9). This is apparent in 'FitTok' (fitness side of TikTok) where #Fitspo influencers share health and fitness related content including workout routines/programs, form tips, healthy meal ideas as well as information regarding macros and calories. The world of nutrition and exercise can be confusing and

complicated to even the most experienced practitioners with many individuals not having the time and/or money to invest in a personal trainer or nutrition coach. Many look to these self-proclaimed, often unqualified health and fitness influencers for advice and guidance. This has been the case, particularly over the last few years as Covid-19 brought about lockdowns, gym closures and individuals working from home. This change to the structure of the health and fitness industry saw the market for 'online' health/nutrition content creation skyrocket (Ananthakrishnan et al, 2020). Countless health and fitness influencers have, over the past two years, built up large, loyal followings and have gained significant recognition within the FitTok #Fitspo community despite having no or minimal qualifications in the area (Yang and Zilberg, 2020, p.4). Over time, influencers build an emotional and friendship-like trust within their followers (particularly within younger audiences) which leads their followers into believing the information they are consuming from these influencers is accurate, credible and reliable (Delbaere, Michaeel and Phillips, 2020, p.101). What these younger, more vulnerable audiences fail to recognize is the fact that most of these influencers are in fact unqualified (despite the "fitness coach" or "nutritionist" title bolded in their bio) and therefore are, in many instances, actively spreading disproven health/nutrition claims that fail to be backed up by credible industry-based research and data (Lofft, 2020, p.56).

Additionally, the affordances of TikTok further contribute to and enhance the spread of inaccurate and unreliable information put out by influencers within the platform. TikTok is known for its complex yet highly accurate algorithm which is characterized by "content-based interactions that largely depend on individually customized video feeds curated by the apps recommendation algorithm" (Klug et al, 2021, p.84). In short this means TikTok feeds are personally curated due to the algorithm being so highly selective in which content gets shown to which user group based on their interests, subject matter and/or user activity (Worb, 2020). This results in the formation of echo chambers and the issue of information silos is introduced whereby users are shown one side of a particular narrative/viewpoint without being presented with various counterarguments, opinions or beliefs (Lofft, 2020, p.59). Audiences who actively pursue weight loss related content are presented with a wide range of different fad diets and cleanses that are promoted and

endorsed by health influencers on TikTok, claiming to have been the 'secret' to their miracle weight loss. Desperate or vulnerable audiences who are being exposed to this factually incorrect information fail to be shown the appropriate information from credible professionals which, in turn, would allow them to effectively challenge their beliefs regarding diet and exercise which have been so heavily influenced and pushed by health influencers on TikTok (Carson, 2021, p.9). This can become highly toxic and potentially dangerous if the algorithm continues to recommend content that is more and more extreme (e.g. extremely restrictive diet habits) as a user continues to show interest in one particular side (Carson, 2021, p.9).

Influencers act as role models and therefore have a significant level of influence, power and hold over these younger audiences (Vasconelos, 2019). When an influencer mentions a particular diet that worked for them or a food group they cut out (healthy or not, whether they are qualified or not or have any knowledge of nutrition of fitness at all) vulnerable audiences are following in their footsteps and are actively taking this advice/recommendation onboard (Vasconelos, 2019, p.33). In fact, Lofft (2020) highlights how the increased and ongoing exposure to unsubstantiated claims significantly increases the audiences' chances of believing it which is known as the 'mere exposure effect'. Consequentially, this spread of misinformation which is exacerbated by echo chambers and information silos in TikTok results in vulnerable audiences developing highly skewed and damaging perceptions about what is 'healthy' and what isn't. TikTok and other social media including Instagram and Facebook have not (to date) been held to account in ensuring that information that is shared within their platforms is factually correct before being published to millions of users located within these platforms.

TikTok has opened a door full of opportunities for influencers to reach, target and engage with larger audiences within their niche. TikTok's algorithm as opposed to that of Instagram or Twitter makes growing an audience through viral videos easier than ever before with some users 'accidentally' going viral (or starting a viral trend) from an overnight one hit wonder (Monaghan, 2021). However, virtually anyone can publicly

publish content to millions of people no matter the accuracy, legitimacy and accountability of the information itself or qualifications they claim to have (Wang et al, 2019, p.2).

A key feature assisting user virality on TikTok is the 'For You' page (FYP) which suggests new and highly tailored content to users based off popularity and their user profile (who they follow, what type of content the interact with, etc) (Worb, 2020). This feature however is enhancing the spread of misinformation further, as posts that gain higher engagement rates through likes, comments, views and shares, results in the post featuring on more users For You pages (Buchanan, 2020, p.1). For those within the #Fitspo community, "what I eat in a day" videos dominate the space. Although these videos are posted with good intentions and with the purpose to provide meal inspiration or recipe ideas, it can also be highly toxic and damaging when presented to vulnerable individuals who are struggling with negative mindsets/habits around eating, such as those with diagnosed eating disorders or are in eating disorder recovery. Thousands of these "what I eat in a day" videos promote fad diets or show restrictive eating habits such as juice cleanses, no carb diets, restrictive calorie counting, etc. As well as this, many of these health influencers have the idolized body type (tall, lean with ab definition) which younger generations desire to have. As a result, these audiences are seeing these posts about how/what they eat (and cut out) and think that in order to look like them and achieve this dream physique, they must adopt the same eating habits. This is a significant and pressing issue as the majority of these influencers are unqualified and instead are spreading this information based on their own personal experience and what has worked for them. What these younger audiences fail to recognise is that personal experience is a highly untrustworthy source of evidence as it is extremely susceptible to cognitive bias and every body type is different (age, weight, activity level, ect) meaning what works for someone won't necessarily work for everyone else (Glofox, 2020).

A report published by Statista Research Department (2021) investigated the distribution of TikTok users in the US by age group and found that roughly 25% of active users were aged between 10-19 years and just over 22% were aged between 20-29. This is

concerning as Veterlaus et al (2015) highlight in their studies that it is younger audiences within this age range which are most at risk of developing poor relationships, mindsets and habits regarding health and nutrition. In fact, a study conducted by Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko (2015) concluded that these younger audiences actively seek and engage with health-related content which is shared by influencers through various social media platforms such as TikTok. This is a significant issue as even though many of these health influencers don't hold any relevant qualifications (such as a nutrition or dietetics degree), they are still regarded as knowledgeable sources of information due to their large follower count and recognition they've received (from viral posts) within the platform (Vasconelos, 2019, p.2). As well as this, many health influencers have highly admirable and sought-after body composition where it is easy for younger audiences to look at this and form the perception of 'they must know what they are doing'. Thus, when influencers within TikTok's #Fitspo community endorse a particular way of eating or exercising, younger audiences are quick to jump on board. This was the case for TikTok influencer Jay Davis (known as junior_iay_davis on TikTok) who went viral following his video titled "lose weight in just 7 days! #weightloss #getshredded #coffeeandlemon." Jay received over 2.4 million views (and counting) for posting a video promising weight loss results within 7 days by adding the juice of half a lemon to a cup of coffee and drinking it every day. The word quickly spread around the #Fitspo community and within a matter of days, thousands were on board trying out this 'weight loss hack.' Many were unable to tolerate the taste however others endorsed, even swearing by the hack stating it had stripped pounds off their waistlines (Callahan, 2021, para.4). Industry academia and various research studies published by experts within the field have proven how there is no single food, ingredient or hack that will cause weight loss, rather it is through creating an appropriate caloric deficit (expending more calories than a person is consuming) (Finer, 2012). Registered Dietitian Maya Feller commented on the trend stating "it's just another TikTok trend with no merit" (Callahan, 2021, para.5). As these trends are created by influencers who have no qualifications within the area, this is directly exacerbating the spread of misinformation within social media platforms. Not to mention these behaviors are red flags for those trying to create long lasting, sustainable eating habits and such content can be highly triggering for those suffering from disordered eating behaviors.

These viral diet related videos also create negative beliefs and mindsets within younger, more impressionable audiences which can potentially lead to wider health implications such as teens/younger adults developing eating disorders such as bulimia, binge eating disorder, orthorexia, etc.

Conclusion:

Health and nutrition influencers on TikTok have actively contributed to and even exacerbated the spread of misinformation within communities regarding diet and exercise related topics. TikTok's highly selective algorithm paired with the emergence of influencers within this platform has resulted in untrustworthy and potentially harmful information to spread rapidly within online communities. Echo chambers and information silos have therefore been formed within social media platforms where young and highly impressionable audiences are being persuaded into believing damaging claims made by unqualified health influencers. This spread of misinformation has resulted in younger audiences developing harmful belief systems regarding specific diet and exercise regimes resulting in disordered eating habits and body image issues. It is evident that more needs to be done in regard to platforms implementing effective monitoring systems within online community groups and they are now increasing pressure from Governments, Regulators, Industry Bodies and the general public to ensure that information they allow on their sites is in fact correct.

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