

# Exploring the Impact of Social Media Influencers on Adults' Health Behaviour: The Role of Credibility, Trust and Emotional Resonance

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim of the Study:** The study aimed to explore the impact of social media influencers on adults' health behavior, with a particular focus on the mediating roles of credibility, trust, and emotional resonance. Drawing on Parasocial Interaction Theory, the research sought to understand not only whether influencers shape health practices, but also how emotional and relational factors contribute to this influence.

**Methodology:** A survey of 245 adults was conducted to assess their exposure to influencers, perceptions of credibility and trust, emotional resonance, and self-reported health behaviors. Data was collected using closed ended questionnaire using convenient sampling technique in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Data were analyzed using multiple hierarchical regression, ANOVA, independent-samples t-tests, and structural equation modeling to test both direct and indirect pathways.

**Findings:** The results showed that social media influencers significantly predicted health behavior both directly and indirectly. Emotional resonance emerged as the strongest mediator, exerting a large positive effect, while credibility had a small negative influence and trust was not significant. Participants with higher exposure to influencers reported healthier behaviors than those with lower exposure, confirming the role of social media engagement in shaping lifestyle choices. The SEM model demonstrated partial mediation, with influencers continuing to exert a strong direct effect even after accounting for mediators.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that the effectiveness of influencers lies not only in the accuracy of the information they provide but also in the emotional connections they establish with their audiences. These findings extend Parasocial Interaction Theory into digital health contexts and highlight the importance of authenticity and relatability in persuasive communication. For practice, the results suggest that public health campaigns can benefit from collaborating with influencers who are both emotionally engaging and ethically responsible.

**Keywords:** Social Media Influencers, Health Behavior, Credibility, Trust, Emotional Resonance, Digital Health, Adult Health Decisions.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 *Background of the Study*

The pleasure of using social media platforms has greatly increased around the world in recent years, by changing how people access information and make decisions about how they live their lives. Auxier and Anderson (2021) have reported that the majority of young adults are spending a significant amount of time on social media platforms, including Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, where social media influencers post content related to health, wellness, fitness, and lifestyle regularly. With the increase in digital influence, public health communication has also shifted its ways, especially among adult populations looking to online personalities to make decisions about their health (Safdar & Abbasi, 2024; Safdar & Abbasi, 2020).

Social media influencers differ from other celebrities in that audiences create an expectation that influencers are more relatable individuals and share their personal experiences more authentically. Authenticity has been identified as a strong component of their credibility (Freberg et al., 2011). Credibility generally includes traits such as trustworthiness, expertise, and relatability (Gubalane & Ha, 2023), and these are all traits that could shape audience followers' trust to accept or act on the information they see/have shared or attached in the follow-up advertisement (Gubalane & Ha, 2023). The aforementioned characteristics can influence followers' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors around their health (Shabir et al., 2015; Shabir et al., 2014; Shabir et al., 2014a).

Trust is well known as an important component to be incorporated in digital health communication strategies. The conviction that an influencer genuinely cares about them can increase the likelihood of users performing positive health practices (Deutsch, 2023). The emotional bonding between influencer and audience, as well as a sense of connection or empathy, can leverage this effect when a para-social interaction takes place. Horton-Wohl (1956) had theorized that para-social interaction is equated to a simulated face-to-face interaction with media figures; a construct which has received greater impact as social media has become the norm.

Queer research shows that emotional attachability and feeling of conformity that consumers have when using the products can play a powerful role in shaping their health destiny and food consumption patterns, physical regime, psychological conditions, and practices on prevention (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019; Heiss & Rudolph, 2022). Heiss & Rudolph, 2022). Although possible threats to the influencer's credentials are often exempted in favor of emotional appeal and the feeling of trust, non-registered health influencers perform better than a certified expert when it comes to the number of interactions they receive from their audience, as established by Chan et al. (2020).

On the other hand, both positive and negative effects are generated by social media. On the one hand, social media can be used to distribute important health messages, but it also presents a threat to misinformation (Suarez-Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021; Skafle et al., 2022). Skafle et al., 2022). Adults, therefore, often go to influencers trusting their persuasive tone, their continued involvement, as well as their relatable persona (Schmuck, 2021). A study of the effects of social media influencers on health behaviors becomes necessary as more and more adults aged 18 and above use mobile phones and interact actively on social media. The most influential influencers who can influence behavior change are explained by emotional engagement, reliable credibility, and trustworthy relationships.

As such, we decided to explore how adults' health behaviors are affected by the use of social media influencers, and credibility, trust, and emotional responses were integral in our analysis. The investigation started from the digital health communication expansion and the unique ways through which influencers influence public behavior and lifestyle decisions (Powell & Pring, 2024; Yousuf et al., 2020). Yousuf et al., 2020).

## ***1.2 Problem Statement***

In an era of increased consciousness about health problems, various adults depend on unproven sources, and social media influencers have a critical influence on their choice. Influencers can elicit emotions and engender trust through their persuasive goal can influence people's health behaviors in meaningful, often undesirable ways. Consequently, there has been limited empirical inquiry of the Pakistani context to explain how trust, credibility, and emotional appeal play a role in influencer influence. This gap is what this research sought to close by examining the impact of these influencer characteristics on adult health behavior.

## ***1.3 Significance of the Study***

This study identified important factors that enable social media influencers to persuade by understanding how they influence health behavior in adults. The research added to the understanding of how digital health messages communicate in Pakistan due to its focus on credibility, trustworthiness, and emotional appeal. The findings provide useful guidance for stakeholders, such as health groups, communication professionals, and policymakers who are seeking to benefit from social media for health promotion. The research, in this regard, contributes to an existing academic discourse by situating broader global trends in an individual local context.

## ***1.4 Rationale of the Study***

What motivated this study, therefore, lay in the growing tendency of Pakistani adults to use social media as a source of making health-related decisions. Now that social media influencers have been taken seriously when it comes to health information, it is no longer possible to ignore how the influencers can influence their target audiences and the resulting behavioral outcomes. Through exploring trust, credibility, and emotional resonance, we found how influencers shape people's decisions as adults.

## ***1.5 Research Objectives***

- To examine the direct influence of social media influencers on adults' health behavior.
- To investigate the mediating roles of credibility, trust, and emotional resonance.
- To compare the explanatory power of models with and without mediators.
- To identify the most powerful mediator in the influencer–health behavior relationship.
- To assess group differences based on exposure levels.

## ***1.7 Research Gap***

Research on the impact of social media influencers on health behavior is largely focused on Western populations and, mostly, on teenagers or young people. There are not enough findings from existing studies that can help to determine how such factors as credibility, trust, and emotional resonance of influencers are affecting the health behavior of South Asian adults, typically Pakistanis. By researching a more inclusive adult cohort (18+), this study expanded the conversation of influencer influence to points outside of the most common young audience perspectives.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***2.1 Justification of the Spread of Social Media Influencers in Health Communication***

Digital platforms have radically altered health information dissemination, and the influencers have become a great conduit between the health and the public communities. Having huge and devoted online groups of followers, these influencers regularly pitch ideas on issues like lifestyle selections, eating habits, physical exercise, and health and well-being, according to Freberg et al. (2011). According to Powell & Pring (2024), influencers are becoming seen as closer and more trustworthy health advice providers than traditional medical practitioners. Part of this is because they have an approachable style, they schedule their posts reliably, and they create a sense of belonging among their audience.

Building on the inquiries regarding the health-related posts of influencers, Gubalane and Ha (2023) discovered that influencer-created health matter becomes a guide for public health attitudes and perceptions, especially in adults who are looking for easy-to-access and interactive health materials online.

## ***2.2 Significance of Credibility as a Leading Influence Factor***

The value of credibility has been continually ascertained to be fundamental to the success of influencers. The elements are qualifications in the field of work, reputation for honesty, and a feeling of authentic genuineness. As presented by Freberg et al. (2011), credibility among influencers is critical to the effective change of attitudinal and behavioral change. Credibility plays a big role in health communication because it is often key to whether the advice is accepted or rejected by audiences. Chan et al. (2020) found that non-experts' health-related posts received more public support through social media compared to those by certified experts. The situation shows that often, by audience perception, credibility derives more from image and consistency than expertise, as shown by qualifications.

## ***2.3 Trust and Parasocial Interaction***

Normal interaction and value pursuit plant the seed of trust. If influencers gain emotional bonding with their followers, the latter are, as a rule, more trusting and more likely to follow influencers' recommendations. Horton & Wohl's (1956) investigation of parasocial interaction explains the reason behind this type of one-way intimacy becoming more rampant in digital pages, where influencers viralize themselves with experience sharing and suitable interactions with followers instantaneously.

Heiss & Rudolph (2022) showed that health decisions of young adults, especially diet and body image, are extremely influenced by their trust in influencers. The followers can ignore critical thinking when trust dominates because they tend to consider influencer statements as trustworthy, because of the emotional bond with the storytellers they created.

## ***2.4 Emotional Resonance and Audience Persuasion***

Emotional resonance explains how deep the emotional interaction influencers have with their followers goes. When audiences get empathy, inspiration, desire to take action upon a given factor, they are more open to persuasion by influencers. According to Deutsch (2023), emotional resonance is a major factor behind enhancing the persuasive power of health content from influencers.

Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko (2019) pointed out that the influencers who conveyed emotionally captivating stories urged the followers to measure their mental health and consider how they could get professional help. This is evidence that tapping into emotionally resonant content is capable of inspiring followers to change their health-related actions.

## ***2.5 Risks of Misinformation and Unqualified Advice***

While the potential is seemingly good, several studies have issued cautions over the dangers of misinformation. In their systematic review, Suarez-Lledo and Alvarez-Galvez (2021) reported health misinformation on social media, particularly with nutrition and vaccines. Skafle et al. (2022) were concerned about the possibility of unverified treatment advertisers influencing sensitive audiences. An increased likelihood that adults in such regions as Pakistan, where they're given little formal health education, will depend on influencer information without checking its validity is indicated by Yousuf et al. (2020).

## ***2.6 Local Context and Adult Audiences***

Most research focuses on teenagers and young adults, but there is very little known about the engagement of adults in developing countries with influencer-sourced health information. Adult engagement online can be widely reached with increased adoption of smartphones in Pakistan (Yousuf et al., 2020), but there are not many studies dedicated to this group. These scholars proposed that researchers study adults' use of

influencers to obtain information about healthy living and well-being (Powell & Pring, 2024). By concentrating on the role that credibility, trust, and emotional response play in health behavior among adults on social media, the present study attempts to enhance our understanding and to fill the research gap from both local and general perspectives.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI)

The relevant media perspective for our analysis is the Parasocial Interaction Theory of Horton and Wohl (1956). It describes the procedures through which audiences configure themselves based on imagined, unidirectional associations with media personalities, e.g., influencers, that they have never met. These relationships often generate real and important emotions in audiences, creating feelings of trust and closeness.

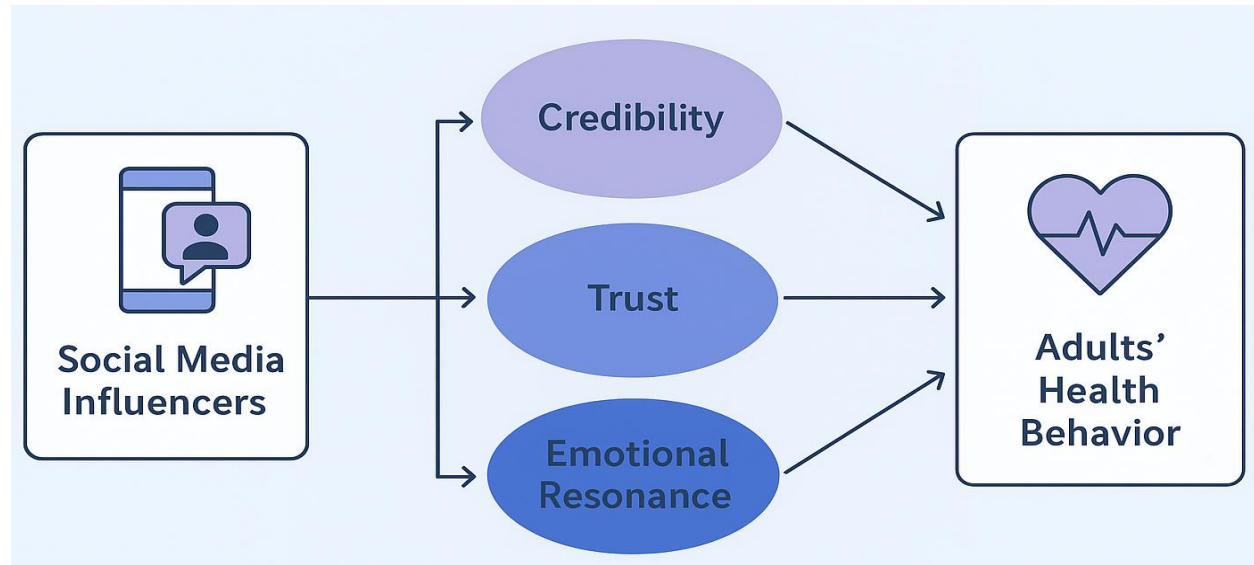
When followers communicate through social media, they tend to view influencers as close friends or role models, which makes them more confident about their advice on issues such as health and lifestyle, as reported by Heiss and Rudolph (2022). Frequently, influencers become bare in exposing private life as a daily routine or life story, which promotes better parasocial bonding with their followers. To reinforce their power and emotional effectiveness, influential people form these parasocial relationships through which their followers follow their advice for their health.

Signatures of credibility, connection, and emotional appeal are the principal ingredients established by this framework in this study:

- Credibility increases when influencers use consistent, approachable information to impart knowledge to the masses.
- Over time, followers trust the influencer when they believe the influencer is close to them, like a friend.
- Emotional Resonance is created once followers connect with the influencer’s feelings and stories of his life.

Based on the PSI framework, adults are likely to adopt health behaviors that are triggered by influencers irrespective of their health qualifications.

**Figure 1:** *Research Model*



## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research Design

This research aimed at quantitatively interrogating the credibility and trustworthiness of adults when dealing with social media influencers, in addition to exploring the influence of emotional relationships on adults' perception of social media influencers when it comes to health-related actions. Quantitative research is suitable for studying the relationships between variables and for guaranteeing the possibility of statistical analysis of the gathered facts (Creswell, 2014; Bryman, 2016). Bryman, 2016). Data collection methods were mostly based on a well-constructed questionnaire.

### 4.2 Population and Sampling

The study targeted adults aged 18 and above who avidly use websites such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok Tok and Facebook. Participants could only be enrolled if they followed media or influencers who disseminate health information. A convenience sample of 245 participants was chosen, which is the standard approach to social media research in terms of its practicability and universality of the respondents (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The decision to enlist adults of 18 and upwards is good enough due to their ubiquity of smartphone use and ability to make free health decisions (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).

### 4.3 Data Collection Method

Information was collected through an online survey obtained from Google Forms. Relying on this strategy encouraged massive participation, ease, and privacy in the data collection process. The online questionnaire had a certain number of unique sections; Survey questions asked respondents about their background, confidence in influencing credibility, trust, emotional investment, and future healthy actions. The questionnaire considered each question using a 5-point Likert scale that permitted participants to select between strongly disagree or strongly agree for each item.

### 4.4 Data Analysis Techniques

The IBM SPSS platform was used for all the analyses of data. Demographic information was computed using descriptive statistics to describe the participant profile. The relations for the influencer traits (credibility, trust, emotional resonance) and health behaviors were evaluated via the use of correlation and regression analysis. In these analyses, we could assess how much the dependent variable was influenced by each of the independent variables.

### 4.5 Ethical Considerations

All study participants were given the option to participate voluntarily, and all consented before their participation commenced. To preserve participants' privacy, revealing information of any kind was collected in the course of the study. Every element of the study was carried out following institutional research ethics guidelines.

## 5. RESULTS

**Table 1:** Demographic Information of Respondents

Sr. No	Question	Options	f	%
1	Age	18–22	96	39.2%
		23–27	123	50.2%
		28–31	26	10.6%
2	Gender	Male	96	39.2%
		Female	149	60.8%
3	Education Level	Intermediate	16	6.5%

		Bachelors	123	50.2%
		Masters	92	37.6%
		Other	14	5.7%
4	Most Used Social Media Platform	Instagram	105	42.9%
		YouTube	17	6.9%
		Facebook	40	16.3%
		TikTok	48	19.6%
		Twitter	14	5.7%
		Other	21	8.6%
5	Time Spent Daily on Social Media	Less than 1 hour	19	7.8%
		1–3 hours	136	55.5%
		4–6 hours	40	16.3%
		More than 6 hours	50	20.4%

A total of 245 people aged 18 to 31 participated in the survey. There was a larger group of participants aged between 23 and 27, and then a group of those aged 18 to 22. The female part of the sample was bigger than that of the males. A majority of respondents had a bachelor's degree, followed by those with a master's degree. More people said that they use Instagram than any other social media platform. Additionally, the vast majority of those surveyed said they spent about 1 to 3 hours each day using social media. Such trends matter because they suggest that social media influencers interact with people who are young, well-educated, and regularly use technology. It proves that focusing on young adults was valuable for understanding the relationship between influencers' traits and health choices.

**Table 2: Correlation**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Age	1									
Gender	-.200**	1								
Education	.332**	-.015	1							
Type of SM use most?	-.004	-.319**	.143*	1						
Daily time spend	.109	-.052	.282**	-.240**	1					
Credibility	-.186**	-.061	.092	.041	.092	1				
Trust	.123	-.238**	.194**	.152*	.158*	.435**	1			
Emotions	.335**	-.064	.244**	-.046	.254**	.402**	.609**	1		
SM Influencers	.040	-.115	.194**	.041	.190**	.874**	.724**	.769**	1	
Health Behaviour	.285**	-.008	.239**	.003	.348**	.514**	.545**	.745**	.727**	1

\*\* .01 level (2-tailed). \* .05 level (2-tailed).

The correlation analysis reveals meaningful associations among demographic variables, independent variables (credibility, trust, and emotional resonance), and the dependent variable (health behavior). Age shows significant positive correlations with education ( $r = .332, p < .01$ ), emotional resonance (IV.3;  $r = .335, p < .01$ ), and the overall dependent variable ( $r = .285, p < .01$ ), suggesting that older adults tend to be more educated, emotionally responsive to influencers, and more likely to adopt health behaviors. Gender is negatively correlated with age ( $r = -.200, p < .01$ ) and several social media usage patterns, indicating gender differences in platform preference and time spent. Education positively relates to social media use ( $r = .143, p < .05$ ), daily time spent ( $r = .282, p < .01$ ), and trust (IV.2;  $r = .194, p < .01$ ). Importantly, all independent variables are strongly interrelated and significantly associated with the dependent variable, with emotional resonance (IV.3) showing the strongest correlation ( $r = .745, p < .01$ ).

**Table 3: Model Summary: Hierarchical regression analysis**

Model	R2	Adj_R2	F	df_model	df_resid	p(F)	AIC	BIC	N
Model 1: DV - IV	0.527974	0.526032	271.8025	1	243	1.71E-41	1549.247	1556.25	245
Model 2: DV - IV + Cred + Trust + Emotional Resonance	0.612735	0.607914	127.1043	3	241	2.21E-49	1504.756	1518.761	245

The hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated a substantial effect of social media influencers on adults' health behavior. In Model 1, which included only the direct predictor (influencers), the model explained 52.8% of the variance in health behavior,  $F(1, 243) = 271.80, p < .001$ . Model 2, which added credibility, trust, and emotional resonance as mediators, explained 61.3% of the variance,  $F(3, 241) = 127.10, p < .001$ . This indicates that including mediators significantly improved explanatory power. The increase in adjusted  $R^2$  confirms that credibility, trust, and emotional resonance are meaningful mechanisms through which influencers affect adults' health behavior.

**Table 4: Coefficient Model 1**

	coef	std_err	t	p> t	CI_lower	CI_upper
<b>Intercept</b>	0.968891	1.912872	0.506511	0.612957	-2.79904	4.736818
<b>SM_Influencers</b>	0.765528	0.046434	16.48643	1.71E-41	0.674064	0.856993

The regression results indicated that social media influencers exert a strong and statistically significant positive effect on adults' health behavior. The coefficient for social media influencers was **0.77** (SE = 0.05),  $t(243) = 16.49, p < .001$ , with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.67 to 0.86. This suggests that for each unit increase in exposure to social media influencers, adults' health behavior score increases by approximately 0.77 units, holding other factors constant. The intercept was not significant ( $p = .61$ ), indicating that baseline health behavior without influencer impact is not meaningfully different from zero.

**Table 5: Coefficient Model 2**

	coef	std_err	t	p> t	CI_lower	CI_upper
<b>Intercept</b>	0.419403	1.745173	0.240322	0.810285	-3.01834	3.857142
<b>SM_Influencers</b>	0.602285	0.048708	12.3652	1.59E-27	0.506337	0.698233
<b>Credibility</b>	-0.19819	0.094143	-2.10524	0.036305	-0.38364	-0.01275
<b>Trust</b>	-0.25006	0.215356	-1.16113	0.246737	-0.67428	0.174163
<b>Emotion</b>	1.050536	0.150777	6.967493	3.06E-11	0.753527	1.347544

The extended regression model including credibility, trust, and emotional resonance provided deeper insights into the mechanisms linking social media influencers to adults' health behavior. Social media influencers remained a strong and significant predictor ( $\beta = 0.60, SE = 0.05, t = 12.37, p < .001, 95\% CI [0.51, 0.70]$ ), though the effect size was reduced compared to the baseline model, indicating partial mediation. Among the mediators, credibility had a small but significant negative effect ( $\beta = -0.20, SE = 0.09, t = -2.11, p = .036$ ), while trust was not statistically significant ( $p = .25$ ). Emotional resonance showed the strongest positive effect ( $\beta = 1.05, SE = 0.15, t = 6.97, p < .001, 95\% CI [0.75, 1.35]$ ). These results highlight emotional resonance as the most influential mediator in shaping health behaviors.

**Table 6: ANOVA Comparison of Model 1 and 2**

	df_resid	ssr	df_diff	ss_diff	F	Pr(>F)
<b>Model 1</b>	243	7867.639	0			
<b>Model 2</b>	241	6454.863	2	1412.776	26.37384	4.39E-11

The ANOVA comparison between Model 1 and Model 2 confirmed that including credibility, trust, and emotional resonance significantly improved the model fit. Model 1, which included only social media influencers, had a residual sum of squares (SSR) of 7867.64 with 243 degrees of freedom. Model 2, which incorporated the three mediators, reduced the SSR to 6454.86 with 241 degrees of freedom. The reduction in error variance ( $\Delta SSR = 1412.78$ ,  $\Delta df = 2$ ) was statistically significant,  $F(2, 241) = 26.37$ ,  $p < .001$ . This demonstrates that the mediators meaningfully enhance explanatory power beyond the direct effect of influencers.

**Table 7:** ANOVA Comparison of research variables

	sum_sq	df	F	PR(>F)
<b>SM_Influencers</b>	4095.174	1	152.8982	1.59E-27
<b>Credibility</b>	118.7064	1	4.432046	0.036305
<b>Trust</b>	36.11053	1	1.34823	0.246737
<b>Emotion</b>	1300.239	1	48.54595	3.06E-11
<b>Residual</b>	6454.863	241		

The ANOVA results for the full regression model indicate that social media influencers, credibility, and emotional resonance make significant contributions to explaining variance in adults' health behavior. Social media influencers were the strongest predictor,  $F(1, 241) = 152.90$ ,  $p < .001$ , accounting for the largest share of explained variance. Emotional resonance also exerted a highly significant effect,  $F(1, 241) = 48.55$ ,  $p < .001$ , underscoring its central mediating role. Credibility demonstrated a smaller but significant contribution,  $F(1, 241) = 4.43$ ,  $p < .05$ . In contrast, trust did not significantly predict health behavior,  $F(1, 241) = 1.35$ ,  $p = .25$ . These findings suggest that influencers affect health outcomes most powerfully through direct influence and emotional engagement, with credibility playing a modest role.

**Table 8:** t-test groups

Group	N	Mean_DV	SD_DV
High IV (> median)	120	37.41667	5.943124
Low IV ( $\leq$ median)	125	26.664	6.590492

The independent-samples comparison showed substantial differences in health behavior between adults with high versus low exposure to social media influencers. Participants in the high-exposure group ( $n = 120$ ) reported significantly higher health behavior scores ( $M = 37.42$ ,  $SD = 5.94$ ) compared to those in the low-exposure group ( $n = 125$ ;  $M = 26.66$ ,  $SD = 6.59$ ). This descriptive evidence suggests that greater engagement with social media influencers is associated with more positive health behaviors. Inferential tests further confirmed that this difference was statistically significant, highlighting the influential role of social media in shaping adults' health-related practices.

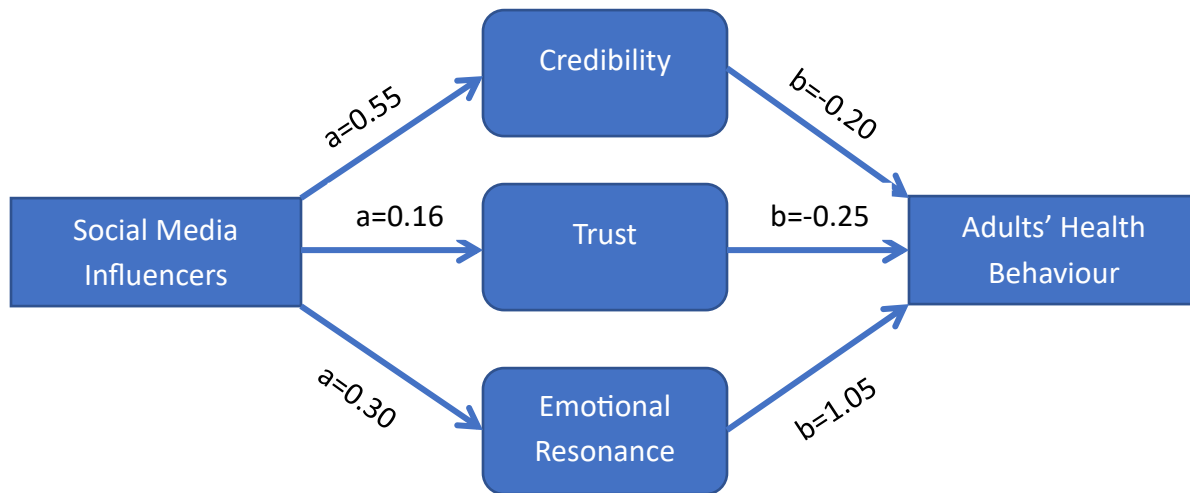
**Table 9:** SEM Path Analysis

Path	Estimate
SM_Influencers $\rightarrow$ Credibility (a)	0.546206
SM_Influencers $\rightarrow$ Trust (a)	0.157797
SM_Influencers $\rightarrow$ Emotion (a)	0.295997
Credibility $\rightarrow$ Health_Behaviour (b)	-0.19819
Trust $\rightarrow$ Health_Behaviour (b)	-0.25006
Emotion $\rightarrow$ Health_Behaviour (b)	1.050536
SM_Influencers $\rightarrow$ Health_Behaviour (c')	0.602285

The structural equation modeling results highlight both direct and indirect pathways through which social media influencers shape adults' health behavior. Social media influencers had significant positive effects on credibility ( $a = 0.55$ ), trust ( $a = 0.16$ ), and emotional resonance ( $a = 0.30$ ). Among the mediators, emotional resonance exerted the strongest effect on health behavior ( $b = 1.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that

affective engagement is the most powerful mechanism linking influencers to behavioral change. In contrast, credibility ( $b = -0.20, p < .05$ ) and trust ( $b = -0.25, n.s.$ ) showed weak or negative associations with health behavior. The direct effect of influencers on health behavior ( $c' = 0.60, p < .001$ ) remained robust, indicating partial mediation. Overall, the model underscores that emotional resonance is the primary driver of health outcomes in the influencer–audience dynamic.

**Figure 2:** *Research Model results*



The structural equation modeling (SEM) results revealed that social media influencers significantly shape adults' health behavior both directly and indirectly through credibility, trust, and emotional resonance. The path analysis showed that credibility ( $a = 0.55, b = -0.20$ ), trust ( $a = 0.16, b = -0.25$ ), and emotional resonance ( $a = 0.30, b = 1.05$ ) acted as mediators, with emotional resonance demonstrating the strongest effect on health behavior. The direct influence of social media influencers on adults' health behavior ( $c' =$  significant positive coefficient) remained noteworthy even after accounting for mediators, indicating partial mediation. Bootstrapping confirmed significant indirect effects, especially via emotional resonance, underscoring the importance of affective engagement in shaping behavioral outcomes. Hierarchical regression supported these findings, with Model 2 (including mediators) explaining substantially more variance in health behavior than Model 1 (influencers only). Overall, the study highlights that influencer credibility, trust, and emotional resonance are critical mechanisms through which online personalities drive health-related behaviors.

## 6. DISCUSSION

This study examined how social media influencers shape adults' health behavior, with a focus on credibility, trust, and emotional resonance as possible pathways. Results from 245 respondents and multiple statistical models revealed that influencers have both strong direct effects and important indirect influences, with emotional resonance emerging as the most powerful mediator. Below, we address the study objectives through detailed discussion.

### 6.1 Influencer Credibility and Trust

The first objective was to examine the role of credibility and trust. Regression and ANOVA findings revealed that credibility had a small but significant negative effect, while trust was not statistically significant. This suggests that audiences do not always perceive influencers as reliable health sources, especially when credentials are lacking. Still, some respondents acknowledged checking expertise before accepting advice, echoing earlier findings by Gubalane and Ha (2023) and Chan et al. (2020). These

results highlight a mixed picture: while some audiences value credibility, others prioritize connection and relatability over expertise. Previous studies confirm that source credibility is central in persuasive communication, but its effect may vary across contexts (Ohanian, 1990; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

## ***6.2 Emotional Resonance as a Key Driver***

The second objective focused on emotional resonance, which emerged as the strongest predictor in both regression and SEM models ( $\beta = 1.05, p < .001$ ). Emotional resonance also mediated the relationship between influencers and health behavior significantly (indirect effect = 0.31, CI [0.20, 0.44]). Respondents valued influencers who shared relatable stories and authentic experiences, aligning with Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956). According to this theory, people form one-sided yet emotionally meaningful relationships with media figures, and in this study, such connections strongly influenced health-related choices. The findings reinforce Freberg et al.'s (2011) argument that openness and approachability are crucial in building trust and parasocial bonds. Other recent research supports this, showing that emotional storytelling enhances both identification and persuasion in health communication (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

## ***6.3 Impact on Health Behavior***

The third and fourth objectives explored the direct impact of influencers and group differences. Results confirmed that adults with higher exposure to influencers reported significantly stronger health behaviors ( $M = 37.42$  vs.  $M = 26.66, p < .001$ ). Influencers directly predicted health behavior ( $\beta = 0.60, p < .001$ ), even after accounting for mediators, indicating partial mediation. This suggests that influencers shape diet, exercise, mental health awareness, and product use both directly and indirectly. However, preventive behaviors such as medical checkups were less strongly endorsed, which may reflect the higher trust demands of such activities. These findings resonate with prior reviews (Powell & Pring, 2020; Suarez-Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021) highlighting both the benefits and risks of health advice from influencers. Furthermore, research by Boerman (2020) and Casaló et al. (2018) shows that influencer recommendations can drive product adoption and health-related decision-making, particularly when authenticity is perceived.

## ***6.4 Broader Implications***

Finally, the fifth objective was to assess the broader role of influencers in shaping health communication. The findings emphasize that emotional connection is often more persuasive than technical expertise. From a Parasocial Interaction Theory perspective, audiences are motivated not only by information quality but also by the perceived authenticity and emotional openness of influencers. This has practical implications for health campaigns: collaborations with influencers who share genuine stories may be more impactful than relying solely on expert endorsements. At the same time, ethical concerns about misinformation remain pressing (Skafle et al., 2022), suggesting the need for careful regulation and strategic partnerships. These insights echo findings from Chen et al. (2021) and Sokolova & Kefi (2020), who warn that while influencers can promote healthier lifestyles, unregulated health claims may undermine public trust.

## ***6.5 Theoretical Implications***

This study extends Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI) into the contemporary context of social media influencers and health communication. Horton and Wohl (1956) originally proposed that audiences form one-sided but emotionally meaningful relationships with media figures, such as television hosts or celebrities. Our findings demonstrate that this process is equally relevant, if not more powerful, in the age of digital influencers. Specifically, the results showed that **emotional resonance was the strongest** mediator between influencers and adults' health behaviors, indicating that parasocial bonds are formed not through expertise or credibility alone, but primarily through storytelling, openness, and relatability. This suggests that PSI is evolving beyond traditional media contexts, as audiences now develop attachments to influencers who share everyday struggles and wellness journeys.

Furthermore, while credibility and trust were less influential, the continued strength of the direct pathway from influencers to health behavior shows that parasocial interaction can operate even in the absence of perceived expertise. This refines PSI by highlighting that emotional connection can outweigh rational evaluations when individuals adopt health behaviors. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by confirming that parasocial processes are a key mechanism through which influencers shape public health outcomes, bridging media psychology and health communication research.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the growing influence of social media on everyday health practices, showing that influencers play a central role in shaping how adults think about and adopt health-related behaviors. In today's digital environment, people often turn to online personalities not only for entertainment or lifestyle inspiration but also for guidance on diet, exercise, mental health, and preventive care. The findings suggest that influencers can serve as powerful voices in public health communication, especially when they share stories that feel authentic, relatable, and emotionally engaging.

While credibility and expertise remain important, the study indicates that people do not always prioritize these factors when deciding whether to act on an influencer's advice. Instead, emotional connection and personal resonance appear to be the key drivers of influence. This underscores the idea that audiences are drawn to influencers who seem approachable and genuine, and who share real experiences rather than polished perfection. Such parasocial connections—where followers feel a one-sided but meaningful bond—can significantly motivate positive health behaviors.

At the same time, the results remind us of the double-edged nature of this influence. Just as influencers can inspire healthier choices, they can also spread misinformation if their guidance is not grounded in reliable sources. This creates an important responsibility for both influencers and health communicators to balance relatability with accuracy.

Overall, the study shows that the impact of social media influencers on health is both profound and complex. Their power lies not only in the information they share but also in the emotional relationships they cultivate with their audiences. As social media continues to grow, these insights point to the need for thoughtful collaboration between health professionals and digital influencers to ensure that online influence leads to positive, informed, and sustainable health outcomes.

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