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The contribution of digital influencers to enhancing healthy nutritional awareness among consumers

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Abstract---This study aims to analyze the role of digital influencers on social media platforms in enhancing healthy nutritional awareness among consumers, in light of the widespread dissemination of nutrition and health content on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. The study adopted the descriptive-analytical approach. The study observed a disparity in the credibility of content provided by some influencers who offer health advice without a scientific background or professional qualification. One of the study's findings is that nutrition specialists are responsible for planning appropriate healthy dietary regimens, and it should be recognized that there is no single diet that applies to everyone. Daily nutritional needs vary from one individual to another due to differences in height, age, weight, and physical activity, as well as health, social, and psychological factors. The study also emphasizes the importance of obtaining information from reliable sources and receiving nutritional advice from qualified nutrition specialists. The study recommended encouraging partnerships between influencers and nutrition experts, as well as launching organized digital awareness campaigns in cooperation with official health institutions.

Keywords---Nutritional awareness, digital influencers, social media networks.

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a noticeable increase in the role of digital influencers on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, particularly in the food sector, as they have

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become a real influential force in changing followers' dietary behaviors. Their influence ranges from promoting healthy eating habits to, in some cases, encouraging the consumption of food products that are harmful to health. They use social media to disseminate health information and encourage the adoption of a healthy lifestyle, which contributes to increasing nutritional awareness and shaping dietary behaviors.

Healthy nutritional awareness is considered one of the fundamental factors in maintaining public health and preventing chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. This has prompted many health institutions to adopt digital strategies for nutritional education. In this context, digital influencers have become a non-traditional means of disseminating health messages by simplifying nutritional concepts, sharing healthy recipes, and presenting motivating personal experiences.

However, this influence is not without challenges, as some influencers lack academic training or expertise in the field of nutrition, which may lead to the dissemination of misleading or scientifically unfounded information. From this perspective, the research problem can be formulated as follows: To what extent do digital influencers contribute to enhancing healthy nutritional awareness among consumers?
Based on the above, the following questions can be raised:

- What is meant by nutritional awareness and digital influencers?
- How do digital influencers contribute to enhancing healthy nutritional awareness among consumers?

Research Hypotheses:

- Increasing visual content (videos, illustrative images) enhances the effectiveness of nutritional messages.
- The effectiveness of nutritional influence decreases if the influencer is not a specialist in the field of health or nutrition.

Significance of the Study: This research derives its importance from the nature of the topic it addresses, which lies in identifying the extent to which digital influencers contribute to enhancing healthy nutritional awareness. It seeks to understand the nature of digital influencers' contribution to promoting healthy nutritional awareness among Algerian consumers and to analyze the positive and negative dimensions of this influence, in light of the cultural, social, and economic specificities that characterize the environment.

Research Objectives: This study aims to shed light on the extent to which consumers rely on nutritional content presented by influencers and to evaluate the effectiveness of this content in directing dietary behavior toward healthier patterns, while providing practical recommendations on how to employ this type of digital influence in supporting national health policies.
In addition, the study seeks to describe and diagnose the research variables represented by "nutritional awareness" and "digital influencers." The research objectives can be summarized as follows:

- Studying nutritional awareness.
- Identifying digital influencers and their impact on consumers.
- Examining the contribution of digital influencers to enhancing healthy nutritional awareness among consumers.

Research Methodology: Through reviewing the concepts related to nutritional awareness and digital influencers, the descriptive-analytical method was adopted, as it is the most appropriate for studying social and behavioral phenomena by collecting and analyzing data in order to explain the relationship between digital influencers and consumers' dietary behavior.

First: The Conceptual Framework of Digital Influencers

The need of economic operators to reach consumer audiences and stakeholders has increased as a result of market expansion, the growth of modern production methods, and the accompanying rise in production volume. This situation has required the search for new approaches to reach audiences that traditional print, audio, and audiovisual media are no longer able to effectively access in order to introduce them to the products and services of these institutions. With the development of the Internet and the emergence of social media platforms, a large segment of the audience shifted to following these platforms and spending time browsing them. This compelled advertising economic institutions to pursue this audience through social media and attempt to find intermediaries between them and consumers. Consequently, attention turned toward social influencers as individuals who are continuously active on social media platforms and enjoy a large number of followers.

1-1 Definition of Content Creation: Content creation refers to any valuable content that conveys an idea, presented in audio, written, or visual form through various means of communication, whether digital or traditional, with the aim of influencing a specific audience (Meziane, 2024, p. 166).

A content creator, on the other hand, is defined as any person who specializes in publishing content online and is capable of entertaining or educating followers. They are active on social media platforms to provide value to their audience, even in cases where no brand is supporting that content (Ajal, 2023, pp. 514–515).

1-2 Definition of Digital Influencers: A digital influencer is defined as a person who has the ability to influence the opinions and behaviors of a large number of followers through social media platforms, by means of continuous content that is often personal in nature and characterized by a degree of credibility and mass appeal. This definition is based on the availability of two elements: "digital influence" and "trust." Freberg et al. argue that a successful influencer is one who is able to create an interactive emotional relationship with their audience, enabling them to influence decisions related to purchasing or lifestyle patterns.

This concept has gradually expanded to include not only celebrities in the arts and media, but also specialists in various fields (such as health, nutrition, and sports) who possess specialized content that attracts a niche audience (Freberg, 2011, p. 90).

1-3 The Difference Between Influencers and Content Creators: The concept of influencers is measured by the size of their follower base (i.e., quantitatively); the larger the number of followers, the greater the influence. In contrast, the concept of content creators is measured qualitatively, based on the type and value of the information they share with followers across various fields according to their specialization, which is the reason they gain followers (Ajal, 2023, p. 515).

Accordingly, a content creator may see their content spread widely and gain a large number of followers, thereby becoming both a content creator and a digital influencer. However, not all influencers necessarily produce meaningful content; an influencer may have one million followers yet publish no purposeful content.

1-4 Characteristics of Digital Influencers: Digital influencers possess a set of characteristics and attributes that distinguish them from others in their environment, including:

- **Expertise of the Influencer:** Expertise is one of the most important dimensions of influencer credibility, through which influencers create impact on followers' comprehension processes. Expertise is defined as "the degree to which influencers are perceived as communicators and sources of reliable assertions, associated with their experience, skills, knowledge, and qualifications, and the extent to which followers view them as valid, experienced, informed, and qualified sources." From another perspective, the importance of a message depends on the expertise and credibility of its source; sources characterized by expertise tend to be more persuasive. Building a mental image of influencer credibility among followers through expertise reflects the source's knowledge or skills in offering opinions,

viewpoints, and claims on a particular topic. Influencer expertise is related to acquiring sufficient skills and knowledge to endorse a brand or to build perceptions among followers.

- **Trust in the Influencer:** Trust is one of the defining constructs in the influencer credibility model, as trustworthiness affects the effectiveness of celebrity or influencer endorsement. Source credibility is associated with perceived honesty, reliability, and dependability of celebrities or influencers. When an influencer demonstrates integrity, honesty, and sincerity in presenting content to their audience, this is expressed as trustworthiness, which has a direct impact on message effectiveness and credibility (Merzek, 2024, p. 72).
- **Authenticity:** The concept of authenticity is of great importance in building strong relationships between influencers and their followers. It is essential to present "behind-the-scenes" content that appears genuine to the audience. If influencers fail to do so, they may be perceived as inauthentic by followers. Studies also indicate that content creators who present their posts in a personal manner tend to have more effective advertisements, underscoring the importance of authenticity. To successfully build authenticity and achieve personal communication, influencers should strive to share their opinions honestly while informing followers about collaborations with companies. Research also suggests that marketers should work with influencers by minimizing content restrictions, allowing influencers to present content in a way that aligns with their personal style. Authenticity serves as a motivating factor for companies to initiate collaborations with influencers. Conversely, an influencer may be perceived as inauthentic if their account appears to be dedicated solely to advertising, which may also be the case when an influencer follows very few people while having a large number of followers.
- **Attractiveness:**
  Physical attractiveness in advertising on social media refers to beauty, as it may be reflected through the use of certain elements such as bold and expressive facial expressions and body language that aligns with the design of the advertised product in the image. However, it is believed that people tend to show a preference for influencers who are either physically attractive to them or who reflect a warm personality, rather than someone who may be perceived as rude or offensive. Physical attractiveness can be an important factor in how individuals think about others and the judgments they make. For example, an influencer perceived as attractive may be seen as someone who conveys immediacy, has an appealing smile, and an engaging look (Meziane, 2024, p. 169).

1-5 Types of Digital Influencers and Their Role in Communication: There are several classifications of digital influencers. Some classify them based on the number of followers, others according to the field in which they are active, while some adopt different classification criteria.
Classification According to Number of Followers: This classification includes four categories:

- **Mega-influencers:** They have more than one million followers and are often well-known celebrities.
- **Macro-influencers:** Their follower count ranges from 100,000 to one million, and they are the most commonly used in commercial and health campaigns.
- **Micro-influencers:** They have between 10,000 and 100,000 followers, but often enjoy a high level of engagement.
- **Nano-influencers:** They have fewer than 10,000 followers but are specialized in a specific topic, such as plant-based nutrition or therapeutic exercise.

Abidin emphasizes that the success of these influencers in exerting influence is due to their direct interaction with the audience and their reliance on a "personalization of advice" approach, which enhances feelings of trust and belonging (Abidin, 2016).

Jim Barry, on the other hand, identifies four types of influencers:

- **Educators:** Influencers who teach other users useful information and share their expertise with others.
- **Coaches:** Influencers who teach and train others, primarily relying on experimentation and participation.
- **Entertainers:** Influencers who broadcast entertaining and light content, relying on a light comedic style.
- **Charismatic Influencers:** Influencers who possess a likable personality among a large segment of users and focus on spreading positive energy, inspiration, and creativity (Omar, 2024, p. 93).

1-6 Definition of Social Media Networks: Social media networks are a system of electronic networks on the Internet that allow subscribers to create a personal profile and then connect, through an electronic social system, with other members who share the same interests and hobbies. Over time, these networks have evolved into large platforms that include numerous private and public figures, groups, and public and private institutions. They are easily created thanks to the features and applications provided by these networks to subscribers (Khenifer, 2023, p. 501).

1-7 The Most Influential Social Media Networks: Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are among the main platforms used by influencers to promote ideas and products related to health and nutrition. Each platform is characterized by a different interactive nature:

- **Facebook:**
  Facebook is a social networking site that has gained wide acceptance and interaction among people, especially youth, around the world. At its inception in 2004, it did not go beyond being a personal blog and was initially limited to the university environment. It did not achieve distinction over earlier social networking sites such as MySpace until 2007, when new features were introduced, including providing opportunities for developers. This feature increased Facebook's popularity, allowing it to expand beyond the United States to all countries worldwide. By 2010, the number of registered users exceeded half a billion, who regularly visit the platform to exchange files, photos, and video clips, comment on published opinions, ideas, and various new topics, in addition to active participation, often through chats and messaging (Khenifer, 2023, pp. 502–503).
- **Instagram:**
  Instagram is a free application that operates on smartphones and is based on sharing photos through the application and other social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. It is also a social media platform that allows users to edit and upload photos and video clips in the form of posts or short stories published via the user's account on computers or smartphones. It is characterized by the hashtag feature and photo editing using various filters, as well as the possibility of sharing posts, stories, and videos across other social media platforms (Khalaflawi, 2023, p. 116).
- **YouTube:**
  Modern technological development in the field of the Internet has provided YouTube technology, which has become widely popular among users of all categories due to its communicative features that enable users to view its content at any time, beyond the time constraints imposed by television screens. Users can also comment on content according to their own perspectives, away from the gatekeeper control that may delete or modify messages in traditional media. YouTube was launched in 2005 by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim, former employees of PayPal. During the summer of 2006, YouTube became one of the fastest-growing and most widespread websites on the Internet. The site includes a wide range of content, such as cinema and television films and music clips (Khenifer, 2023, pp. 503–504).

- **TikTok:**
  TikTok is currently witnessing a significant rise in influencer impact, especially among youth, due to its fast-paced nature and simplified creative content (Djafarova Elmira, 2017).

Recent studies (Djafarova Elmira, 2017) indicate that Instagram is the most effective platform in influencing females and youth, while YouTube achieves strong results in building long-term trust with followers.

Second: Nutritional Awareness and Digital Influence: The food domain is extremely important for individuals in protecting themselves and their families, as it is closely linked to health and safety from diseases. Unhealthy food is considered a source of many diseases affecting humanity today. Overconsumption causes diseases, and deprivation also causes diseases. Therefore, nutritional awareness and knowledge of harmful versus healthy foods have become essential aspects of life.

2-1 Concept of Nutritional Awareness: Nutritional awareness is defined as the adequate knowledge and understanding individuals have regarding healthy nutrition, food components, and their impact on public health, along with the ability to make healthy dietary decisions. This concept goes beyond mere theoretical knowledge to practical behavior based on conscious awareness of the importance of food quality and balanced nutrients. What matters is not merely filling the stomach to feel full, nor the quantity of food, its scarcity or abundance, or its low or high price, but rather the nutritional value of food and the extent to which it contains essential nutrients for the body. It also includes the individual's ability to choose food properly, protect it from contamination, distinguish between spoiled and safe food, avoid excessive consumption, and follow healthy dietary behaviors. Nutritional awareness is based on three aspects: the cognitive aspect, the behavioral aspect, and the affective aspect (Contento, 2008).

It also refers to developing society's awareness of the importance of proper nutrition and understanding its basic principles, which form an integrated unit through which the general objectives of nutritional education are achieved. Nutritional awareness can be offered as independent curricula, especially in advanced stages of education. Nutritional awareness includes several components:

- Knowledge of food components and their effects.
- The ability to read food labels.
- Evaluating widely circulated nutritional information.
- Awareness of the relationship between food and psychological and physical health.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) indicates that nutritional awareness is a necessary first step in combating malnutrition and obesity, especially in urban environments where processed foods are widespread. National food-based dietary guidelines provide context-specific advice and principles regarding healthy diets and lifestyles, based on sound evidence and responsive to public health and nutrition priorities in each country, patterns of food production and consumption, social and cultural influences, and food composition data (Silva, 2024).

2-2 Relationship Between Nutritional Awareness and Chronic Diseases:
Research has shown that low levels of nutritional awareness are directly associated with increased rates of non-communicable diseases such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and certain types of cancer. Reports by the World Health Organization indicate that unhealthy dietary habits represent one of the most prominent global risk factors and contribute to increasing the economic burden on healthcare systems.

The global rise in obesity and chronic diseases, such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases, reflects complex interactions between biology, personal behavior, and the environment. As a result, awareness of the importance of nutrition education has increased. An analysis of evidence derived from more than 300 studies shows that nutrition education is more effective when it focuses on behavior/action (rather than knowledge alone) and systematically links theory, research, and practice.

Nutrition education consists of three core components (Contento, 2008):

- **A motivational component:** Aims to increase awareness and enhance motivation by addressing beliefs and attitudes through effective communication strategies.
- **A practical component:** Seeks to facilitate people's ability to take action through goal setting and cognitive self-regulation skills.
- **An environmental component:** In which nutrition educators work with policymakers and others to enhance environmental support for action.

Nutrition education plays a pivotal role in building sustainable health awareness. Therefore, nutrition education programs, whether in schools or through the media, demonstrate a direct impact on improving dietary behaviors and reducing reliance on high-calorie foods. On the other hand, a report issued by the World Health Organization highlights the importance of targeting social media as a platform for educating young people who spend long periods of time online, where influencers can be utilized as an alternative and flexible source of nutritional information.
It is noteworthy that some societies, despite having high levels of education, still suffer from weak nutritional culture, which highlights the need for innovative and easily accessible educational programs, including digital campaigns through digital influencers on social media platforms.
Thus, nutrition education is not limited to providing scientific information; it also includes motivating individuals to change their daily behavior through social influence and positive role models, which directly intersects with the role of digital influencers.

2-3 Digital Influence on Individuals' Dietary Behavior: The ability of digital influencers to affect their followers' dietary behavior is based on theories of social influence, most notably Albert Bandura's *Social Learning Theory*, which emphasizes that individuals learn by observing the behavior of others, especially when those others enjoy social acceptance or a prominent status.
A/ Social Learning Theory: Social learning theory is increasingly cited as a key component in the sustainable management of natural resources and in promoting desired behavioral change. This theory is based on the idea that we learn from our interactions with others within a social context through observing their behaviors. People develop similar behaviors after observing others, as they internalize and imitate observed behaviors, particularly when their observational experiences are positive or involve rewards related to the observed behavior.
In 1986, based on his studies and findings, Bandura decided to rename Social Learning Theory (SLT) as Social Cognitive Learning Theory (SCLT). In other words, Social Cognitive Learning Theory (SCLT) emerged as a more accurate description than Social Learning Theory, which had been advocated since the 1960s. SLT and SCLT are often described as a bridge between behavioral learning theories and cognitive learning theories, as they incorporate attention, memory, and motivation. They place strong emphasis on cognitive concepts. Moreover, Albert Bandura is considered one of the most influential psychologists whose social cognitive theory has impacted many research fields, including education, health sciences, social policy, psychotherapy, and others (Razieh Tadayon Nabavi, 2012).
There are three key concepts in social influence theory:

- People can learn through observation, known as observational learning.
- Mental states are an important factor in learning and are also referred to as intrinsic reinforcement.
- Learning does not necessarily lead to a change in behavior; it is followed by a modeling process (the individuals being observed are called models, and the learning process is called modeling).

Bandura identifies four necessary conditions for the modeling process. An individual can successfully model another person's behavior by meeting the following conditions:

- **Attention:** The more attention-grabbing or distinctive the behavior, the more likely it is to attract the audience's attention.

- **Retention:** The ability to remember the observed behavior.
- **Reproduction:** The ability to replicate the behavior demonstrated by the model.
- **Motivation:** The learner's willingness to demonstrate what has been learned.

B/ Influencers' Role in Changing Followers' Dietary Habits: Influencers play a direct role in shaping followers' dietary behaviors through three main mechanisms (Carrotte, 2017):

1. **Behavioral Imitation:** Followers tend to imitate the influencer's dietary pattern, especially in healthy eating challenges. Influencers possess characteristics that make them a source of trust for followers, particularly when followers perceive the influencer as credible through the information they provide, the expertise they demonstrate, and the attractiveness of the content they present.
2. **Encouragement and Motivation:** Through positive messages about health, physical activity, and balanced nutrition, followers are encouraged to emulate the influencer, especially if they consider them a role model.
3. **Reshaping Perceptions:** By changing the stereotypical image of healthy food as being boring or expensive and presenting it as enjoyable and easy to apply.

Naturally, influencers can have either a positive or negative impact on young people's self-perception and dietary habits, depending on the content of the message and the type of influencer.

C/ The Role of Influencers in Increasing Nutritional Awareness Among Consumers: The success of digital influencers in changing consumers' dietary behavior and increasing their awareness of healthy nutrition can be attributed to several factors, most notably (Klassen, 2018):

- **Focus on the Influencer's Appearance:** The physical appearance and outward look of influencers significantly affect consumers' behaviors. This is achieved by displaying the influencer's body shape, wearing sports clothing from well-known brands that highlight physical fitness and muscular build, which implicitly reflects a commitment to a healthy dietary program accompanying a fitness routine. In addition, influencers often talk about the stages of transformation they experienced after adhering to a healthy diet, especially when supported by "before" images.
- **Demonstrating Self-Confidence:** The self-confidence displayed by influencers implicitly reflects their confidence in their appearance, their words, and the information they provide about healthy nutrition, even when some are not specialists. Some rely on praising products based on personal experience, while others depend on reading and explaining the information printed on product labels. In contrast, specialized influencers emphasize their scientific capabilities and expertise in explaining food components, calorie content per meal, methods of calculating calories, appropriate food quantities for each individual, and even sleep timing and duration. All of this serves as a way for influencers to showcase their knowledge in areas where they are more informed than others.
- **Discussing Personal Experience:** Influencers often refer to their personal experiences with healthy nutrition as a means of emotionally appealing to followers and encouraging them to try it themselves. Personal experience allows for conveying a genuine impression of the proposed diet. Influencers also attempt to show how healthy nutrition helped them overcome certain health issues, most notably obesity (weight gain). Influencers emphasize that they do not promote any type of diet until they have tried it for a specific period, as a commitment to credibility and consideration for their followers' interests—an approach highlighted by most influencers.
- **Providing Specialized Advice:** Influencers may possess a large amount of specialized information, derived either from reading about certain foods or from their actual experiences with them. As a result, they present specialized information, even when they are not formally trained in nutrition, in an effort to satisfy followers' curiosity regarding the benefits of foods.

D/ Criticisms Directed at Influencers: Influencers face several criticisms, the most prominent of which include (Byrne, 2017):

- **Inaccurate or Misleading Information:** Despite the widespread dissemination of influencer content in the field of nutrition, many influencers lack a scientific or academic background in nutrition or public health. This may lead to the spread of inaccurate or misleading information that could pose risks to followers' health, particularly when it involves strict dieting regimens or dietary supplements.
  A study by Byrne indicated that a large proportion of influencers who publish nutrition-related content on Instagram do not rely on reliable scientific sources, and that promoting unexamined dietary practices may contribute to eating disorders among young people.
- **Commercial Bias and Sponsorship Influence:** Many influencers promote food products in exchange for financial rewards from food and supplement companies, which can compromise neutrality and expose audiences to commercial bias, especially when sponsored content is not clearly disclosed. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has emphasized that failure to disclose sponsorships constitutes a violation of advertising honesty, particularly in health and nutrition sectors. European studies have observed that some influencers promote foods and drinks high in sugar and fat under misleading "healthy" claims (Coates, 2019).
- **Lack of Regulation and Legislation in Some Countries:** In many countries, there are no clear laws regulating health content on social media, leaving room for misleading information and unethical promotional practices. This regulatory gap creates a digital environment that may not be safe for receiving health information. For example, a study in the Middle East highlighted that healthy nutrition content on TikTok suffers from weak scientific standards and lacks oversight from official health authorities (Al-Mutairi, 2022).
- **Negative Impact on Mental Health:** Several studies show that nutrition and health content provided by some influencers can cause psychological pressure on followers, especially when healthy lifestyles are portrayed as idealized, without accounting for social or economic differences. This pressure can lead to feelings of guilt or eating disorders such as *Orthorexia Nervosa* (an obsessive focus on healthy eating). Psychological assessments indicate that constant comparisons with influencers exacerbate issues of self-acceptance and body satisfaction (Turner, 2017).
- **Digital Access Gaps and Social Inequality:** Despite the expansion of the internet, there remain disparities in access to digital health content, especially among rural populations or low-income groups. This means influencer-driven campaigns may not reach all target segments, reinforcing nutritional and health inequalities.

Conclusion:

Digital influencers in the field of nutrition have become a form of soft power in contemporary health awareness. While this role carries significant potential for positive influence, it also entails ethical and scientific responsibilities that require coordination and integration among all stakeholders.
Sustainable activation of this role requires:

- Building a comprehensive system for training and monitoring.
- Involving local communities.
- Integrating smart technology tools to analyze health content and its impact.

Study Findings:

- Ensure information is obtained from reliable sources, and nutrition advice should come from qualified nutrition specialists.
- Avoid diets claiming rapid weight loss, as extreme diets or supplements often have harmful health effects.

- Nutrition specialists are responsible for designing appropriate healthy diets, recognizing that no single diet applies to everyone. Daily nutritional needs vary due to differences in height, age, weight, physical activity, and other health, social, and psychological factors.

Recommendations:

- Train influencers on healthy nutrition concepts in collaboration with official health authorities.
- Enhance monitoring of nutrition-related content on social media platforms.
- Encourage collaboration between influencers and nutrition experts to produce scientific and engaging content.
- Promote a culture of verifying information among consumers.
- Launch targeted digital awareness campaigns leveraging influencers' reach to promote healthy dietary practices.

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