

Q&A: Why online discount codes from influencers for 'miracle' products aren't your key to health

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The wellness industry is unregulated with few rules governing marketing claims often made by social media influencers, who present themselves as subject-matter experts providing "relatable" content to thousands--if not millions--of followers.

The problem? Online personalities often tout unproven health claims of products and services, contradict standards of care and capitalize on people's vulnerabilities with the help of social media platform algorithms while making money from the proceeds of product sales.

Jon-Patrick Allem, an associate professor in the Rutgers School of Public Health's Department of Health Behavior, Society and Policy, has been studying the role of social media in shaping health-related attitudes and behaviors.

In this interview, Allem, a core member of the Rutgers Institute for Nicotine & Tobacco Studies, discusses how dubious health claims made by [social media influencers](#) can impact health.

Why is it important to explore the intersection of the wellness industry, social media and health decision-making?

The [wellness](#) industry is a trillion-dollar industry. While this may be surprising to some, it shouldn't be, given that the industry lacks a lot of important regulations. For example, a company can produce and sell a [dietary supplement](#) without notifying the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Additionally, there is a lack of enforcement of rules policing marketing claims from companies about the effectiveness of their products. As an aside, there was a recent study of approximately 400,000 generally healthy adults, examining whether multivitamin use improved longevity. With more than 20 years of follow-up data, the team from the National Cancer Institute found that daily multivitamin use was not associated with a mortality benefit. This is a big deal.

Today, the wellness industry's main way of marketing products is by using social media influencers or online personalities who have

cultivated a global audience by presenting themselves as experts, providing relatable, stimulating content, reaching millions of people

Social media influencers—who are paid to promote products to their followers—often tout unproven health claims of products and services. They also may contradict medical advice and [scientific research](#) and capitalize on peoples' vulnerabilities with the help of social media platform algorithms.

What are some of the major concerns when it comes to the regulation of marketing claims made by the wellness industry?

I've noticed companies are taking customer testimonials and using them in their promotional materials, treating them like they are findings from scientific studies. These testimonials are designed to make consumers and potential consumers feel, not necessarily think, to create positive product perceptions.

I've also noticed that companies will use claims about FDA approval in misleading ways. For example, a company may use an ingredient that has received FDA approval for human consumption, but the company did not receive FDA approval to claim that the same ingredient can improve, say, fertility. This creates a false sense of trust for a product that has no scientific support for its claims, taking advantage of consumers.

How do social media influencers impact consumer health choices? What risks do they pose?

The scientific community doesn't really know for certain. That is why I think this area of research is so important.

I'm hoping to see members of the public health community harness their interdisciplinary skills to undertake research to address the knowledge gap at the intersection of the wellness industry, social media and health decision making. This would be a big undertaking, so I also hope that the National Institutes of Health establishes funding to help public health researchers better understand the impact of the wellness industry on health decision making.

What role do social media algorithms (and platforms) play in the promotion of wellness products?

Initial research suggests that social media algorithms can influence certain behavior. As such, it is plausible that the effects of engaging with wellness content on subsequent behavior may be explained, in part, by algorithm-driven exposure to wellness content.

Given that social media platform's algorithms are informed by each user's prior online behaviors--for example, "liking" a wellness post--the content users continue to see would reflect changes in users' attitudes toward how to best care for themselves.

Given the amount of dubious content that exists on social media, exposure to such content may lead to poorer health outcomes through delayed care or ineffective alternative care for a growing segment of social media users.

What steps can be taken to protect people?

There are a lot of steps people can take. For one, consult your health care provider before taking any supplement or undergoing some kind of service with the goal of improving your health. This may not be possible for everyone, but for those who do have access to proper care should

exercise this option.

Everyone should keep in mind that the online personalities promoting wellness products and services are being paid and may make a percentage of sales from the product or service based on people using their "codes" or following their "links" to a product. Influencers do not always make this obvious as they should, and some go as far as to conceal this fact to appear impartial or "organic." People should be aware that the key to wellness probably doesn't come via a discount code from an online personality.

Provided by Rutgers University

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