

Analyzing Tiktok's Role in Shaping Health Behaviour

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Abstract

This study employs a descriptive survey design to comprehensively assess consumer behaviours towards health products promoted on TikTok, targeting Malaysian citizens aged 18 and above. Despite the platform's increasing popularity for health product advertisements, scepticism persists regarding the efficacy of products endorsed by TikTok influencers. Findings reveal a positive response towards TikTok's influence on purchasing behaviour, with users acknowledging the need to verify health claims before making purchases. While there's a slight preference for health products endorsed by influencers, informed decision-making is emphasised. Positive feedback from TikTok users influences others' decisions to try health products, but concerns arise over potential misinformation dissemination and discrepancies between healthcare provider recommendations and patient preferences. Users prioritise influencer credibility and medical expertise, although not all actively seek health-related content. The study sheds light on TikTok's role in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviours, guided by the Transactionality Paradigm Theory. Future research could delve into long-term effects of TikTok endorsements, strategies to mitigate misinformation, and regulatory oversight to enhance consumer trust in health-related advertisements on social media platforms.

Keywords

Tiktok; influencers; health products; health behaviours

Introduction

Social media has evolved into a powerful digital platform that influences various aspects of human behaviour. Beyond merely facilitating communication among users, social media platforms have become influential channels for shaping public opinion and behaviours (Meenakshi Palo, 2024). These platforms come in various forms, including social networking websites, visual-centric platforms like TikTok and Instagram, podcasts, blogs, and more. The pervasive nature of social media in the digital age extends its impact far beyond casual interactions, positioning it as a key player in the dissemination of information and trends.

In the digital age, social media platforms have become powerful catalysts for shaping individual and collective behavior. Among them, TikTok has soared in popularity, profoundly influencing how people express themselves, interact with others, and internalize social norms. Characterized by short-form videos, trending challenges, and viral hashtags, TikTok offers a unique environment that fosters creativity and community while influencing societal values. This essay explores the various ways TikTok influences social behavior, examining its role in personal identity formation, community building, and the broader social implications that arise from its widespread use.

TikTok serves as a dynamic platform for individual expression and personal identity construction. Its user-friendly interface encourages creative self-presentation, allowing individuals to showcase their talents, opinions, and personalities through short, shareable and impactful videos. Trending challenges and hashtags play a significant role in shaping user identities by providing common themes and cultural touchpoints that foster a sense of belonging and participation.

Among these platforms, TikTok stands out with over 2 billion downloads worldwide, making it the fifth most popular social media network globally (Iqbal, 2024). Known for its engaging and highly addictive content, TikTok features personalised feeds of short videos with audio and visual effects. Its "For You Page" (FYP) uses a sophisticated algorithm to tailor content based on user interactions, encouraging prolonged and repeated engagement (Vicente, 2021).

The intersection of social media and health behaviour is particularly significant. Health-related content on platforms like TikTok is proliferating, with influencers and users alike sharing advice, product endorsements, and personal health journeys (Cohen et al., 2020; Zhang & Rau, 2021). This trend raises important questions about how such content influences consumer behaviour, particularly in terms of purchasing health products

(Giles, 2016; Kapoor et al., 2018). Despite its popularity, there is limited research on the specific impacts of TikTok on users' health behaviours, especially in the context of over-the-counter health product purchases (Feng et al., 2019).

In recent years, TikTok has emerged as a dominant social media platform across the world, including in Malaysia, where it has significantly influenced the behavior and perceptions of its users. As a short-form video app that combines entertainment, social interaction, and creative expression, TikTok has transformed the way Malaysians communicate, understand their culture, and experience mental health challenges. This essay explores TikTok's diverse impacts on Malaysian society by analyzing its impact on social interactions, cultural perceptions, and psychological well-being. Understanding these influences is critical in understanding how digital platforms can change social norms and individual behaviors in the context of modern Malaysia.

TikTok has profoundly transformed social interactions among Malaysians, leading to significant shifts in communication patterns and socializing habits. Traditionally, Malaysians have relied on face-to-face interactions, community gatherings, and physical meetings to build relationships. However, the rise of TikTok has

shifted many of these interactions to virtual spaces, where users engage through comments, duets, and shared video content.

This research paper aims to examine the effects of TikTok exposure on users' health behaviours through a descriptive survey design. The study focuses on Malaysian consumers and explores how TikTok influences their decisions to purchase over-the-counter health products. The findings reveal that TikTok significantly impacts consumer behaviour, with users responding positively to health product recommendations from influencers. TikTok's interactive format and dynamic content play crucial roles in shaping health-related behaviours among its users.

Healthy behavior is all actions or activities related to maintaining and improving one's health. Healthy behavior can include various aspects such as eating habits, physical activity, hygiene, and other habits that have a positive impact on health. Health behavior encompasses the various ways individuals engage in habits and actions that significantly influence their health and well-being. In an era marked by increasing awareness of health issues, understanding the dynamics of health behavior is paramount. This article delves into the key aspects of health behavior, emphasizing its importance, types, factors influencing it, and methods to

promote healthier choices.

In addressing this research gap, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role social media plays in health-related decision-making. By investigating the specific effects of TikTok, this paper aims to provide insights that could inform future public health strategies and digital marketing practices.

Method

This study uses quantitative method. This study was conducted by observing TikTok platform users and their tendencies towards health aspects. The research approach based on positivism is known as quantitative research. It is used to investigate a specific population or sample, collect data with research instruments, and evaluate data statistics to test previously formed assumptions. The purpose of descriptive research with quantitative methods is to describe the problem being studied with the help of literature to strengthen the researcher's analysis and assist in drawing conclusions. The research results obtained by other researchers are the results of research on computational variable indicators that have been documented in writing by the researcher.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

a) Demographic Background

TikTok is hugely popular in

Malaysia, with an estimated 29 million users aged 18 and above as of early 2024. This represents 84% of the country's 34 million internet users (Ibrahim, 2025). TikTok also reaches 85.4% of Malaysia's internet users, with 44.3% of the audience being female and 55.7% male (Farid, 2024).

It is evident from the data that the majority of the participants are female, comprising 58.4% (243 individuals). There are 279 individuals in the 18-25 age group, which accounts for 67.1% of the total. Malay individuals constitute a substantial proportion, amounting to 67.5% (281). A majority of respondents, 257 individuals, or 61.8%, reside in urban areas. The Bachelor's degree is the most advanced level of education among respondents, with 50.7% (211 individuals) possessing this qualification. The respondent profile is clearly illustrated by these insights, which emphasise trends in gender, age, ethnicity, residential area, and educational level.

b) Influence on Purchasing Behaviour

The data analysis in Table 2 indicated that the majority of respondents ($M=4.04$) concurred that they would verify the health claims of products advertised on TikTok before making a purchase. Direct-to-consumer advertising has a significant influence on the

behaviour and perception of healthcare delivery, as per Shaw (2024). It has been discovered that individuals frequently experience a sense of empowerment as a consequence of these advertisements and are more likely to seek out additional health-related educational resources. This suggests that a substantial number of users may take the initiative to verify the health claims of health product advertisements on TikTok before making a purchase.

Furthermore, TikTok's infinite cycle model, which emphasises continuous engagement and discovery, encourages users to research and verify their purchases before making them (TikTok For Business, 2023). Furthermore, there is a slight preference for health products that are endorsed by TikTok influencers over those that are not featured on the platform ($M=3.11$). A study published in STAT (Dave et al., 2024) has demonstrated that TikTok influencers, including those without formal medical training, are increasingly advocating for prescription medications. This emphasises the growing impact of social media personalities on consumer behaviour in the healthcare sector.

These influencers frequently share personal anecdotes, which can foster a sense of authenticity and trust, thereby making their endorsements particularly

influential. It is still imperative to make informed decisions, despite the fact that there is a minor preference for health products that are promoted by TikTok influencers. The average influence on purchasing behaviour is ($M=3.53$). It is evident that TikTok and its influencers are capable of effectively generating interest and influencing consumer behaviour. However, the final purchasing decisions are also significantly influenced by the necessity for product verification and trust.

c) Effectiveness on Health Products

Based on the data analysis in Table 3, the majority of respondents ($M=3.87$) concurred that the positive feedback from TikTok users regarding specific health products had an impact on their decision to attempt them. As per an article by Anderer (2024), TikTok has become a preferred platform for individuals to share their personal experiences with health products through user-generated content, such as testimonials and reviews. In conjunction with TikTok's extensive user base, these personal narratives help to cultivate a sense of authenticity and trust among other users, which can significantly influence their perceptions and decisions. A significant discovery is the discrepancy between the preferences of patients and the

recommendations of healthcare providers. This is demonstrated by the increasing number of women who are documenting their IUD placements, despite the apparent distress. This underscores the disparity between medical advice and patient preferences. In addition, the article conveys concern about the dissemination of inaccurate information on TikTok.

Finally, the percentage of individuals who believe that health products advertised on TikTok are more effective than those not advertised on the platform is relatively low ($M=3.11$). This indicates that, despite the fact that TikTok can stimulate interest and trial, consumers do not overwhelmingly perceive these products as superior in effect. In a 2024 article published by the University of Colorado, the advantages and disadvantages of advertising on TikTok are examined, with a particular emphasis on the impact on all aspects of healthcare, including healthcare costs, population health, and provider and patient experiences (Shaw, 2024).

It has been observed that certain physicians experience adverse effects, such as the pressure to prescribe unnecessary medications, which can result in a low belief in the efficacy of health products advertised on TikTok, despite the fact that certain patients feel empowered and seek additional health information from these advertisements. The

respondents' perception of the aggregate mean effectiveness of health products advertised on TikTok is ($M=3.40$). This implies that users have varying perspectives. Although TikTok's user-generated content can generate interest and initiate trials, it fails to consistently persuade users of the superior efficacy of these products, as it must balance trust in genuine user experiences with scepticism due to potential misinformation.

d) Confidence in Influencers

In the digital era, social media platforms have become an essential part of everyday life, shaping how individuals access information and influencing their behavior. TikTok, a rapidly growing short-form video platform, has emerged as a critical space for health communication and education. Its unique combination of engaging content, viral trends, and influencer engagement has transformed the way health information is shared and received. This essay explores the multifaceted relationship between TikTok and health behavior, examining how the platform influences health awareness, affects individual behavior, and presents challenges and opportunities for health promotion. By analyzing these aspects, we can better understand TikTok's role in shaping contemporary health perceptions and actions.

TikTok plays a significant role in increasing health awareness among its users by serving as a rapid dissemination platform for health-related information. Unlike traditional media, TikTok allows users to share concise, visually engaging videos that can quickly reach millions of viewers. Viral health challenges—such as fitness routines, mental health tips, or vaccination campaigns—leverage the platform’s viral nature to spark public interest and engagement. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok played a significant role in spreading awareness about preventive measures and vaccine information through creative challenges and testimonials. Influencers and content creators also significantly shape health perceptions; their large followings lend credibility and relatability to health messages, which often influences viewers’ attitudes and understanding. The platform’s ability to drive rapid and widespread dissemination of health information makes it a powerful tool for raising awareness of a range of health issues, but it also raises concerns about the accuracy of the content shared.

Beyond awareness, TikTok’s engaging format influences individuals’ health behaviors in complex ways. On the one hand, health content that promotes positive practices—such as exercise routines,

nutritious recipes, or coping strategies for mental health issues—can motivate viewers to adopt healthier lifestyles. For example, TikTok fitness influencers have inspired many people to engage in regular physical activity through their accessible and entertaining videos. Conversely, the platform also facilitates the spread of misinformation, which can lead to unhealthy or dangerous behaviors. Misinformation about unproven treatments or conspiracy theories about health interventions can undermine public health efforts. Additionally, TikTok’s social validation mechanisms—likes, comments, and shares—encourage social comparison, which can impact self-esteem and body image. While peer validation can encourage healthy habits, it can also perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards or risky behaviors, highlighting the nuanced influence of social dynamics on health decisions.

Despite its potential, using TikTok effectively for health promotion presents significant challenges and opportunities. One major concern is the difficulty in verifying the credibility of health content amidst the vast amount of user-generated videos. Misinformation can spread quickly, making it important to develop strategies to identify and promote credible sources. However, TikTok’s immense popularity offers a unique

opportunity for targeted health campaigns, especially among younger demographics who may be less accessible to traditional media. Health organizations can leverage TikTok's creative tools to craft engaging messages that resonate with users. Additionally, there is an urgent need for a regulatory framework and platform policy to reduce misinformation and ensure the dissemination of accurate health information. By fostering collaboration between health authorities and content creators, TikTok can serve as a powerful ally in public health initiatives while protecting against the spread of harmful fake news.

In conclusion, TikTok significantly impacts health behaviors through its role in raising awareness, shaping individual actions, and presenting both challenges and opportunities for health promotion. Its ability to spread information quickly and engage users makes it a powerful platform for delivering health messages, but the risks of misinformation and social influence must be carefully managed. As TikTok continues to grow, it offers a promising avenue for health communication strategies.

According to the data analysis in Table 4, the majority of respondents ($M=4.34$) concurred that it is crucial for an influencer to possess medical expertise or credentials when sharing health-related content on TikTok. These

influencers are subject to more stringent standards due to the confidential nature of healthcare information, as stated in a guide from Influence Insider on the topic of becoming a medical influencer (Cny, 2023). Medical influencers frequently demonstrate their credentials, expertise, and firsthand experience to win the trust of their audience, as the guide emphasises. This suggests that on TikTok, users prioritise medical expertise or credentials when ingesting health-related content.

Nevertheless, the rate of following influencers who post health-related content is relatively low ($M=3.12$), suggesting that, despite the importance of trust and credibility, not all users actively pursue health content on TikTok. Almost 44% of the videos contained fraudulent material, as per an article by Jarvis & Opinion (2024) that reviews the benefits and drawbacks of health influencers on TikTok. Content producers who do not identify as medical practitioners but possess over 10,000 followers, or "nonmedical influencers," were responsible for the production of nearly half of all videos. There was a higher probability that these films would contain false information and have inferior quality ratings. This implies that followers of these influencers may follow them less frequently as a result of concerns regarding the dissemination of inaccurate information. ($M=3.71$) is

the average level of confidence in influencers. This underscores the significance of exacting standards of accuracy and integrity in the material of influencers, as well as the importance of customers exercising discernment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although TikTok is primarily an entertainment application for users, its latest feature functioning as a marketplace for various goods has provided numerous benefits to users. This includes the sale of health products on TikTok, which has indirectly influenced users' health behavior.

The study results showed that the influence on purchasing behavior recorded the highest mean score ($M=4.04$), indicating that users typically verify health claims advertised on TikTok before purchasing a health product. Users frequently encountering health products on TikTok recorded the second-highest mean score ($M=3.96$). This suggests that users believe TikTok is a transparent and trustworthy platform for purchasing health products.

The effectiveness of health products promoted on TikTok can also be seen when positive feedback from other TikTok users influences someone's decision to try them. This is because positive feedback about the product can give new customers confidence that the product is of high

quality and meets their expectations. As a result, users will believe that the health products advertised on TikTok are as effective as stated.

The study also found that influencers can change users' attitudes and purchasing patterns regarding health products. Users tend to buy health products promoted by TikTok influencers with medical expertise or qualifications when sharing health-related content on TikTok. This is because the health information shared by influencers, supported by reliable sources and studies, can substantiate their claims and gain users' trust.

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