

Facebook fitness and Insta-vitamins: How social media shapes women's health

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A new study led by researchers from the University of Sydney has found young women's engagement with social media plays a major role in shaping how they think—and act—in relation to their health.

The research, published in the journal *Health Marketing Quarterly*, studied 30 women aged between 18 and 35 during the 2021 COVID-19 lockdowns to understand the factors influencing them to adopt diet and exercise messages on social media platforms Facebook, Instagram and TikTok.

Lead author of the study, Ph.D. candidate Clare Davies from the Discipline of Media and Communications, said the initial findings suggest women are just as likely to accept [health messages](#) on social media—promoted by [influencers](#)—as they are from [public health](#) communicators.

"The women we spoke to were highly influenced to take up diet and exercise messages on social media if they felt a sense of 'connection', or relatability, with the source of the message," she said.

"Social media influencers embody this connection by fostering relationships with their audiences and sharing anecdotes about their own lives and behaviors. This was amplified during the pandemic when many women turned online to seek connectivity and explore new ways of living a healthy life."

Although much of the world has emerged from COVID-19 induced lockdowns, Davies said many of the women surveyed continued to engage with diet and [exercise programs](#) promoted by wellness influencers post-pandemic due to the sense of "friendship and community" they generated around shared health and lifestyle goals.

"Access to exclusive [online communities](#), coupled with real-life 'meet and greets' with the influencers, are a big drawcard for women when deciding whether or not to take up specific programs or diets," she said.

Participants also said they were highly encouraged to take up and

maintain diet and exercise regimes if the influencer promoting them had similar life or health experiences to them, or even a similar body type.

"Women reported being drawn to [social media influencers](#) who shared intimate details of their lives and whose personal narratives they could relate to. This included experiencing a similar health issue to the influencer, like endometriosis, or discussing things like their fertility and relationship challenges."

Similarly, the study found exposure to personal testimonials from other women and 'before and after' visuals in closed online communities were a major factor in shaping women's understanding of and behaviors around health.

One participant, who was part of a closed Facebook group associated with influencer Jessica Sepel (of JSHealth vitamin fame), reported being influenced to take a supplement for a condition "she had never experienced" due to the strength of other women's private testimonials about the product.

Co-author of the study, Adjunct Professor Alana Mann from the discipline of media and communications, said, "This study offers a snapshot into the influence of social media on women's behavior, particularly in relation to complex ideas about their health and well-being."

"Our current findings, and the emerging body of research into social media and public health, demonstrates that health marketers and public health campaigners must recognize that [social media](#) influencers and online communities do present new opportunities for ways of communicating complex health messages to women."

Davies added, "This is a case of listening to the consumer. Women, and

[younger people](#) in general, are increasingly getting their information from non-medical bodies, and this information influences their ability to make independent decisions in everyday life."

"It is vital that those designing and implementing public health campaigns work with this knowledge to ensure people get the right information about health and how to live a healthy life."

More information: Clare Davies et al, Factors influencing women to accept diet and exercise messages on social media during COVID-19 lockdowns: A qualitative application of the health belief model, *Health Marketing Quarterly* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/07359683.2023.2193076](https://doi.org/10.1080/07359683.2023.2193076)

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