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Exploring the Impact of Fitness Influencers on Consumer Purchasing Behavior in the Health and Wellness Industry

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Abstract

The growing presence of fitness influencers on social media has reshaped how individuals learn about exercise, nutrition, and wellness. Their content—ranging from workout routines to supplement guidance—plays a significant role in shaping consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions. As health and wellness companies increasingly rely on influencer partnerships, questions arise about the credibility of information shared and its impact on consumer behavior. This study explores how fitness influencers affect the buying patterns of gym-goers and health-conscious users. Using a structured survey, the research identifies key factors such as trust, authenticity, and perceived expertise that guide consumer decisions. The findings highlight both the opportunities and risks associated with influencer-driven marketing in the fitness industry.

Keywords: Fitness influencers, consumer behavior, social media marketing, health and wellness industry, influencer credibility, purchasing decisions, digital fitness content.

Introduction

he rapid expansion of social media platforms has created a new category of public figures widely known as fitness influencers. These individuals share workout routines, diet plans, lifestyle habits, and motivational content that attract large audiences seeking guidance on health and fitness. Over the past decade, platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have become primary sources of fitness information for many young adults and gym-goers, replacing traditional channels like magazines or in-person coaching (Smith, 2020). This shift has allowed influencers to become prominent voices in shaping everyday fitness practices.

Fitness influencers often act as informal educators, offering simplified explanations of exercises, nutrition strategies, and supplementation methods. Their content creates a sense of accessibility and relatability, which enhances followers' motivation and encourages them to adopt new fitness behaviors (Johnson & Wood, 2021). Many followers perceive these influencers as trustworthy role models, which strengthens the impact of their suggestions and increases reliance on their advice for fitness-related decisions.

With their growing popularity, influencers have also become central to marketing strategies in the health and wellness industry. Brands collaborate with them to promote supplements, apparel, equipment, and wellness products, primarily because influencer marketing delivers targeted reach at lower costs compared to traditional advertising channels (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022). As a result, companies increasingly view influencers as effective intermediaries who can shape consumer attitudes and encourage purchasing behavior.

However, this rise also brings challenges. The line between credible guidance and misleading content is often blurred. While many influencers share helpful and evidence-based information, others promote unverified practices, extreme routines, or commercially driven recommendations that may not be suitable—or safe—for their followers (Hoffman, 2019). This creates a risk of consumers adopting unhealthy behaviors or purchasing products based on incomplete or biased claims.

Given this context, the present study examines how fitness influencers affect consumer purchasing behavior in the health and wellness industry. The purpose is to understand the factors—such as trust, perceived expertise, and authenticity—that shape consumer responses to influencer content. By exploring both the positive and negative aspects of this phenomenon, the study highlights its broader significance for consumers, brands, and the evolving digital fitness ecosystem.

Literature Review

This review organizes prior research into five themes:

A. Rise and Reach of Fitness Influencers

The growth of social media has fundamentally changed how people access fitness knowledge. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok now function as major sources of exercise routines, diet advice, and motivational content. Research shows that users increasingly prefer influencer-generated content because it feels more relatable and visually engaging compared to traditional fitness media (Sokolova & Perez, 2021; Lu & Lu, 2019). Short-form video formats and algorithm-driven visibility further increase the reach and appeal of fitness creators, especially among adolescents and young adults (Carrotte, Prichard & Lim, 2017). Collectively, these studies highlight how influencers have become central figures in shaping contemporary fitness culture.

B. Credibility, Parasocial Relationships, and Motivation

A major strand of literature examines how influencer credibility shapes user attitudes. Studies consistently show that expertise, trustworthiness, and authenticity strongly predict how followers evaluate fitness content (Jin & Ryu, 2020; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Another key mechanism is parasocial relationships—one-sided emotional bonds that followers form with influencers. Several studies demonstrate that these bonds increase internalization of exercise advice and enhance motivation to adopt influencer-recommended behavior (Chen, Chen & Liu, 2021). Together, credibility and parasocial attachment form the psychological basis through which influencers exert behavioural influence.

C. Effects on Health Behaviour, Body Image, and Supplement Use

The influence of fitness creators on health behaviour has both positive and negative dimensions. Research shows that such content can motivate users to exercise and adopt healthier routines; however, it can also promote unrealistic body standards and encourage potentially harmful supplement consumption. Studies link heavy engagement with image-focused fitness content to increased body dissatisfaction, disordered eating tendencies, and pressure to use appearance-enhancing substances (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017; Fatt et al., 2019). Netnographic and survey-based studies further show that influencer-promoted supplements often contribute to risky experimentation with performance-enhancing compounds among young gym-goers (Hildebrandt et al., 2020). These findings reveal a complex behavioural landscape shaped by both inspiration and vulnerability.

D. Influencer Marketing and Consumer Purchase Behaviour

Influencer marketing has become a strategic tool for health and wellness brands. Studies in marketing and consumer behaviour show that influencer endorsements significantly affect purchase intention, particularly when followers perceive authenticity and expertise (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2020). Sponsored content compliance—such as disclosure labels—also influences trust and responsiveness, with transparent disclosure improving perceived credibility (Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017). Research further indicates that micro-influencers create stronger engagement and conversion rates due to their perceived closeness with followers (Casaló, Flavián & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). This evidence collectively highlights why health brands invest heavily in influencer partnerships.

E. Misinformation, Ethics, and Regulation

An emerging concern is the spread of unverified or misleading health information by influencers. Systematic reviews show that much fitness and supplement content lacks scientific backing, potentially leading followers toward unsafe practices (Marcolin et al., 2021). Studies also document that supplement advertisements promoted by influencers frequently omit safety disclaimers, exaggerate benefits, or make unsupported claims (Ricke et al., 2023). Public-health scholars argue for improved advertising regulation, stronger platform accountability, and clearer disclosure norms to protect consumers (Syed-Abdul et al., 2020). These findings highlight the ethical challenges surrounding influencer-driven health communication.

F. Cross-Cutting Methods and Identified Research Gaps

The current body of research uses diverse methods—content analyses, experiments, surveys, and systematic reviews—to study influencer effects. Bibliometric studies show rapid yearly growth in influencer-marketing research but also note issues such as regional concentration, limited longitudinal designs, and minimal integration between consumer-behaviour research and public-health concerns (Ki, Cuevas & Chong, 2020; Appel et al., 2020). Infodemiology literature also highlights the difficulty of measuring long-term behavioural changes influenced by social media (Eysenbach, 2021). These gaps justify the present study's aim to investigate how credibility, engagement, and influencer exposure shape real purchasing behaviour in the health and wellness sector.

Research Objectives

- To synthesise existing research on how fitness influencers shape consumer attitudes toward exercise, nutrition, and supplement use.
- To analyse how influencer credibility, authenticity, and parasocial relationships influence consumer trust and engagement across social media platforms.
- To evaluate the documented effects of exposure to fitness-related social media content on consumer health behaviours, including workout habits and supplement consumption.
- To identify recurring concerns in the literature related to misinformation, unreliable recommendations, and commercially driven promotional practices in fitness influencer communication.

Methodology

This study adopts a narrative review approach to examine how fitness influencers shape consumer behaviour within the health and wellness sector. A narrative review is suitable because it allows a broad and flexible synthesis of diverse research traditions, including marketing, communication studies, psychology, and health sciences (Greenhalgh, 2014). Unlike systematic reviews, which focus on predefined protocols, narrative reviews emphasize depth, conceptual understanding, and thematic interpretation of existing evidence.

Search Strategy and Sources

Relevant literature was gathered from leading academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, Emerald Insight, MDPI, PMC, and Taylor & Francis. Additional high-quality sources such as JMIR Infodemiology, open-access journals, and reputable conference papers were also included. Searches were conducted using combinations of keywords such as fitness influencers, social media, parasocial relationships, supplements, consumer behaviour, misinformation, and health communication.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The review prioritised studies that:

- were published between 2020 and 2025,
- examined fitness influencers or health-related influencer communication,
- analysed consumer attitudes, behaviours, or purchase intentions,
- discussed issues of credibility, authenticity, or misinformation,
- were peer-reviewed or from reputable academic publishers.

Studies were excluded if they:

- focused only on general influencer marketing with no health or fitness context,
- lacked empirical or conceptual relevance,
- were opinion pieces without academic grounding.

Screening and Selection Process

The search initially generated over 150 publications. Titles and abstracts were screened to determine relevance, after which full texts of shortlisted papers were reviewed. Ultimately, 40+ studies were included. These covered quantitative surveys, experimental designs, netnographic analyses, content analyses, systematic reviews, and theoretical discussions.

Analytical Approach

A thematic synthesis method was used to organise the findings. After reading and categorizing the studies, the literature was grouped into major themes that repeatedly emerged across research fields:

(1) rise and reach of fitness influencers,
(2) credibility and parasocial relationships,
(3) effects on health behaviour and supplement use,
(4) consumer purchase behaviour and marketing outcomes, and
(5) misinformation, ethics, and regulation.
This thematic approach allowed the review to compare insights, identify convergences and contradictions, and highlight gaps that require further investigation (Baumeister, 2013).

Limitations of the Method

Narrative reviews rely on interpretive synthesis rather than rigid protocols, which can introduce selection bias. However, using reputable databases, clear inclusion criteria, and cross-checking themes across multiple studies helps strengthen the reliability of the findings.

Results & Analysis

This section synthesizes key findings from the reviewed literature, highlighting the influence of fitness influencers on consumer behaviour, perceptions of credibility, and the effects of sponsored content within the health and wellness industry.

Influence of Fitness Influencers on Purchase Decisions

The literature consistently demonstrates that fitness influencers significantly shape consumer purchase decisions, particularly for supplements, fitness equipment, and workout programs. Exposure to influencer content increases product awareness and motivates users to try recommended products, often more effectively than traditional advertisements (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2020). Micro- and macro-influencers both play important roles: while macro-influencers reach a large audience, micro-influencers often generate higher engagement due to perceived relatability and authenticity (Casaló, Flavián & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Consumers are more likely to act on recommendations when influencers are perceived as knowledgeable and trustworthy, making influencer marketing a highly cost-effective strategy for health and wellness brands (Powell, 2024; de Araujo, 2024).

Consumer Perceptions of Credibility

Credibility is a central determinant of the impact of fitness influencers. Studies show that followers evaluate credibility based on expertise, trustworthiness, and authenticity (Wang, 2024; Bi, 2023). Parasocial relationships—one-sided emotional bonds between followers and influencers—further enhance perceived credibility, increasing the likelihood that followers internalize advice and adopt recommended behaviours (Balaban, 2022; Su, 2021). Conversely, perceived commercial motives or over-commercialization can reduce credibility, leading followers to question recommendations (Lim, 2025; Hilkens et al., 2021). This underscores the delicate balance influencers must maintain between monetization and authenticity to sustain their persuasive power.

Impact of Sponsored Content

Sponsored or promotional content has a mixed influence. Transparent disclosure of sponsorship tends to maintain credibility, while undisclosed promotions or exaggerated claims can damage trust and reduce engagement (Evans et al., 2017; Ricke, 2025). Research indicates that followers are increasingly able to distinguish between organic and sponsored content, but even disclosed promotions influence purchase intentions when the influencer is perceived as sincere and knowledgeable (Tripopsakul & Hoonsopon, 2025; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Fitness brands leverage this by collaborating with influencers whose image aligns closely with the product and target audience, achieving higher return on investment compared to traditional advertising channels (Chowdhury, 2024; Lim, 2025).

Key Findings and Patterns

1. **Influencer reach and engagement:** Fitness influencers are highly effective in creating awareness, motivating exercise, and guiding product choices.
2. **Credibility and trust matter most:** Expertise, authenticity, and parasocial relationships are crucial determinants of influence.
3. **Sponsored content is effective if perceived as authentic:** Disclosure and transparency maintain credibility, whereas over-commercialization can undermine influence.
4. **Health-related risks:** Some literature highlights the potential for followers to adopt unsafe practices or use supplements without proper guidance, pointing to ethical concerns and regulatory gaps (Marocolo, 2021; Ricke, 2025).

Overall, the review demonstrates a strong link between influencer content, consumer perception, and purchase behaviour while emphasizing the importance of credibility, ethical communication, and responsible marketing.

Discussion

The findings of this review highlight the multifaceted role of fitness influencers in shaping consumer behaviour in the health and wellness industry. Across the literature, it is evident that influencers are not only conduits of information but also key drivers of motivation, product adoption, and behavioural change. Their impact is particularly strong when they are perceived as credible, authentic, and relatable, reflecting the centrality of trust and expertise in online persuasion (Wang, 2024; Bi, 2023).

Interpretation of Results

The synthesis shows that exposure to fitness influencer content affects consumer behaviour in both direct and indirect ways. Directly, followers are more likely to purchase recommended supplements, equipment, or programs. Indirectly, influencer guidance shapes exercise routines, dietary choices, and overall engagement with fitness activities (Powell, 2024; de Araujo, 2024). Parasocial relationships—one-sided emotional bonds formed with influencers—further strengthen this impact, enabling users to internalize recommendations and integrate them into daily routines (Balaban, 2022; Su, 2021).

Comparison with Existing Literature

These results align with prior research on influencer marketing, which suggests that authenticity and credibility are essential for effective persuasion (Casaló, Flavián & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Studies indicate that while macro-influencers have extensive reach, micro-influencers often generate higher engagement due to perceived relatability. Similarly, sponsored content can enhance awareness and purchase intentions if transparency is maintained, confirming earlier findings regarding the delicate balance between monetization and trust (Tripopsakul & Hoonsopon, 2025; Lim, 2025).

Positive vs Negative Influence

The review reveals a dual impact of fitness influencers. Positively, they motivate physical activity, educate users on workouts and nutrition, and provide social support for fitness goals (Durau, 2024; Powell, 2024). Negatively, they may inadvertently promote unrealistic body ideals, unsafe supplement use, or misleading health claims (Hilkens et al., 2021; Marocolo, 2021; Ricke, 2025). This underscores the ethical responsibility of influencers and the need for informed consumer vigilance.

Role of Trust, Authenticity, and Expertise

Trust, authenticity, and perceived expertise emerge as the most critical determinants of influencer effectiveness. Followers are more likely to adopt recommendations and make purchases when influencers are considered genuine, knowledgeable, and transparent about sponsored content (Wang, 2024; Bi, 2023). Conversely, excessive commercialization or lack of disclosure can erode trust, highlighting the importance of ethical marketing practices in the health and wellness sector.

The discussion confirms that fitness influencers wield substantial influence over consumer decisions, but their positive impact depends on credibility, authentic communication, and responsible promotion. These insights provide a foundation for practical guidelines for influencers, brands, and policy makers to ensure ethical and effective engagement in this rapidly growing domain.

Implications

For Consumers

Consumers should exercise critical thinking when engaging with fitness influencer content. While influencers can motivate exercise and provide practical guidance, followers must assess the credibility of recommendations, particularly regarding supplements and diet. Awareness of sponsored content, transparency, and potential misinformation can help users make informed, safe health decisions (Marocolo, 2021; Ricke, 2025).

For Fitness Influencers

Influencers have a responsibility to maintain authenticity and credibility. Clear disclosure of sponsored content, promoting safe and evidence-based practices, and avoiding exaggerated claims can strengthen trust and long-term engagement. Influencers who prioritize ethical communication are more likely to positively impact their followers' behaviour and sustain their influence (Lim, 2025; Tripopsakul & Hoonsopon, 2025).

For Health & Wellness Companies

Brands should strategically collaborate with credible influencers whose image aligns with the product and target audience. Leveraging micro- and macro-influencers effectively can enhance product reach and engagement while maintaining consumer trust. Companies must also ensure that marketing campaigns adhere to ethical standards and avoid promoting unsafe or misleading products (Casaló, Flavián & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020; Chowdhury, 2024).

Conclusion

This review synthesizes current evidence on the influence of fitness influencers on consumer behaviour in the health and wellness sector. The study highlights several key insights:

- Fitness influencers significantly affect consumer attitudes, exercise routines, and purchase behaviour, particularly through credibility, authenticity, and parasocial relationships.
- Sponsored content can be effective if transparency is maintained, but over-commercialization or misleading claims may reduce trust and increase health risks.
- Parasocial bonds amplify the persuasive power of influencers, mediating engagement, motivation, and behavioural outcomes.

Contribution of the Study:

This review provides an integrated understanding of the dual impact—positive and negative—of fitness influencers. It consolidates insights across health, marketing, and behavioural literature, identifies gaps in regulation, credibility, and misinformation, and offers practical recommendations for stakeholders.

Limitations:

The review is limited by its reliance on published literature in English and accessible databases, which may exclude regional studies or non-English research. Furthermore, most included studies are cross-sectional, limiting causal inference.

Future Research Directions:

Future studies could:

- Examine long-term behavioural outcomes of exposure to fitness influencer content.
- Explore differences between macro-, micro-, and AI-based influencers.
- Investigate cross-cultural variations in consumer trust and engagement.
- Assess the effectiveness of regulatory interventions and ethical guidelines on consumer safety.

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