

The Challenges and Ethical Concerns of Fitness Influencer Marketing: A Conceptual Framework

Effulgence

Vol. 24, No. 1

January - June 2026

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Abstract

This conceptual paper examines the challenges and ethical concerns associated with fitness influencer marketing, a rapidly evolving field in the digital era. The existing studies have largely focused on influencer marketing and its benefits. In contrast, this paper highlights a field that has been less acknowledged, including its challenges and ethical concerns, such as content quality, transparency, authenticity, brand–influencer congruity, the promotion of harmful products, and unrealistic body standards. Based on a thorough review of the literature, the paper also presents specific research propositions derived from each identified challenge and ethical concern, guiding future researchers. These propositions highlight how various factors can influence followers' trust, engagement, and purchase intentions. The findings underscore the importance of ethical practices and responsible content creation to ensure that fitness influencer marketing remains valuable for influencers, brands, and their audience.

Keywords: Fitness Influencers, Purchase Intention, Engagement, Challenges, Ethical Concerns, Trust.

INTRODUCTION

In the revolutionized digital world, social media has transformed how people consume information and interact with brands. Due to social media platforms, the communication between brands and consumers has become more interactive, as people can actively engage with brands on these

platforms. It has changed the way brands build relationships with consumers and shape purchase intentions. This dynamic interaction process is sourced by social media influencers, the individuals who build a follower base based on their expertise, authenticity, and credibility. Through regular engagement with followers, influencers develop a relationship with them, thereby fostering their credibility (Herath & Wanigasuriya, 2025).

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Influencers are experts in different fields and provide content in diverse arenas. Those who focus on a niche category, such as fitness, are typically known as fitness influencers. They focus their content on fitness, physical activities, providing dietary consultations, and promoting a healthy and active lifestyle. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the trend of fitness influencers, as people were confined to their homes and gyms were inaccessible at the time, so they turned to fitness influencers for guidance. The fitness influencers not only guide and motivate them, but also provide product recommendations. By sharing their lifestyle, engaging with followers, and refining their workout routine, they cultivate a large and loyal following, establishing themselves as trusted experts and opinion leaders who can influence their followers' decisions (Durau et al., 2024). Marketers recognized this shift in consumer engagement, thereby reaching out to influencers for their product endorsement. The economic value of this phenomenon is evident, as Rossum (2024) states that by 2027, the influencer marketing industry is expected to reach \$480 billion. Unlike traditional one-way marketing strategies, marketers are increasingly turning to influencers for interactive marketing, as nearly half of purchase decisions are made based on influencers' endorsements, which are trusted by 60% of consumers (Ekinici et al., 2025). The dual impact of influencers not only helps in creating prominent marketing strategies but also promotes a fitness and wellness culture.

Although the prior studies shed light on influencer features (including expertise, demographics, credibility, and authenticity), type of content (presentation and narration of content), audience size and engagement levels, product type, expertise of influencers, ethical concerns, and transparency (Hudders et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021; Ekinici et al., 2025), limited studies discussed the challenges and ethical concerns related to fitness influencer marketing. The discussion about the negative aspects is critical due to the increasing popularity of fitness influencers and their marketing

strategies. It becomes substantial to understand not only positive aspects but also challenges and negative aspects of fitness influencer marketing. Therefore, the paper aims to synthesise the existing literature and provide insights into the challenges and ethical concerns of fitness influencer marketing.

Literature Review

Influencer marketing has become one of the most discussed topics in the marketing and interactive fields. Due to the growth of social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, influencers, the content creators, have become prominent individuals who shape consumer behavior, brand image, and persuade purchase intentions. Among these influencers, fitness influencers are one of the niches.

Fitness influencers are content creators who post specialized content related to fitness and share it with their followers on social media platforms (Durau et al., 2024). Fitness influencers have gained significant popularity and established themselves as reliable sources for audiences seeking advice on exercises, diets, and general wellness practices, as the value of health and well-being in society continues to grow. As evidence of the growing demand for conveniently, readily accessible, and trustworthy fitness content, YouTube reported that the number of fitness-related videos on its site increased more than five times during the COVID-19 pandemic as compared to the prior year (Li et al., 2023). They regularly share content that reflects their daily routines, workouts, nutrition tips, and motivational messages. Through consistent posting and active engagement with their followers, they build credibility and strong relationships with their audiences over time (Duplaga, 2020; Pekkanen, 2022). Their influence extends beyond mere content consumption, as followers begin to perceive them as relatable role models who demonstrate desirable lifestyles. Over time, this dynamic creates an environment where audiences look to fitness influencers as opinion leaders, as well as for

inspiration and accountability in their personal fitness journeys and the development of an active lifestyle (Duplaga, 2020; Pekkanen, 2022).

With the growing popularity, fitness influencers become valuable collaborators for brands, especially those operating within the health and wellness industry. Companies in sectors such as exercise gear, sportswear, nutritional supplements, fitness equipment, and healthy food and beverages are increasingly partnering with these influencers for marketing and promotional purposes (Wijerathna & Wijesundara, 2022). These collaborations capitalize on the established trust between influencers and their audiences, thus enhancing the seeming authenticity and credibility of the endorsed products. Empirical evidence advocates that when fitness products are endorsed by influencers with recognized expertise in the field, consumers are more persuaded to view the products positively and associate them with greater value and reliability (Hudders & Lou, 2023; Aguilar & Arbaiza, 2021). The fitness influencers' ability to persuade stems from their dual roles as approachable individuals and specialists. While their personal involvement and stories create a feeling of connection with followers, their specific knowledge gives authority. They can influence purchasing intentions, shape consumer attitudes, and inform decision-making processes thanks to this unique blend. (Sokolova & Perez, 2021). Consequently, fitness influencers are not merely content creators but are also powerful agents of social persuasion within the digital marketplace.

Influencer marketing: Influencer marketing is a strategy of social media marketing in which brands collaborate with influencers and urge them to endorse their products. This enhances brand awareness, shapes purchase intention, and influences consumer behavior among followers (Ki et al., 2020). Influencers build a sense of belonging among their followers over time by sharing content and engaging with them. This relationship between influencers and followers has paved new ways for brand promotion, as brands reach out to influencers

to have their product endorsed by influencers on social media platforms. Due to high engagement on social media, marketing conducted through Influencers is considered more effective than traditional marketing (Belanche et al., 2021). On social media platforms, engagement is influenced by the content shared by influencers, as followers often do not know them personally. However, through the content shared, they build credibility, which has a significant impact on influencer marketing (Belanche et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2025). In addition, Joshi et al. (2025) mentioned that the commercial potential of influencer marketing highlights the reason why brands seek influencers to promote their products. Also, the Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report (2024) stated that expenditure on influencer marketing reached \$24 billion in 2024, underscoring its significance (Pan et al., 2025).

Parasocial Interaction Theory: According to Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Bond, 2016), influencers can build a sense of closeness and relationships with their followers by engaging in and interacting in ways that resemble real-life relationships. By sharing their lifestyle and engaging in ways that mirror everyday communication, they establish emotional connections with their audience. These bonds are much like what parasocial interaction theory refers to as “secondary attachment objects” (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Thomson, 2006; Ekinci et al., 2025), where people develop connections and relationships even when there is no direct interaction. The effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies depends mainly on these emotional connections. When influencers can foster a sense of familiarity and trust, they can create a dedicated and loyal audience. At the same time, they convey an authentic impression, which makes their content feel more enjoyable and entertaining. This perceived authenticity results in increased engagement and participation from followers (Casaló et al., 2017; Ekinci et al., 2025). To foster this connection, influencers often present an image of an exciting, yet unrealistic lifestyle. This motivates the followers, as

it shows them a world that might seem unattainable. It gives users access to experiences and knowledge they may not have encountered before. Nevertheless, although these unrealistic images are inspiring, it is essential to acknowledge that behind the carefully curated posts and flawless appearances lies a much more complex and sometimes troubling reality. The pressures, expectations, and selective storytelling can paint a picture that is not always reflective of authentic experiences, making the connection both powerful and potentially misleading (Ekinici et al., 2025).

Social Influence Theory: This theory was initially formulated by Kelman (1956), who suggested that the social environment has a substantial impact on individual behavior, attitudes, and decisions. Recently, social media platforms have become the new social environments where people connect and encounter a variety of content. The theory suggests that fitness influencers influence users and interact with fitness-related content, and that the trust followers have in fitness influencers (Rui & Liu, 2021). The followers observe the content of fitness influencers and attempt to build a workout routine and adopt similar lifestyle choices (YI, 2023). Furthermore, followers are significantly influenced by content that is authentic and consistent (Li et al., 2023). The community-focused content, credibility, and authenticity of influencers impact the engagement level. Community-focused content refers to the content shared by fitness influencers that inspires consumers to perform in physical activities, share their knowledge, and connect with brands (Rui & Liu, 2021; Dubey, 2024). Credibility and authenticity are essential components for successful fitness influencer marketing, as they shape purchase intention, build engagement, and reliable endorsements that are more effective than generic promotions (Li et al., 2023).

Social Comparison Theory: Proposed by Festinger (1954), this theory suggests that people assess their beliefs and abilities by comparing them to those of others. Although opinions and skills may seem

different, they are interconnected and influence behavior. It is noted that by performing skills, individuals can demonstrate them, and then use these demonstrations to compare their capabilities and opinions with those of others. People who are perceived as better than oneself are considered superior, and those who are perceived as lesser are considered inferior. With the increasing popularity of fitness influencers and people engaging with them, they begin to compare themselves to these influencers (Lindenmeyer & Månsson, 2024). These comparisons can be downward and upward. Comparing oneself to those who are regarded as superior leads to upward comparisons, whereas comparing oneself to those who are perceived as inferior or lesser causes downward comparisons (Watson et al., 2011). Social Comparison Theory describes how influencers affect people who engage with their content, shedding light on how influencers can have a negative impact on social media users' overall well-being and self-worth (Lindenmeyer & Månsson, 2024).

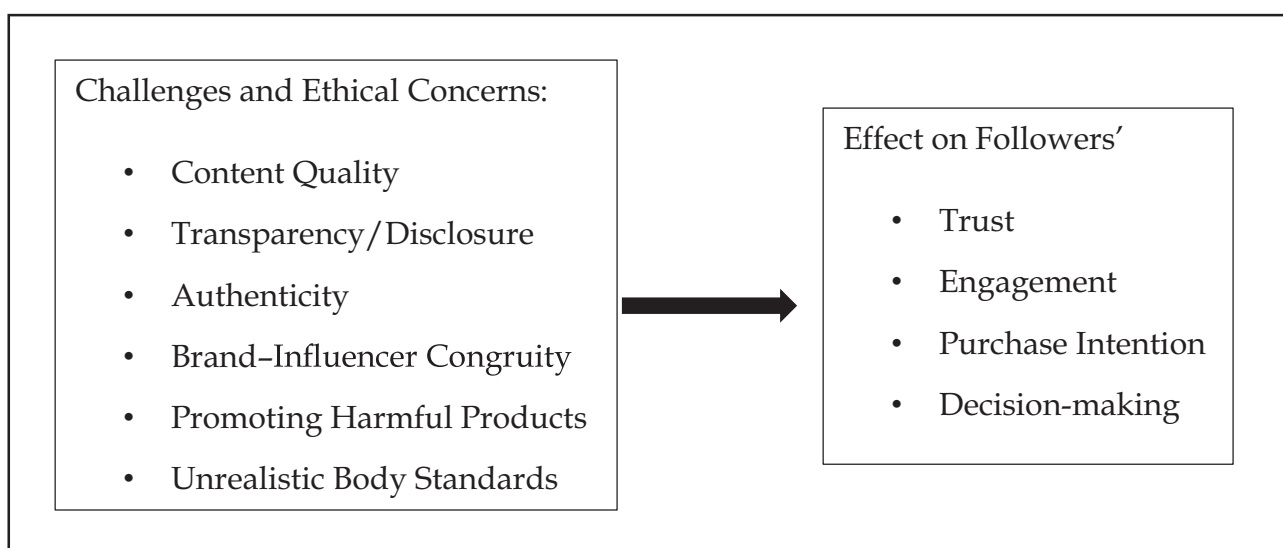
With the growing popularity of fitness influencers in today's digital environment, several challenges and ethical concerns also arise that marketers and brands must address and handle appropriately. Understanding exactly how effective these influencer marketing strategies are in the contemporary digital world is one of the most considerable challenges. The marketing approach, target audience, and platforms can all have an enormous impact. This makes measuring the return on investment process difficult for the marketers. Along with performance monitoring outcomes, influencer trustworthiness and authenticity are creating much concern. With many influencers promoting products, it may be challenging to understand which influencers genuinely believe in brands and are giving honest and authentic reviews about the brands they endorse. The lack of transparency and disclosure can raise questions about misleading content and prompt actions to establish strict guidelines that ensure ethical considerations. The quality of the information and its impact on viewers is another

significant concern. Serious harm can arise from issues such as misleading data, unrealistic body standards, and incongruity between an influencer's persona and a brand's product type. These issues have the potential to damage a brand's reputation and make it more challenging to establish deep and enduring connections with the target audience. It is becoming increasingly evident that brands must exercise greater caution in their collaborations with influencers, as influencer marketing continues to expand. For marketing strategies to foster a

connection with audiences and build trust, authenticity, openness, and congruity between influencer material and brand messaging are crucial.

Conceptual Framework

Based on a review of the existing literature, the study offers a conceptual framework that demonstrates the relationships among challenges and ethical concerns in fitness influencer marketing and their effects on followers (presented in Figure 1).



Source: Author's own

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Challenges and Ethical Concerns in Fitness Influencer Marketing

Methodology

Before conducting the literature review, the scope of the study was defined, and substantial keywords were identified. The focus was on influencer marketing, specifically within the fitness niche. The research also highlighted the challenges and ethical issues associated with influencer marketing. To find relevant literature, keywords such as "Dark side of influencer," "Challenges," "fitness influencer marketing," and "Ethical concerns" were used. The selection of literature was guided by its relevance to the study's objectives, which included research related to influencer marketing, fitness-oriented content, and ethical issues in digital marketing. Existing literature that is irrelevant and repetitive is

excluded from the study. The search was carried out in September 2025 using these keywords. The studies were screened by reviewing the titles and abstracts. This process significantly reduced the number of relevant papers. From this analysis, six significant challenges and ethical concerns were identified that impact fitness influencers and their influence on followers' purchase intentions, engagement, authenticity, and decision-making.

Challenges and Ethical Concerns

After reviewing the existing literature, six significant challenges and ethical concerns are highlighted, which impact followers' attitudes and perceptions towards fitness influencers. Subsequently, it affects

the decision-making, consumer behavior, and purchase intention of followers. The six challenges and ethical concerns are also depicted in Table 1 with their propositions.

Content Quality: Content quality states the extent to which content shared by influencers is complete, appropriate, and meaningful for their audience (Dabbous & Barakat, 2020). High-quality content is not only about simple posting, but it also involves creating content that is educational, captivating, visually tempting, and engaging enough to capture and grasp the attention of followers. For fitness influencers, this often means developing workout routines, diet plans, and wellness guidance that are accurate, reliable, and easy for followers to apply in their daily lives. Such content is expected to meet the highest standards of authenticity and usefulness, ensuring that it genuinely contributes to the fitness journey of the audience (Yangzi et al., 2023). Quality content has a central role in driving engagement, as followers are more likely to engage with content that they perceive as trustworthy and valuable, which in turn shapes their purchasing decisions and lifestyle choices (Kim, 2022). Despite its importance, consistently producing such high-quality material poses a considerable challenge. Many influencers struggle to generate content that is both fresh, genuine, and captivating, as the process requires creativity, time, and in-depth knowledge (Yangzi et al., 2023).

Proposition 1: Lower perceived content quality has a negative impact on long-term relationships with fitness influencers, trust, and follower engagement.

Transparency/Disclosure: Transparency and disclosure are increasingly prioritized by consumers in the digital space. When influencers openly share whether their content is sponsored, reveal both the benefits and limitations of a product, and provide honest reviews, they establish greater trust and are more likely to maintain long-term relationships with followers (Äyrämöinen, 2025). This openness builds credibility and positions influencers as more

authentic figures in their audience's eyes. On the other hand, concealing sponsorship or withholding key information creates skepticism. Research has shown that trust in influencers decreases by as much as 32 per cent when sponsorship details are hidden, as followers feel misled when they realize that a recommendation was not a genuine personal opinion but rather a paid promotion (CMA, 2023; Äyrämöinen, 2025). The absence of transparency not only harms an influencer's reputation but also diminishes the perceived credibility of the brand involved. As a result, a lack of disclosure can weaken trust, authenticity, and engagement levels, directly impacting purchase intentions among followers (Äyrämöinen, 2025).

Proposition 2: Hidden transparency and disclosure regarding sponsored content decrease followers' trust and weaken their loyalty toward the influencer.

Authenticity: The authenticity of influencer marketing has become one of its most contested aspects. Over time, the genuine nature of endorsements is often diluted as influencers enter into more paid collaborations and brand partnerships. This shift makes it increasingly difficult for followers to differentiate between authentic, experience-based recommendations and commercially motivated promotions (Ekinci et al., 2025). In the fitness industry, the issue becomes even more critical, as followers expect influencers to share products and practices they genuinely use for their health and well-being (Äyrämöinen, 2025). Since these recommendations directly impact physical health, credibility carries more weight compared to other industries. Fitness influencers are often regarded as trustworthy sources of advice, and followers believe that the products they endorse could have tangible effects on their bodies, whether positive or negative (Powell & Pring, 2024; Zou et al., 2021). Thus, when authenticity is compromised, it not only damages consumer trust but also reduces the likelihood that followers will rely on influencers for purchase decisions and lifestyle choices (Äyrämöinen, 2025).

Proposition 3: The lack of authenticity of fitness influencers unfavourably impacts followers' reliance on their recommended products for health and fitness decisions.

Brand-Influencer Congruity: At its core, influencer marketing is designed to persuade audiences to consider or adopt products and services recommended by influencers. A central challenge in this process, however, is the connection between the influencer's personality and the brand promoted. When a natural and visible fit exists, followers see the endorsement as more genuine and are more likely to accept it. Conversely, when there is little or no congruity, endorsements appear forced and may even attract criticism. A notable example of this is the collaboration between Volvo and Chriselle Lim, a fashion and lifestyle influencer, who promoted a Volvo eco-friendly car cleaner. This endorsement was inconsistent with the type of content Lim was known for, leading her followers to express disappointment and question the relevance of her promotion. Both Lim and the brand faced backlash due to this lack of alignment. This case illustrates how even an influencer with a significant following and strong engagement cannot compensate for poor brand-influencer fit. Congruity is therefore not only preferred but also necessary for maintaining authenticity and attaining successful and desired marketing results (Belanche et al., 2021).

Proposition 4: A low level of congruity between the influencer's persona and the brand reduces credibility and consumer acceptance.

Promoting Harmful Products: Influencers in the fitness industry who promote goods that might be harmful to consumers' health create another serious ethical concern. Many influencers take advantage of sponsorships for products like sugar-filled beverages, drugs for weight loss, and fat-burning supplements, as well as other products whose safety is questionable. Influencers expose their followers to possible health hazards and unintentionally

mainstream bad consumption habits by endorsing such products. Because followers tend to place greater confidence in influencer recommendations than in traditional advertising, these campaigns may persuade people to purchase dangerous products before fully understanding their negative impacts (Ekinci et al., 2025). This behavior exemplifies the exploitation of influence, where followers trust influencers' opinions and believe that the goods they recommend align with their fitness ideals. Influencers exploit this trust by prioritizing financial gain over the well-being of their audience and endangering the health of their followers.

Proposition 5: The promotion of harmful products by influencers has a negative impact on followers' trust and may lead to harmful consumption behaviors.

Unrealistic Body Standards: Fitness influencers encourage unrealistic body standards. They frequently post photos and videos that have been edited, filtered, and enhanced. People compare themselves with these influencers and consider themselves inferior, as it seems impossible for them to attain the body standards of influencers (Ekinci et al., 2025). Studies reveal that this leads to dissatisfaction, a negative mood, low self-esteem, and reduced inspiration to engage in fitness activities, especially among women (Prichard et al., 2020). Men demonstrate similar behavior to women, feeling frustrated and unsatisfied when comparing themselves to fitness influencers (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020; Ekinci et al., 2025). People may eventually take drastic steps, such as adopting adverse dieting practices, intense workout regimes, or even undergoing cosmetic surgeries, in an attempt to achieve these unrealistic body standards, which can harm their mental and physical well-being (Ekinci et al., 2025).

Proposition 6: Exposure to unrealistic body standards through fitness influencers is more likely to lead to lower self-esteem and unhealthy fitness practices among followers.

Table 1 : Challenges and ethical concerns with propositions

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Impact</i>	<i>Proposition</i>
Content Quality	Fitness routines, diet plans, and wellness advice that are accurate and practical for daily life.	Builds trust and engagement. Encourages followers to interact, leading to informed lifestyle and purchase choices. However, consistently producing such content is challenging due to the demands of creativity and time.	Lower perceived content quality has a negative impact on long-term relationships with fitness influencers, trust, and follower engagement.
Transparency/ Disclosure	Influencers clearly state when a post is sponsored, sharing both the benefits and limitations of the products as well.	Enhances credibility and fosters long-term relationships. Lack of disclosure reduces trust and harms both influencer reputation and brand credibility.	Hidden transparency and disclosure regarding sponsored content decrease followers' trust and weaken their loyalty toward the influencer.
Authenticity	Sharing fitness practices and products that the influencer genuinely uses.	When authenticity is compromised, followers doubt recommendations, reducing engagement and purchase intent. Particularly critical in fitness, where health outcomes are directly affected.	The lack of authenticity of fitness influencers unfavourably impacts followers' reliance on their recommended products for health and fitness decisions.
Brand-Influencer Congruity	Fashion influencer promoting an eco-friendly car cleaner – seen as inconsistent and forced.	Poor alignment leads to backlash, criticism, and loss of trust. Even influencers with large followings cannot compensate for a brand mismatch.	A low level of congruity between the influencer's persona and the brand reduces credibility and consumer acceptance.
Promoting Harmful Products	Sugary drinks, unsafe supplements, and unregulated weight-loss products are being promoted	Followers may blindly adopt risky behaviors, trusting influencers more than traditional ads. This misuse of influence can	The promotion of harmful products by influencers has a negative impact on followers' trust and may lead to harmful

	without full disclosure.	lead to adverse health consequences.	consumption behaviors.
Unrealistic Body Standards	Extreme dieting, intense workouts, and cosmetic procedures are encouraged by comparisons with influencers.	Leads to body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and reduced motivation for healthy habits. Particularly harmful to both women and men, fostering mental and physical health issues.	Exposure to unrealistic body standards through fitness influencers is more likely to lead to lower self-esteem and unhealthy fitness practices among followers.

Source: Author's own

CONCLUSION

Fitness influencer marketing has evolved to be a significant component of how individuals seek guidance, motivation, and ways to enhance their routines in the modern digital age. Nevertheless, despite its numerous positive aspects, this marketing strategy has several challenges and ethical concerns that should be carefully considered. As this paper explores, challenges such as content quality, authenticity, transparency, brand-influencer congruity, marketing harmful products, and unattainable body standards may have a negative impact on followers' physical and mental health, as well as their trust and engagement. Furthermore, the propositions highlighted in this paper aim to guide future research by identifying prominent areas where these challenges and ethical concerns may influence followers' engagement, trust, and decision-making.

According to the Parasocial Interaction Theory, followers' parasocial relationships with influencers build an emotional connection that increases the audience's susceptibility to persuasion. Similarly, social influence theory and social comparison theory contribute to explaining how fitness influencers' sharing of information can negatively impact behavior, attitudes, and self-perception. The unrealistic lives of influencers often get compared to followers' fitness journeys, which can have adverse

effects, including poor self-esteem and unhealthy fitness activity.

The study has concluded that as consumers rapidly seek fitness influencers for products and fitness advice, influencers and brands should assume greater liability. While congruity between the influencer's expertise and the brand type is essential to prevent misleading followers, transparency and authenticity should be given high importance to foster confidence. To guarantee that sponsored material is appropriately disclosed and that harmful products are not advertised inaccurately, platforms and regulatory bodies should also enforce ethical standards. Although the regulatory bodies are forming guidelines that increasingly focus on transparency and complete disclosure by labelling the advertised content as sponsored content and paid partnership. However, the varying levels of compliance across various social media platforms cause it a challenge. In addition to marketers and influencers, consumers should also be aware of these challenges, as they need to exercise caution when interacting with information and trust the sources they consult. In conclusion, it is essential to address the negative aspects of fitness influencer marketing, despite its considerable potential to guide and inspire. A holistic and balanced strategy that promotes authenticity, transparency, and well-being can ensure that influencer marketing remains a force for positive engagement and trust, and not a source

of harm or misinformation.

Limitations and Future Research

The paper explores one of the significant aspects of fitness influencer marketing i.e., the challenges and ethical concerns in fitness influencer marketing. However, it is essential to identify its limitations and future scope for researchers. The study is based on secondary sources and existing literature, thus may not provide comprehensive insights into recent trends in the field and the complex relationship between followers and influencers. Furthermore, the results are generalised and do not consider geographical, demographic, or cultural differences in the way followers engage and respond to influencer content. The focus of this paper is mainly on the challenges and ethical concerns, rather than on strategies or approaches that can help mitigate these issues and challenges. Additionally, future researchers can explore related areas, such as the dark side of virtual influencers, which represents an emerging niche within the influencer industry and may presents unique challenges and ethical considerations.

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