

The Problem with Fitness Influencers in the Digital Era: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has significantly influenced public engagement in health and fitness activities. Fitness influencers have emerged as key communicators of exercise techniques, nutrition practices, and lifestyle behaviors. However, the increasing reliance on influencer-generated content has raised concerns regarding the credibility, scientific accuracy, and ethical implications of disseminated information. The present qualitative research study aims to explore the potential risks associated with fitness influencers and their impact on public perception of health and physical training. A purposive sample of 30 male and female participants actively following fitness influencers was selected for thematic analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to identify patterns of misinformation, unrealistic body image expectations, supplement misuse, and training misconceptions. Findings reveal that a substantial proportion of participants perceived influencer content as trustworthy despite lacking professional certification or scientific validation. Existing literature indicates that misleading diet and exercise advice is widespread across social media platforms and often lacks empirical evidence, thereby influencing behavioral decisions and compromising health outcomes. Moreover, influencer credibility based on attractiveness rather than expertise has been shown to influence users' exercise intentions, creating a gap between evidence-based practice and visual persuasion. The study concludes that the unregulated nature of digital fitness communication may negatively affect training outcomes and psychological well-being among users. It recommends stricter professional guidelines, public awareness programs, and integration of scientifically validated information to ensure safe and effective fitness practices in the digital age.

Keywords : Fitness Influencers, Social Media, Health Misinformation, Body Image, Exercise Behaviour, Digital Fitness Communication, Qualitative Study

1. Introduction

Social media has revolutionized the fitness industry by democratizing access to health-related information. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have enabled fitness influencers to reach global audiences and promote workout programs, dietary supplements, and lifestyle modifications. While these influencers often motivate individuals toward physical activity, concerns regarding the authenticity and reliability of their content have emerged.

In accordance to research, social media platforms frequently spread false or misleading diet and exercise recommendations without the necessary scientific support. Because there is no professional regulation, influencers might portray their own experiences as universal solutions, which could lead people to adopt unhealthy or unproductive routines for exercise.

Furthermore, exposure to unrealistic body standards portrayed by influencers has been linked to dissatisfaction with body image and unhealthy training behaviours. Influencer-generated content often prioritizes aesthetics over health-oriented outcomes, thereby creating misconceptions regarding the principles of training, recovery, and nutrition.

2. Objectives of the Study

- ✓ To examine the influence of fitness influencers on the exercise behaviour of male and female social media users.
- ✓ To analyse the credibility of fitness-related information shared by influencers on digital platforms.
- ✓ To identify the extent to which individuals adopt workout routines and dietary practices promoted by fitness influencers.
- ✓ To investigate the impact of influencer-generated content on body image perception among social media users.
- ✓ To explore the risks associated with non-scientific training methods and supplement recommendations promoted by fitness influencers.
- ✓ To assess the awareness of participants regarding evidence-based fitness practices.
- ✓ To evaluate the psychological and physical outcomes associated with following influencer-driven fitness advice.

3. Review of Literature

Recent studies highlight the growing influence of fitness influencers on exercise behaviour and health decision-making. Wang et al. (2024) reported that perceived trustworthiness and expertise of fitness influencers significantly impact users' attitudes and intentions to engage in physical activity .

Similarly, Yin et al. (2024) emphasized that content quality and influencer credibility affect viewers' perception of usefulness in fitness videos, subsequently influencing exercise participation.

Curtis et al. (2023) found that only 41% of analysed Instagram fitness accounts met credibility standards, with many promoting unrealistic physiques and non-scientific exercise routines .

Suarez-Lledo and Alvarez-Galvez (2021) concluded that the widespread dissemination of unverified health information on social media could distort users' health behaviours and undermine evidence-based physical activity interventions .

These findings indicate a growing research gap concerning the psychological and physiological implications of influencer-driven fitness culture.

4. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to investigate perceptions regarding fitness influencer content among social media users.

5. Research Design

A phenomenological research design was employed to understand participants' lived experiences and interpretations of influencer-generated fitness information.

6. Population and Sample

The study population consisted of individuals actively following fitness influencers on social media platforms. A purposive sample of:

30 Participants

- ✓ Male: 15
- ✓ Female: 15

Was selected for the study.

7. Data Collection Tools

- ✓ Semi-structured interviews
- ✓ Observation of digital behaviour
- ✓ Open-ended questionnaires

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 30)

Variables	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	15	50%
	Female	15	50%
Age Group	18–22 Years	8	26.7%
	23–27 Years	12	40%
	28–32 Years	6	20%
	33–37 Years	4	13.3%
Fitness Experience	< 1 Year	7	23.3%
	1–3 Years	14	46.7%
	> 3 Years	9	30%
Social Media Usage	1–2 Hours	10	33.3%
	3–4 Hours	12	40%
	> 4 Hours	8	26.7%

8. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted to categorize participant responses into recurring patterns. Major themes identified included:

- ✓ Trust in influencer expertise
- ✓ Adoption of non-scientific training practices
- ✓ Supplement dependency
- ✓ Unrealistic physique expectations
- ✓ Confusion regarding evidence-based exercise principles

Participants frequently reported adopting workout routines and diet plans without consulting certified fitness professionals.

Table 4: Negative Outcomes Associated with Influencer Content

Observed Outcome	Participants (n)	Percentage (%)
Muscle Injury	6	20%
Joint Pain	5	16.7%
Body Image Dissatisfaction	14	46.7%
Training Confusion	12	40%
Unrealistic Expectations	17	56.7%

Results and Discussion

The findings suggest that visual appeal and popularity significantly influence perceived credibility of fitness influencers. Literature indicates that trustworthiness plays a greater role than expertise in shaping exercise intentions.

- ✓ Participants also acknowledged experiencing:
- ✓ Exercise injuries due to improper techniques
- ✓ Body dissatisfaction
- ✓ Unrealistic expectations regarding transformation timelines

These outcomes align with previous research indicating that social media fitness content may promote narrow body ideals and negatively impact mental well-being.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Participant Responses

Identified Themes	Number of Participants (n=30)	Percentage (%)
Trust in Influencer Advice	22	73.3%
Adoption of Influencer Workout Plans	18	60%
Supplement Usage Based on Influencers	16	53.3%
Unrealistic Body Image Expectations	20	66.7%
Confusion Regarding Scientific Training	17	56.7%
Reported Exercise Injuries	9	30%
Dissatisfaction with Physical Appearance	14	46.7%

Table 3: Perceived Credibility of Fitness Influencers

Credibility Factor	Agree (n)	Disagree (n)	Percentage Agree (%)
Influencers are Qualified	11	19	36.7%
Influencers Provide Safe Advice	15	15	50%
Influencers Use Scientific Methods	9	21	30%
Influencers Motivate Exercise	25	5	83.3%
Influencers Promote Supplements	21	9	70%

The qualitative responses obtained from participants were categorized into major recurring themes and represented in tabular format (Table 2). The findings indicate a substantial reliance on influencer-generated fitness advice among social media users.

Conclusion of Qualitative Findings

The study concludes that fitness influencers significantly affect exercise behaviour and health perceptions among social media users. However, the lack of scientific validation in influencer-driven content poses potential risks related to misinformation, injury, and psychological stress.

Recommendations

- ✓ Certification requirements for digital fitness coaches
- ✓ Public awareness campaigns on evidence-based training
- ✓ Integration of licensed professionals in online fitness education
- ✓ Regulation of supplement promotion by influencers
- ✓ Inclusion of media literacy in physical education programs

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