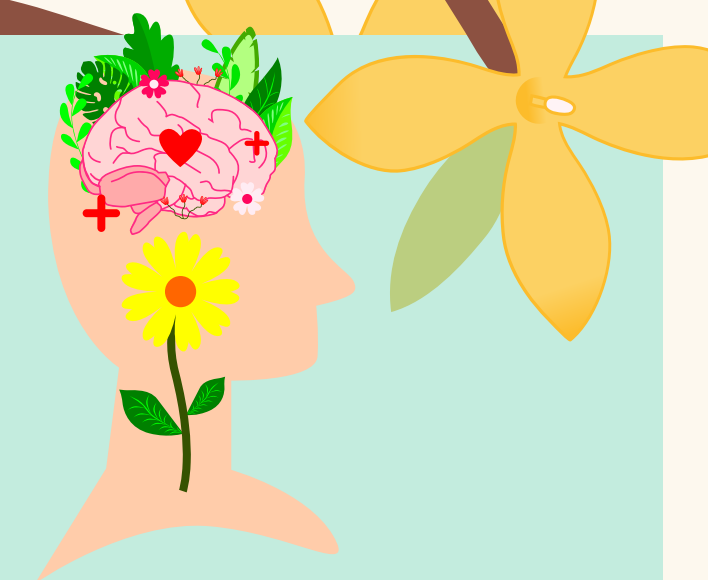# Deception in Wellness Influencer Marketing

Introduction

Influencer marketing has rapidly become one of the most persuasive forms of contemporary advertising, particularly within the growing wellness and protein supplement sector (Weismueller et al., 2020). Wellness influencers are often perceived as trustworthy, relatable, and credible sources of lifestyle guidance (Byrne et al., 2017). Their content blends personal storytelling with subtle commercial promotion, creating a unique persuasive power.

However, this increasing reliance on influencers has raised ethical concerns, including unqualified health advice, selective self-presentation, blurred sponsorship disclosure, and unrealistic body portrayals (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). While deception is widely studied in communication research, there remains a significant gap in understanding how deceptive tactics operate specifically within the wellness influencer space and why audiences continue to tolerate them (Mason, Wiley & Ames, 2018).

This study focuses on Generation Z women, who consume large amounts of Instagram wellness content and are therefore particularly exposed to these deceptive practices.

Research Problem

Despite the growing dominance of influencer marketing within the wellness and protein supplement industry, very little research has examined the specific types of deception used by wellness influencers. Existing studies tend to focus on whether deception occurs, rather than how it operates in different forms within influencer-led marketing.

Moreover, prior research often assumes that deceptive practices are motivated purely by self-interest or financial gain. This assumption overlooks the complex emotional, psychological, and relational dynamics that shape interactions between influencers and their audiences. As a result, there remains limited understanding of why consumers continue to accept deception, even when they recognise it.

Research Questions

1. How does deception manifest within the context of the wellness influencer space?
2. How do Gen Z perceive the intent behind deceptive strategies used by wellness influencers?
3. Why do Gen Z accept the practice of deception within wellness influencer marketing?

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist approach to explore how Generation Z experience and interpret deceptive wellness influencer content (Saunders et al., 2023). An inductive research strategy was used, allowing themes to emerge naturally from participant experiences rather than imposing predetermined assumptions.

A two-phase design was employed:
Digital Diaries – Participants documented real-time reactions to wellness influencer posts, capturing spontaneous perceptions of authenticity and persuasion.
Semi-Structured Interviews – These explored diary reflections in more depth, examining emotional responses, trust, and interpretations of deceptive strategies.

A non-probability sampling approach (convenience and judgement sampling) recruited Gen Z women who regularly engage with Instagram wellness content, aligning with the study's focus population Dissertation Submission May 2025.

Data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which enabled identification of recurring patterns in how participants recognised, interpreted, and rationalised deceptive practices within influencer marketing.

Key Findings

Analysis of the digital diaries and interviews revealed three dominant themes

Research Questions	Key Themes
How does deception manifest within the context of the wellness influencer space?	Equivocation Paltering Falsification Concealment The Information Manipulation Theory
How do Gen Z perceive the intent behind deceptive strategies used by wellness influencers?	Self-serving Deception and Image Management. Perceived altruism and mutually beneficial intentions in small Influencers Self-serving motives in large influencers
Why do Gen Z accept the practice of deception within wellness influencer marketing?	The pursuit of an idealized self Aspirational Pressure Emotional Vulnerability

1. Manufactured Authenticity
Influencers were widely perceived as relatable and "real," yet this authenticity was revealed to be strategically constructed. Participants described influencers as presenting a curated version of everyday life while simultaneously engaging in deceptive practices such as hidden sponsorships, selective disclosure, and exaggerated product claims. Although many recognised these tactics, perceived authenticity still acted as a powerful trust-building tool. Deception was often excused when influencers appeared "genuine," "kind," or "down to earth."

2. Sold on Insecurity
Influencer content frequently relied on idealised body imagery and transformation narratives linked to protein supplement use. This created aspirational pressure and intensified body comparison. Participants reported feeling inspired and motivated, but also emotionally vulnerable. Even when they knew images were edited or unrealistic, the emotional desire to achieve similar results reduced scepticism and increased acceptance of misleading claims.

3. Scale & Motive
As influencers grew in popularity and secured more partnerships, participants became increasingly aware of commercial motives behind their recommendations. Larger influencers were viewed as more profit-driven than smaller creators. However, this awareness did not reduce engagement; instead, participants developed a form of conditional trust, accepting deception as an expected element of influencer success and as the "price" of receiving free content.

Overall participants recognised deceptive practices but did not disengage from the influencer or their recommendations. Instead, deception was reframed as "harmless," "normal," or simply "part of social media," contributing to its continued acceptance.

> "This body is not realistic for a lot of people but I think companies use beautiful women to target young girls."

> "These people living the most amazing lives online, and it makes you feel, honestly, so bad inside you're like, why can't that be my life? Why can't that be me"

Conclusion
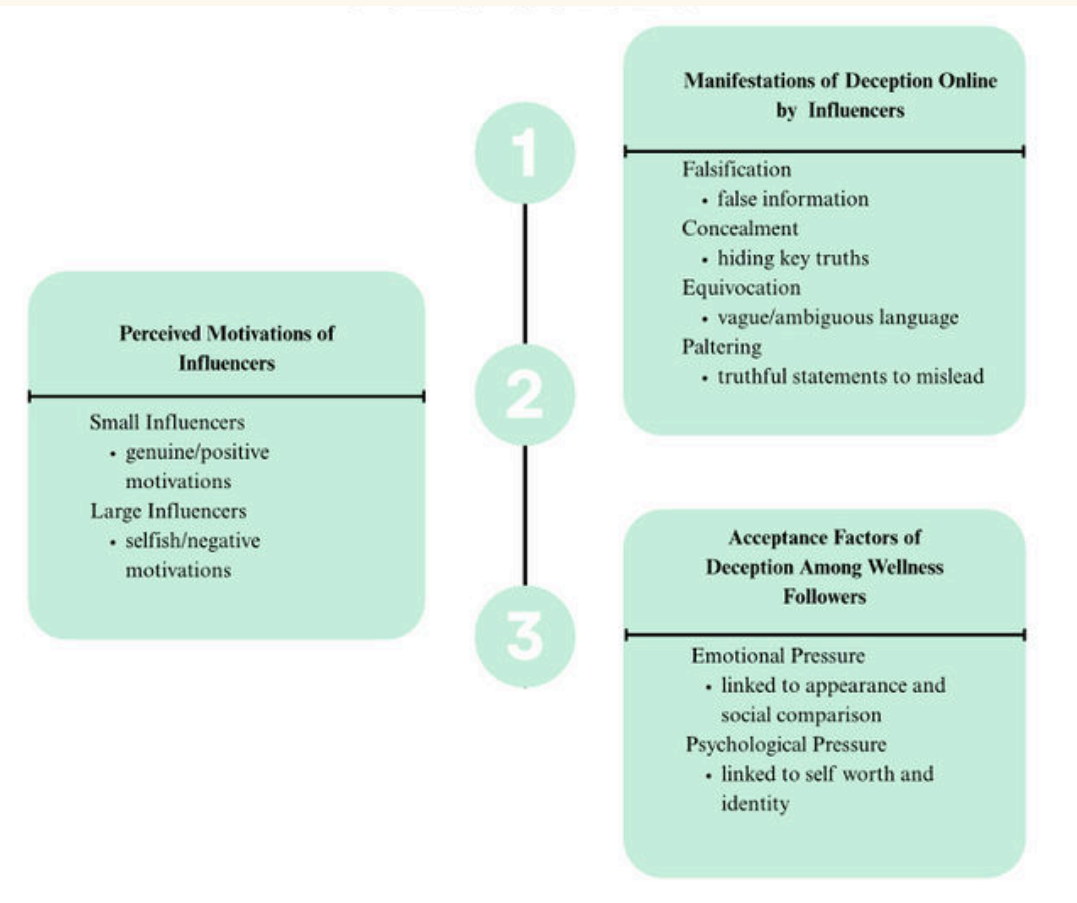
Deception emerges not as an occasional issue but as a normalised and embedded feature of wellness influencer marketing (Weismueller et al., 2020). Influencers act as hybrid communicators—simultaneously entertainers, advertisers, and pseudo-experts—which blurs ethical boundaries and makes persuasive intent difficult to detect (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). Emotional storytelling and carefully curated authenticity often outweigh factual accuracy, enabling misleading claims to remain influential (Byrne et al., 2017).

This study shows that Generation Z are not unaware of deception; instead, they display a complex, ambivalent awareness. Participants recognised tactics such as selective disclosure and exaggerated claims, yet continued to trust and engage with influencers. Their acceptance was shaped by:

- Emotional attachment and parasocial relationships (Rogers et al., 2017)
- Aspirational identification and idealised lifestyle appeal (Byrne et al., 2017)
- Social comparison, especially around body image (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022)
- Perceived authenticity, even when strategically constructed (Weismueller et al., 2020)

These dynamics reveal a broader "deception paradox," where misleading practices become both visible and tolerated (Serota, 2019). Deception is reframed as expected or harmless, allowing it to continue shaping wellness behaviours with minimal challenge. Overall, the findings highlight the powerful emotional and psychological mechanisms that enable deceptive wellness marketing to thrive. As influencer culture further blurs the boundaries between authenticity and advertising, audiences may become increasingly vulnerable to subtle forms of manipulation that feel normal, familiar, and socially acceptable.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should examine how AI-generated bodies, face filters, and deepfake imagery are transforming deception in wellness influencer marketing. As synthetic perfection becomes more realistic, the boundary between reality and fabrication may become increasingly difficult for consumers to detect, potentially intensifying body dissatisfaction, aspiration and trust in misleading product claims.

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