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Wissenschaftliche Abstracts

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Social Media Influencers as a New Source of Health Information: Insights from an Austrian Youth Survey

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Background

Social media influencers have become the dominant source of health information for young people. While some influencers may share valuable content, critics raise concerns that influencers lack expertise, have commercial motives, and hold personal biases. Despite these concerns, little is known about the epidemiology of the health influencer phenomenon. This study provides first insights into the reach of social media influencers in young populations. It also informs public health and future efforts to reach and engage youth, ultimately promoting positive health behaviors and improving overall health.

Methodology

A cross-sectional study was conducted with a representative sample of 1003 Austrian adolescents and young adults aged 15-25. The study examines the epidemiology of health influencers, engagement with influencers, prevalent health topics in influencer posts, advertising, and perceived impact of influencers on health.

Preliminary Findings

The majority of participants (75.37%) follow social media influencers and estimate that over 51% of social media posts they see are generated by influencers. Additionally, 37.19% follow influencers who specifically share health content and 30.91% have purchased health products recommended by influencers (e.g., foods, supplements, beauty products). Furthermore, 40.27% trust influencers they actively follow for health-related information, which is almost as much trust as that in traditional media (43.47%). Finally, over a third find influencer content beneficial for health (32.34%), while 29.20% find it harmful, or neither (33.83%).

Conclusion

This study offers a first epidemiology of health influencers in a young population. Findings demonstrate a high reach of influencers' health content and young people's favorable attitudes towards them. Despite prevalent conflicts of interest and questionable expertise, influencers are perceived as reliable health information sources, and even a source for buying health products. The study contributes to the general knowledge of influencers' role in youth health and offers valuable insights for public health, informing interventions to promote positive health behaviors among Austrian youth.

Main Statement

This study examines social media influencers' reach and young people's engagement with their health-related content. The results offer important insights into the role of SMIs in shaping young people's health attitudes and behavior.