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The Role of Health Influencers on TikTok in Shaping Gen Z Consumer Behavior: A Review of Digital Communication Perspectives and Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the role of health influencers on TikTok in shaping Gen Z's health consumption behavior through the perspective of digital communication and popular culture. The research method used is a qualitative approach with literature study and content analysis, focusing on scientific publications, research reports, and relevant TikTok content. The results show that health influencers use edutainment-based communication strategies by utilizing trends, viral music, and popular culture symbols, so that health messages are more easily accepted by Gen Z. Other findings show that Gen Z not only views health messages as education, but also as part of their social identity and digital lifestyle. This study confirms that the role of health influencers on TikTok can be an effective strategy in health communication, although it still faces challenges such as potential misinformation and the need for collaboration with healthcare professionals.

Keywords: health influencers, TikTok, Gen Z, digital communication

INTRODUCTION

TikTok's rapid growth, particularly among Gen Z, has made it one of the most popular social media platforms today. The app offers short, creative, and trend-driven content, quickly capturing user attention while encouraging active participation through likes, comments, and reshares (Akbar et al., 2024).

TikTok's characteristics, which emphasize visualization, music, and creative effects, make it more interactive than other platforms, and make it easier for users to express themselves, build a digital identity, and follow the development of popular culture in real time (Alvianto et al., 2024). Beyond its entertainment purpose, TikTok has also evolved into a platform for education, promotion, and social campaigns, including in the health sector, thanks to its concise format that allows for effective message delivery. Its popularity among Gen Z not only reflects changing media consumption behavior but also demonstrates how digital technology can shape the lifestyles, communication patterns, and consumption behavior of the younger generation.

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The development of TikTok shows a very rapid phenomenon, especially among Gen Z, which makes it one of the most popular social media today (Aliah & Nurfazri, 2023). This app presents short, creative, and trend-driven content, quickly capturing user attention while encouraging active participation through likes, comments, and reshares. TikTok's emphasis on visuals, music, and creative effects makes it more interactive than other platforms, making it easier for users to express themselves, build a digital identity, and follow popular culture trends in real time.

Beyond its entertainment potential, TikTok has also evolved into a platform for education, promotion, and social campaigns, including in the health sector, thanks to its concise format that allows for effective message delivery. Its popularity among Gen Z not only reflects changing media consumption behavior but also demonstrates how digital technology can shape the lifestyles, communication patterns, and consumption behavior of the younger generation (Putri et al., 2024).

This platform not only functions as an entertainment medium, but has also developed into an educational tool that has a wide reach, including in the health sector (Prasetyo & Anggraeni, 2023). Through its creative short video format, TikTok enables the delivery of health information in a simple, visual, and easy-to-understand manner, making it more readily accepted by audiences, especially younger generations. Many health practitioners, academics, and health influencers utilize the platform to provide education on healthy lifestyles, disease prevention, mental health, and general health literacy.

TikTok's trend-driven and interactive nature also encourages users to actively engage, whether through comments, duets, or challenges, enabling educational messages to spread more widely. Thus, TikTok has transformed from a mere entertainment platform into a strategic medium for raising public health awareness, while also becoming part of the shift in information consumption behavior in the digital age (Sari, 2025).

The phenomenon of health influencers has emerged as a crucial aspect of the social media ecosystem, particularly TikTok, playing a key role in disseminating health information to a wide audience. They not only share health tips, healthy lifestyles, or simple medical information, but also package it in a light, creative format that follows popular trends, making it more accessible to younger generations, especially Gen Z (Pramita et al., 2024).

The presence of health influencers bridges the gap between formal health information, which is usually rigid, and popular communication that is more familiar with the audience's daily lives (Rubinelli, 2025). Through visual approaches, personal narratives, and direct interactions with followers, they are able to build trust, shape opinions, and even influence public health consumption behavior. This phenomenon marks a shift in how people acquire health knowledge, from traditional educational models to more participatory digital communication patterns based on pop culture.

They employ an engaging visual communication style, combined with simple, easy-to-understand language, and utilize popular cultural symbols

familiar to Gen Z's everyday lives. This approach makes health messages not only informative, but also relevant, entertaining, and aligned with emerging digital trends. In this way, health influencers are able to capture attention, build emotional connection, and increase the likelihood of their audience accepting and implementing the health messages they convey.

Gen Z consumer behavior shows a strong tendency to make social media the primary source of health information, replacing the dominance of conventional media and formal sources such as medical personnel or academic literature (Angreni et al., 2024). This generation grew up in a fast-paced digital age, so accessibility, convenience, and social connectedness are important factors in determining how they acquire health knowledge.

Information delivered through social media, especially in short, visual and interactive formats, is more easily captured and suited to their digital experience-based learning style (Yusnaldi et al., 2025). Furthermore, Gen Z tends to trust content shared by figures they consider authentic, relatable, and close to their daily lives, such as health influencers. This phenomenon is not only changing health information consumption patterns but also influencing how Gen Z forms attitudes, makes decisions, and practices healthy lifestyles in their daily lives.

Gen Z's consumption decisions are not solely based on rational considerations, but are also greatly influenced by developing trends, the need to build and affirm social identity, and lifestyles constructed through interactions in the digital world (Azizah & Erawati, 2023). In this context, social media serves as both a space for self-representation and an arena for preference formation, where consumption choices often reflect adherence to popular culture and a desire for recognition within virtual communities. Therefore, Gen Z's consumption behavior is more symbolic and emotional, with decisions made not only related to the functional benefits of a product or service but also to social values and the self-image they wish to project in the digital realm.

From a digital communication perspective, health messages are proven to be more easily accepted when packaged using elements of popular culture such as memes, viral music, and trending TikTok challenges. The use of these elements makes health messages feel more relevant, lighthearted, and in line with the communication style of Gen Z, which is familiar with humor, creative visuals, and collective participation in following digital trends. Popular culture serves as a bridge to simplify complex health issues into easily accessible content, while increasing audience appeal and engagement (Karinda & Ambalao, 2025).

Furthermore, the integration of popular culture into health messaging also strengthens social identity, as Gen Z not only consumes information as knowledge but also incorporates it into their lifestyle and self-expression in the digital space. Thus, the combination of digital communication and popular culture makes health education more interactive, participatory, and potentially more effective in creating behavioral change (Mustofa & Sani, 2024).

This indicates a shift in health communication patterns from a formal model that tends to be rigid and one-way toward a more interactive, engaging, and educational entertainment (edutainment) approach that aligns with the characteristics of the digital generation. The edutainment concept allows health information to be delivered in a light, creative, and entertaining format without compromising its educational value, making it easier for audiences to understand and encouraged to internalize the message. This shift also marks the birth of a new paradigm in health communication, where emotional engagement, popular culture relevance, and audience participation are crucial factors in determining the effectiveness of health information dissemination in the social media era.

The research gap is evident in the tendency of previous studies to focus more on influencer marketing for commercial products such as fashion, cosmetics, and e-commerce, resulting in relatively limited studies on health influencers. Furthermore, research on health communication on social media generally focuses on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, or Twitter, while studies on TikTok, a platform with a very large Gen Z user base, are still rare. Furthermore, there has been no research specifically combining digital communication and popular culture perspectives to explain how health influencers influence Gen Z's health consumption behavior. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by offering a new approach that links popular culture trends with digital communication patterns in the context of health.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of health influencers on TikTok in shaping Gen Z's health consumption behavior, emphasizing how digital communication strategies and the use of popular culture elements are used to influence the acceptance of health messages. Furthermore, this study also aims to identify Gen Z's health consumption patterns, which are influenced not only by rational aspects but also by trends, social identities, and lifestyle constructions in digital media, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of interactions between social media, popular culture, and the health behaviors of the younger generation.

The novelty of this research lies in its novel approach, combining digital communication and popular culture perspectives as analytical lenses in the study of health influencers, with a focus on the TikTok platform, which is still relatively rarely explored in health communication studies. This research offers an understanding that health messages not only function as educational tools but also play a role in shaping the social identity and lifestyle of Gen Z in the digital space. Furthermore, this research is expected to provide a conceptual basis for developing social media-based health communication strategies that are more adaptive, participatory, and relevant to the characteristics of the digital generation.

METHODOLOGY

This research method uses a qualitative approach with a literature review and content analysis design to understand the role of health influencers

5 on TikTok in influencing Gen Z's health consumption behavior through digital communication and popular culture perspectives. Data sources include scientific journal articles, proceedings, books, related research reports, and TikTok content from popular health influencers in the form of videos, comments, and audience interactions (Wenas & Arsastha, 2025). Inclusion criteria included relevant research on health influencers, Gen Z, digital communication, and popular culture within the past 5-10 years, while exclusion criteria included research outside the health domain or not focused on TikTok.

Data was collected through a document study of academic publications and content observation of TikTok content. The analysis was conducted using content and thematic analysis, categorizing digital communication strategies, the use of popular culture, and their impact on Gen Z consumption behavior (Li et al., 2021). Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing literature, social media content, and previous research, as well as through peer review with experts in communication and popular culture. This research resulted in a mapping of how health influencers on TikTok shape Gen Z consumer behavior and provides a new perspective on the integration of digital communication and popular culture in the health realm.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research shows that health influencers on TikTok utilize a unique communication strategy through short-form content, engaging visuals, and the use of music and viral trends. Health messages are packaged in an edutainment format (a combination of education and entertainment), making them more easily accepted by Gen Z, who are accustomed to consuming information quickly and easily. Popular culture such as memes, challenges, and viral sounds are also utilized to link health messages to booming trends, making them more shareable and increasing audience engagement. With this approach, health influencers are able to make health communications more relevant, interactive, and in line with the characteristics of the digital generation.

As a result, Gen Z places more trust in health influencers than in formal information sources, as the content is perceived as more authentic, relatable, and aligned with their lifestyle. Health messages are no longer perceived simply as medical information, but also as part of the social identity and digital lifestyle they wish to project. This is driving a real shift in consumption behavior, with Gen Z showing increased interest in health products, healthy lifestyles, and new habits such as light exercise and a balanced diet. Furthermore, their consumption decisions are more influenced by peer influence on social media than by formal promotions from health institutions, strengthening the position of health influencers as important actors in shaping the health behavior of the younger generation.

The Power of Digital Communication

TikTok, as an algorithm-based platform, has the advantage of widely distributing content through its For You Page (FYP) feature, allowing health messages to reach a more diverse audience without requiring users to first follow specific accounts. This mechanism allows creative, relevant, and trending health content to quickly gain exposure, engagement, and viral potential (Koswara, 2025).

Thus, the dissemination of health information on TikTok depends not only on a health influencer's follower count, but also on how the algorithm tailors content to users' preferences, interests, and digital behaviors. This presents a significant opportunity for health education to reach a wider audience segment, including those who may not have previously actively sought out health information, while simultaneously strengthening TikTok's position as a strategic medium for digital health communication (Al Hanif et al., 2023).

This gives health influencers immense power in disseminating health education quickly, massively, and with the potential to go viral. With the support of TikTok's algorithm, which pushes relevant content to users' feeds, creatively packaged health messages can reach a wide audience in a short time. This position positions health influencers not only as conveyors of information but also as agents of change, capable of shaping public opinion, influencing behavior patterns, and encouraging the adoption of healthy lifestyles among Gen Z.

Relevance of Popular Culture

The integration of popular culture with health messages not only makes the information more visually engaging but also more relevant to the daily lives of Gen Z, who are closely connected to digital trends. The use of memes, viral music, challenges, and popular culture symbols makes health messages feel familiar, easy to understand, and encourages active audience participation.

More than just education, this approach builds a sense of belonging for Gen Z, as they feel part of a digital community that shares similar values, lifestyles, and identities. Thus, health messages serve not only as medical information but also as a social medium that strengthens the younger generation's engagement with a healthy lifestyle, as constructed within popular culture (Situmeang & Situmeang, 2020).

This approach differentiates health influencers from health institutions that tend to use a formal, rigid, and one-way communication style (Gupta et al., 2022). While health institutions often convey information in technical or scientific formats that are difficult for lay audiences to understand, health influencers present information in a lighter, more personal way, and in line with emerging digital trends. This difference makes the health messages delivered by influencers feel

more relatable, relevant, and easily accepted by Gen Z, as they align with their everyday language, symbols, and lifestyle.

Social Implications

Gen Z's consumption behavior is not only influenced by health needs alone, but also by social symbols that are constructed and reproduced through digital content (Gupta et al., 2022). In social media, decisions to consume products or adopt a healthy lifestyle are often not solely based on rational considerations, but rather are linked to self-identity, trends, and the desire for recognition from the digital community. Thus, health consumption for Gen Z serves a dual purpose: as an effort to maintain quality of life and as a social expression that strengthens their self-image in the digital space.

In this context, health influencers play an important role as role models who influence healthy lifestyles in the real world through the self-representation they display in the digital world (Triyas et al., 2024). Through content that combines education with pop culture, influencers shape the perception that health practices are not just a medical obligation but also a worthy part of a modern lifestyle. Their presence bridges the gap between formal health information and Gen Z's need for light, authentic, and trend-setting content, making health behavior changes easier to accept and implement.

Challenge

The potential for misinformation is a major challenge for health influencers, given that not all of them have a medical background or a deep understanding of health. While engaging and viral content can certainly capture the attention of Gen Z, it also carries the risk of spreading inaccurate or even misleading information. This can seriously impact the health behavior of younger generations, especially when misinformation is widely shared without verification from more credible sources.

Therefore, closer collaboration between health influencers and healthcare professionals is needed to maintain the quality and accuracy of health messages. Influencers can act as a bridge in simplifying medical information to make it more accessible, while healthcare professionals play a role in ensuring the scientific validity of the content. This synergy can not only minimize the risk of misinformation but also increase public trust in health messages on social media, making the dissemination of health education more effective, responsible, and sustainable.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that health influencers on TikTok play a strategic role in shaping Gen Z's health consumption behavior through creative, light-

hearted, and trend-following digital communications. The integration of popular culture such as viral music, memes, and challenges has been shown to increase the appeal and effectiveness of health messages, making information more easily accepted and put into practice. Health messages are no longer seen as merely educational, but rather as part of Gen Z's social identity and digital lifestyle, influencing their consumption patterns, particularly in adopting healthy habits. Nevertheless, the potential for misinformation is a challenge that must be anticipated, necessitating collaboration between health influencers and healthcare professionals to ensure accuracy and strengthen adaptive health communication strategies in the digital era.

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