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Social Media Influencers and Public Trust in Over-the-Counter Medication Recommendations

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Abstract

This study examines how social media influencers shape public trust in over-the-counter medication recommendations within digital communication environments. Using a qualitative research design, the study collected data through in-depth interviews, digital observation, and document analysis involving active social media users and influencer-generated pharmaceutical content. The findings reveal that influencer credibility, perceived authenticity, and parasocial interaction significantly influence audience trust and self-medication behavior. Audiences tend to trust relatable and emotionally engaging communication more than formal medical authority, particularly when influencers share personal experiences and transparent recommendations. However, concerns regarding hidden sponsorships, misinformation, and commercialization also emerged as important factors affecting public skepticism. The study contributes to digital health communication scholarship and offers practical implications for policymakers, healthcare institutions, and social media regulators in promoting ethical pharmaceutical communication practices.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the landscape of health information dissemination. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X have increasingly become primary sources of health-related information for global audiences (Thapliyal et al., 2024; Hematabadi et al., 2025; Lim et al., 2022; Brake, 2026). Within this evolving communication environment, social media influencers have emerged as significant actors capable of shaping public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward healthcare products, including over-the-counter (OTC) medications. Unlike traditional pharmaceutical advertising, influencer-based communication often relies on perceived authenticity, parasocial interaction, and peer-like trust, enabling influencers to exert persuasive effects that extend beyond conventional promotional strategies. This phenomenon has generated substantial scholarly interest because OTC medications are directly accessible to consumers without physician prescriptions, thereby increasing the importance of public trust and informed

decision-making in self-medication practices (Bertsche et al., 2023; Patel, 2026; Alharthi et al., 2025).

The increasing dependence on digital health communication coincides with the global rise of self-medication behaviors (Tinuoye, 2025; Daroedono et al., 2022; Srisaknok et al., 2025; Sarhan et al., 2025; John et al., 2026; Ren et al., 2026). Studies have shown that consumers frequently rely on online information sources to evaluate symptoms, compare pharmaceutical products, and identify suitable treatments for minor illnesses. In many countries, OTC medication consumption has grown considerably due to convenience, healthcare accessibility challenges, and rising healthcare costs. Consequently, social media influencers now occupy a strategic position in shaping consumer perceptions regarding medication safety, efficacy, and reliability (Willis & Delbaere, 2022; Willis et al., 2023). Previous research indicates that influencer credibility significantly affects consumer trust and purchase intentions in sectors such as cosmetics, nutrition, and lifestyle products. However, the implications become more complex when influencers promote health-related products because misinformation or exaggerated claims may directly affect public health outcomes (Alsararatee & Yunusa, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2022). The convergence between digital influence and pharmaceutical consumption therefore represents a critical area requiring deeper academic investigation (Tsai et al., 2025; Khafizova et al., 2023; Nguyen & Voznak, 2024; Al-Kfairy et al., 2024).

Existing literature has extensively explored the relationship between social media marketing and consumer trust. Source credibility theory suggests that trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness influence audience acceptance of persuasive messages. Similarly, parasocial interaction theory explains how audiences develop emotional closeness with influencers, often perceiving them as trustworthy peers rather than commercial endorsers. Research by Khan (2023) demonstrated that influencer credibility positively affects consumer trust and engagement, while Zniva et al. (2023) emphasized the role of influencer popularity and perceived authenticity in shaping audience responses. Other studies have examined how health influencers affect dietary supplement consumption, wellness product adoption, and vaccine perceptions. Nevertheless, most prior studies primarily focus on general consumer products, beauty industries, or preventive health campaigns rather than OTC medication recommendations specifically (Wake et al., 2025; Moschis, 2022).

The OTC pharmaceutical context introduces distinct ethical, psychological, and regulatory dimensions that differ substantially from other commercial sectors (Olson etal., 2025; Ji et al., 2025; Shaukat & Ming, 2022). OTC medications involve health risks, dosage considerations, contraindications, and potential side effects that consumers may inadequately understand. Unlike cosmetics or fashion products, inappropriate use of OTC medications may contribute to medication misuse, delayed professional treatment, adverse drug interactions, and increased public health vulnerabilities. Despite these risks, influencer-generated pharmaceutical content often lacks scientific verification or professional accountability. Empirical evidence suggests that many influencers provide health recommendations without adequate medical expertise, while audiences may interpret anecdotal experiences as medically reliable information. This situation creates tensions between commercial influence, digital trust, and public health responsibility.

A further issue is the evolving trust in digital societies. Healthcare organisations, pharmaceutical companies and conventional medical providers have faced a roller coaster of trust over the past few years, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Liu et al., 2022; Halma & Guetzkow, 2023). At the same time, there has been a rise in trust of peer-generated and/or influencer-mediated communication among younger audiences. It is an indication that social trust is gradually eroded

from the institutional knowledge and expertise to the influence through digital interpersonal interaction. It is argued that younger consumers are more likely to feel connected to an influencer, and that they see them as being more transparent than traditional health promotional messages. The link between this perceived authenticity and trust for OTC medication recommendations, however, is not well understood. Additionally, existing research does not investigate how different characteristics of the influencer, such as disclosing expertise and being transparent about sponsorship, or perceived honesty, influence public trust in this particular area of pharmaceutical contexts.

The commercialization of health communication on social media also poses important governance challenges from a regulatory point of view. Monitoring of influencer-led ads for pharmaceuticals remains a challenge for many regulators, as the content often transgresses national borders and develops faster than the evolution of regulations (Shukla & Solanki, 2026). Some governments need to be notified of sponsorship, and some limit health claims to factual statements; there is not a consistent framework for enforcement. The lack of depth to regulation raises the potential for misinformation on the use of medications. Therefore, the interpretation and trust of influencer recommendations, which is both academically interesting and applicable to policy makers, healthcare providers, and pharmaceutical regulators, is of practical value.

While there has been research in the field of influencer marketing and digital trust, there are several areas of research that are missing. First, there are limited studies that examine public trust in OTC medicine recommendations explicitly instead of health products in general. Second, previous studies have tended to focus on the effectiveness of marketing and purchase intention with less focus on public health outcomes and ethical issues. Third, existing discussions lack integration between communication theories, pharmaceutical trust dynamics, and digital consumers' behavior. Finally, there are limited studies that examine the interaction between the different dimensions of the credibility of the influencers and perceptions of medication safety and reliability in online settings. The gaps are suggestive of a need for a more comprehensive analysis framework to understand how social media influencers influence trust in OTC pharmaceutical recommendation.

This study therefore aims to analyze the relationship between social media influencer characteristics and public trust in OTC medication recommendations within digital communication environments. The novelty of this research lies in its integration of influencer credibility theory, parasocial interaction perspectives, and public health communication frameworks to explain trust formation in pharmaceutical-related social media content. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on commercial outcomes, this study emphasizes the intersection between digital influence, consumer trust, and responsible self-medication behavior. The research contributes theoretically by extending digital trust discourse into pharmaceutical communication studies and contributes practically by offering insights for policymakers, healthcare institutions, pharmaceutical industries, and digital content regulators regarding ethical health communication practices in contemporary social media ecosystems.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative-descriptive research design with a digital communication approach to examine how social media influencers shape public trust in over-the-counter (OTC) medication recommendations. A qualitative design was selected because the research sought to explore perceptions, interpretations, and trust formation processes within digital health communication environments

rather than merely measuring statistical relationships. According to Chand (2025), qualitative research is appropriate for understanding social phenomena from participants' perspectives and interpreting complex behavioral interactions in specific contexts. The study also adopted a case-oriented digital media analysis framework to investigate how influencer-generated pharmaceutical content affects audience trust and self-medication perceptions across social media platforms.

The research was conducted within the context of social media health communication in urban digital communities where OTC medication discussions are highly prevalent. The study focused on content distributed through Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube because these platforms are widely used for influencer marketing and health-related communication. The contextual focus included influencers who regularly share medication reviews, wellness advice, or self-treatment recommendations involving non-prescription pharmaceutical products. This setting was considered relevant because younger digital audiences increasingly rely on social media sources when seeking health information and medication guidance.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted through three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, digital content observation, and document analysis. In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with social media users who frequently consume influencer-generated health content. The interviews explored participants' perceptions regarding influencer credibility, trustworthiness, transparency, and the perceived reliability of OTC medication recommendations. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences while maintaining alignment with the study objectives.

In addition to interviews, digital observation was conducted on selected influencer accounts that actively promote or discuss OTC medications. The observation process focused on communication styles, sponsorship disclosure practices, audience engagement patterns, and persuasive strategies employed within influencer content. Comments, likes, and audience interactions were also examined to understand public responses toward pharmaceutical recommendations. Document analysis complemented these techniques by reviewing digital health communication policies, pharmaceutical advertising regulations, and prior scholarly studies concerning influencer marketing and health misinformation.

Informants and Sampling

The study applied purposive sampling to select participants who possessed relevant experiences with social media health communication. Informants consisted of 25 active social media users aged between 18 and 35 years who had previously viewed or followed influencer content related to OTC medications. This demographic group was selected because younger adults represent one of the most active segments in digital media consumption and are highly exposed to influencer marketing practices. Additionally, five social media influencers who frequently discuss health or wellness products were included as supporting informants to provide insights into content creation strategies and audience engagement considerations. The sampling process emphasized information richness rather than statistical representation. Following Patton's purposive sampling principle, participants were selected based on their ability to provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, meaning no substantially new themes emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and digital documents were coded thematically to identify recurring patterns associated with trust formation, influencer credibility, perceived authenticity, and medication-related decision-making. The coding process combined inductive and deductive approaches, allowing themes to emerge organically while also aligning with theoretical constructs derived from source credibility theory and parasocial interaction theory. To enhance analytical rigor, the study employed triangulation across interview findings, observational data, and documentary evidence. Cross-source comparison enabled the researcher to validate interpretations and identify consistencies between participant perceptions and observable influencer practices.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure research validity, the study applied methodological triangulation, source triangulation, and member checking. Triangulation was conducted by comparing findings obtained from interviews, digital observations, and document analysis to strengthen interpretive consistency. Member checking was performed by allowing selected participants to review summarized interview interpretations to confirm accuracy and reduce researcher bias. Furthermore, peer debriefing with academic colleagues specializing in digital communication and public health studies was undertaken to improve analytical credibility. Reliability was addressed through systematic documentation of research procedures, interview protocols, coding processes, and analytical decisions. Maintaining an audit trail enabled transparency and enhanced the dependability of the research findings. These procedures align with Lincoln and Guba's criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings concerning the relationship between social media influencers and public trust in over-the-counter (OTC) medication recommendations. The findings are derived from in-depth interviews with 25 participants, digital observation of influencer-generated health content, and document analysis conducted between January and March 2026. Before discussing the thematic findings, it is important to outline the characteristics of the participants and the scope of the observed digital content in order to contextualize the analytical interpretation presented in this study.

The findings are organized into four major themes. First, the study explains how audiences construct perceptions of influencer credibility in digital pharmaceutical communication. Second, the findings examine the role of parasocial interaction and emotional familiarity in trust formation. Third, the study identifies emerging public skepticism regarding sponsorship transparency and misinformation risks. Finally, the results explore how influencer recommendations affect self-medication behavior and consumer decision-making processes related to OTC medicines.

Participant Characteristics and Digital Observation Context

The study involved 25 participants aged between 18 and 35 years who actively consume health-related content on social media platforms. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their exposure to influencer-generated OTC medication recommendations. Most participants reported daily engagement with influencer content through short-form video platforms and lifestyle-oriented health accounts.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Participants

Informant Code	Age	Gender	Dominant Platform	Frequency of Exposure
P1	21	Female	TikTok	Daily
P2	24	Male	Instagram	Daily
P3	22	Female	TikTok	Daily
P4	28	Female	YouTube	Weekly
P5	31	Male	Instagram	Daily
P6	23	Female	TikTok	Daily
P7	25	Male	Instagram	Weekly
P8	27	Female	TikTok	Daily
P9	20	Female	Instagram	Daily
P10	34	Male	YouTube	Weekly

Source: Processed interview data collected between January–March, 2026

Digital observation was conducted on 15 influencer accounts across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. A total of 120 posts discussing OTC medicines, wellness products, headache relievers, flu medication, digestive remedies, sleep aids, and vitamin supplements were analyzed. The observation focused on communication style, audience engagement, sponsorship disclosure, and the representation of medication safety information.

The analysis demonstrated that influencer communication was predominantly narrative, experience-oriented, and emotionally persuasive rather than medically explanatory. Most content creators emphasized relatability and personal storytelling, while scientific references and pharmaceutical warnings appeared less frequently.

Influencer Credibility and Public Trust Construction

One of the central findings of this study concerns the significant role of influencer credibility in shaping public trust toward OTC medication recommendations. Participants consistently associated trustworthiness with communication style, consistency of content, and perceived honesty rather than formal medical expertise.

The digital observation further revealed that influencers who provided balanced explanations regarding dosage, side effects, and product limitations generated more positive audience responses compared to influencers who focused exclusively on product promotion. Audience comments frequently contained expressions such as “honest review,” “trusted recommendation,” and “real experience,” indicating that authenticity functioned as a primary credibility marker.

Table 2. Dominant Credibility Indicators in OTC Medication Recommendations

Credibility Indicator	Audience Perception	Observed Impact
Honest communication	Increased trust	Higher engagement
Personal experience sharing	Emotional closeness	Recommendation acceptance
Balanced product explanation	Reliability perception	Positive audience feedback
Sponsorship disclosure	Transparency	Reduced skepticism
Consistent health-related content	Expertise assumption	Audience loyalty

Source: Processed interview and digital observation data, 2026

Participants frequently emphasized that relatable explanations increased trust more effectively than formal pharmaceutical advertisements.

One participant explained:

> *"I usually trust influencers who consistently discuss health topics because their explanations feel practical and understandable. Pharmaceutical advertisements often sound too technical, but influencers explain medicines using daily language and personal experiences. That communication style makes me feel more connected to the information." (P3, Female, 22 years old)*

This statement demonstrates that audiences interpret conversational communication as a sign of sincerity and accessibility. Participants perceived relatable narratives as more trustworthy because they reflected ordinary social interactions rather than institutional persuasion.

Another participant stated:

> *"When influencers explain how they personally use OTC medicines for headaches or flu symptoms, it feels more convincing because they show the process honestly. Sometimes they even mention side effects or situations where the medicine did not work perfectly, and that actually increases my trust." (P8, Female, 27 years old)*

The finding indicates that balanced communication contributes significantly to credibility construction. Audiences interpreted acknowledgment of limitations as evidence of honesty rather than weakness.

A third participant explained:

> *"I rarely check whether influencers have medical qualifications because I focus more on whether they sound genuine and consistent. If they frequently discuss health issues responsibly, I automatically assume they know what they are talking about." (P5, Male, 31 years old)*

This pattern illustrates how perceived expertise within social media environments is socially constructed through communication performance rather than professional verification. Trust therefore emerges from repeated digital interaction and perceived authenticity.

Overall, the findings reveal that influencer credibility in pharmaceutical communication is strongly associated with emotional relatability, transparency, and narrative consistency.

Parasocial Interaction and Emotional Familiarity

The second major finding concerns the influence of parasocial interaction on public trust formation. Participants frequently described influencers using relational expressions such as "close," "familiar," and "emotionally relatable." Continuous exposure to influencer content created a sense of personal intimacy that strengthened trust toward medication recommendations.

Digital observations showed that influencers regularly used storytelling strategies involving stress, fatigue, headaches, insomnia, or daily work routines to create emotional resonance with followers. Audience engagement was particularly high when influencers shared vulnerable or personal experiences related to health problems.

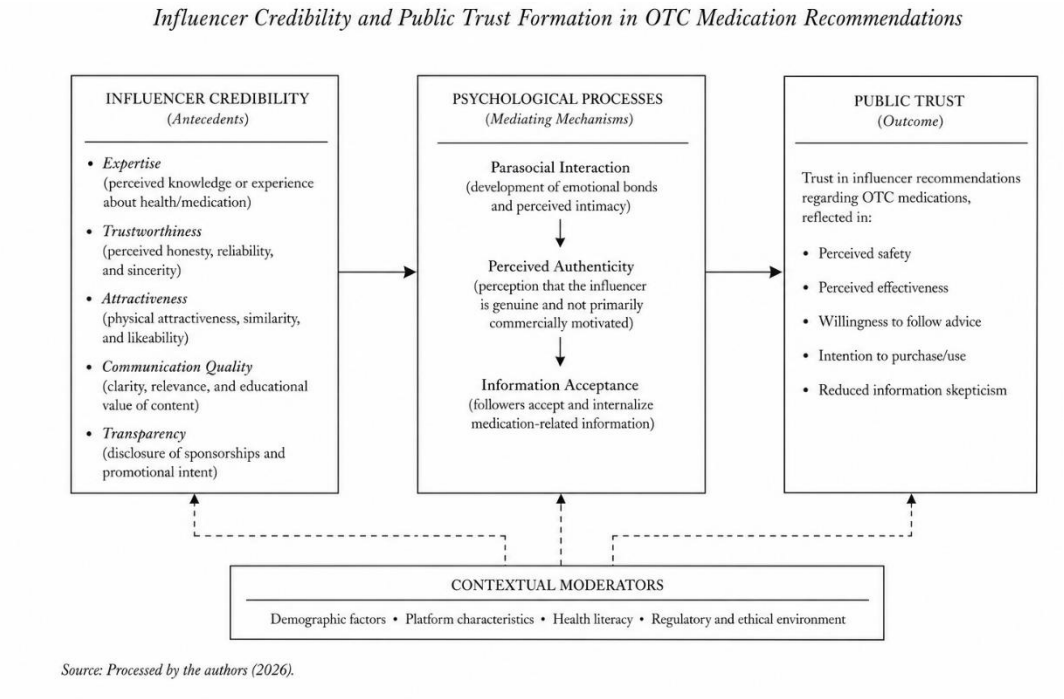

Figure 1. Emotional Trust Formation Through Parasocial Interaction

Source: Processed by the authors, 2026

The figure illustrates the relationship between repeated exposure, emotional familiarity, perceived authenticity, and trust in OTC medication recommendations.

Participants explained that long-term exposure to influencer content gradually transformed followers into emotionally attached audiences.

One participant noted:

> *"I follow some wellness influencers almost every day, so after a while it feels like I know them personally. Their recommendations feel less like advertisements and more like advice from someone familiar. That emotional closeness makes the medicine recommendations easier to trust." (P1, Female, 21 years old)*

This statement demonstrates how parasocial relationships blur the distinction between commercial promotion and interpersonal communication. Trust emerges through perceived familiarity rather than objective evaluation alone.

Another participant explained:

> *"Influencers often talk about stress, lack of sleep, or feeling exhausted after work, and those situations are very similar to my own life. When they recommend OTC medicines, it feels emotionally relevant because the experiences match everyday realities." (P7, Male, 25 years old)*

The findings indicate that emotional similarity strengthens persuasive influence. Participants perceived influencers as trustworthy because they reflected common personal experiences and social pressures.

A third participant stated:

> *"I think many people trust influencers because followers feel emotionally understood. Even if the explanation is not scientific, the emotional comfort itself already creates confidence toward the recommendation." (P9, Female, 20 years old)*

This finding confirms that emotional reassurance significantly contributes to public trust in digital pharmaceutical communication. The persuasive effectiveness of influencer recommendations therefore extends beyond informational quality into emotional and relational dimensions.

The results suggest that parasocial interaction amplifies the persuasive power of influencers by constructing emotionally mediated trust relationships between content creators and audiences.

Sponsorship Transparency and Public Skepticism

Although participants frequently trusted influencer recommendations, the findings also identified increasing skepticism regarding commercial sponsorship practices and hidden advertising strategies. Participants expressed concern that some influencers prioritize promotional contracts over public health responsibility.

Digital observations revealed inconsistent sponsorship disclosure practices across platforms. Some influencers openly labeled sponsored content, while others integrated promotional messages into personal storytelling without explicit disclosure. Audience reactions demonstrated that transparency significantly influenced perceptions of credibility.

Table 3. Public Concerns Regarding Influencer-Based OTC Medication Promotion

Public Concern	Audience Interpretation
Hidden sponsorship	Manipulative communication
Excessive promotion frequency	Commercialization perception
Lack of medical expertise	Risk of misinformation
Exaggerated effectiveness claims	Reduced trust
Absence of side-effect explanation	Safety concerns

Source: Interview and digital observation data, 2026

One participant explained:

> *"Sometimes influencers promote too many medicines within a short period, and that makes the recommendations feel commercial rather than genuine. If every product is described as highly effective, I start questioning whether the review is honest or financially motivated." (P10, Male, 34 years old)*

This finding indicates that over-commercialization weakens perceived authenticity and increases public skepticism.

Another participant stated:

> *"I actually trust influencers more when they clearly mention sponsorships because transparency feels honest. Hidden promotions make audiences feel manipulated because people deserve to know whether recommendations are paid advertisements." (P2, Male, 24 years old)*

The finding demonstrates that disclosure transparency positively affects trust by reducing perceptions of deception.

A third participant explained:

> *"The dangerous part is that many followers immediately believe influencer recommendations without checking medical information. Influencers may unintentionally spread misinformation because they are not healthcare professionals." (P4, Female, 28 years old)*

This concern highlights the broader ethical implications of influencer-driven pharmaceutical communication. Participants recognized the possibility that emotionally persuasive content could contribute to unsafe self-medication practices.

The findings reveal that influencer communication simultaneously generates trust and skepticism. While authenticity strengthens persuasion, excessive commercialization and unclear sponsorship disclosure reduce public confidence.

Influence on Self-Medication Behavior

The final major finding concerns the direct impact of influencer recommendations on self-medication behavior. Most participants admitted that social media content significantly influenced their decisions regarding OTC medication selection and purchasing behavior.

Participants reported that influencer recommendations reduced uncertainty when choosing medications for headaches, digestive problems, flu symptoms, sleep difficulties, and stress-related conditions. Social media platforms therefore functioned as accessible informal references for self-treatment decisions.

One participant stated:

> *"Before buying OTC medicines, I usually search social media first because influencer explanations are faster and easier to understand than medical websites. Their reviews simplify the decision-making process." (P6, Female, 23 years old)*

This statement demonstrates how convenience and accessibility contribute to reliance on influencer-generated pharmaceutical information.

Another participant explained:

> *"Sometimes influencer reviews encourage me to try medicines I never considered before. Seeing someone demonstrate the product in daily situations creates confidence because it feels realistic and practical." (P1, Female, 21 years old)*

The finding indicates that influencers shape consumer experimentation behavior by increasing product familiarity and reducing hesitation.

A third participant stated:

> *"When several influencers repeatedly recommend the same medicine, it creates the impression that the product must be effective and widely trusted. Repetition itself influences public confidence." (P5, Male, 31 years old)*

This result confirms that repeated digital exposure reinforces collective perceptions of reliability and social legitimacy. Public trust therefore develops not only through individual influencers but also through broader patterns of repeated online endorsement.

Digital Trust, Emotional Influence, and Pharmaceutical Communication in Social Media Ecosystems

The findings of this study demonstrate that public trust in over-the-counter (OTC) medication recommendations is strongly shaped by influencer credibility, emotional familiarity, and perceptions of authenticity within digital communication environments. These findings confirm that social media influencers increasingly function not only as marketing intermediaries but also as informal health communicators who influence self-medication behavior and public perceptions regarding pharmaceutical products. The study therefore contributes to broader discussions concerning digital trust, health communication, and platform-mediated consumer behavior.

One of the most important findings concerns the dominance of perceived authenticity and relatability over formal medical expertise in shaping audience trust. This finding aligns with previous studies by Duffek et al. (2025), who argued that influencer

credibility is closely associated with authenticity and emotional connection rather than institutional authority alone. Similarly, Dekoninck et al. (2023) found that younger audiences perceive influencers as trustworthy because they communicate through personal narratives and peer-like interactions. The present study extends these findings into the pharmaceutical communication context by demonstrating that audiences often prioritize emotional accessibility and conversational clarity when evaluating OTC medication recommendations. Unlike previous studies focused primarily on beauty or lifestyle products, this research shows that similar trust mechanisms also operate within health-related consumption practices, despite the higher public health risks associated with medication use.

The findings also reinforce parasocial interaction theory, particularly the argument that repeated digital exposure creates emotionally mediated relationships between audiences and influencers. Das et al. (2025) originally conceptualized parasocial interaction as a one-sided relationship between media figures and audiences, while contemporary studies by Wu et al. (2024) emphasized that social media intensifies these emotional bonds through interactivity and constant engagement. The present research demonstrates that parasocial intimacy significantly affects trust formation in pharmaceutical communication. Participants frequently interpreted influencer recommendations as personal advice rather than commercial persuasion because emotional familiarity blurred the boundaries between advertising and interpersonal communication. This finding represents an important theoretical contribution because it expands parasocial interaction discourse into the domain of pharmaceutical trust and self-medication behavior.

At the same time, the study reveals growing public skepticism toward influencer-based pharmaceutical promotion, particularly regarding sponsorship transparency and hidden advertising practices. This finding corresponds with research conducted by Jia et al. (2024) and Shen et al. (2025) which demonstrated that undisclosed sponsorships reduce consumer trust and increase perceptions of manipulation. However, the current study offers a more nuanced interpretation by showing that transparency does not necessarily weaken persuasive influence. Instead, participants often perceived sponsorship disclosure as a sign of honesty and ethical responsibility. This suggests that transparency may function as a credibility-enhancing mechanism within digital health communication, especially when audiences are increasingly aware of influencer commercialization practices.

Another significant contribution of this study lies in its identification of the relationship between influencer communication and self-medication behavior. Previous scholarship concerning OTC medication use has primarily emphasized pharmacy access, healthcare affordability, and consumer health literacy. In contrast, the present study demonstrates that digital media ecosystems now play a central role in shaping pharmaceutical decision-making processes. Influencers simplify complex medication information, reduce consumer uncertainty, and normalize self-treatment practices through emotionally persuasive narratives. This finding indicates that social media platforms increasingly operate as informal pharmaceutical information environments where trust is socially negotiated through digital interaction rather than exclusively through medical institutions.

The novelty of this research therefore lies in its integration of influencer credibility theory, parasocial interaction perspectives, and pharmaceutical communication studies into a unified analytical framework. Existing studies generally examine influencer marketing from commercial or branding perspectives, whereas this study specifically addresses how emotional trust mechanisms affect public perceptions of medication safety and reliability. By focusing on OTC pharmaceutical recommendations, the research expands digital communication scholarship into an area with direct public health implications (Anis & Anis, 2022).

The conclusions have practical implications for healthcare institutions, pharma regulators and digital governance. The policies of regulatory bodies need to be strengthened to promote transparency and disclosure of sponsorship with regard to health-related promotions on social media. The results also indicate the need for joint communicator approaches between healthcare providers, pharmacists and responsible influencers for enhancing the public health literacy. To conclude, pharmaceutical firms can implement more ethical and educational communication strategies, instead of using only persuasive marketing strategies (Anis & Hassali, 2022; Martinez & Yango, 2023). Furthermore, social media platforms need to further develop monitoring mechanisms to minimise the number of inaccurate drug claims and increase the accountability of digital drug communications.

This study has some positive aspects but some drawbacks. Firstly, the research was largely targeted at more youthful digital generations that are likely to be more representative of other age groups with differing media consumption habits. Secondly, with a qualitative design, interpretation is emphasized over statistical generalization. Thirdly, this study utilised a specific social media platform and medications, which may result in different dynamics of communication as it applies to other medicines or digital environments. Cross-generational comparisons on trust in the pharmaceutical communication of influencers and investigating the impact of cultural context on the perception of the credibility of medication on social media platforms should therefore be studied in the future. If the population level is high, quantitative methods could also be employed to determine the relationship between the influencer traits, self-medication practices and trust development. Further studies on the future should also assess the role of artificial intelligence, algorithmic recommendation systems, and platform governance for the visibility of platform content, and the persuasiveness of health-related content by influencers.

CONCLUSION

This study illustrates how social media influencers can impact the public's confidence in OTC medication recommendations and recommendations via credibility, emotional familiarity, believability, and repeated interactions online. Results show that audiences tend to value personal experiences and communication that resonates with their lived reality over academic health-care knowledge when assessing pharmaceutical information on social media. Parasocial interaction will also reinforce the formation of trust as it will bring a sense of closeness between the influencer and the followers, enhancing the persuasive effect of the content regarding the medicines. But the study also suggests that there is an increasing public distrust of covert sponsorships, commercialisation and the risk of misinformation.

This study is theoretically significant because it brings together the concepts of the three theories: influencer credibility theory, parasocial interaction theory, and pharmaceutical communication theory in the context of a digital health communication. It is clear from the findings that in practice there is a need for better transparency in sponsorship, better ethical practices among influencers, and better digital health literacy programmes to minimise risks of self-medication behaviour. The qualitative nature of the study, the focus of the platform and the age limit of the study participants are the limitations of this study. Comparative, cross-cultural and quantitative studies are needed to explore the impact of demographic, technological and regulatory variation on trust in influencer-based pharmaceutical communication in larger populations in the future.

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