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The Role of Health Influencers in Shaping Clean and Healthy Living Behaviors in the Digital Era

Siti Maisyaroh Bakti Pertiwi[1]*, Asmalinda SY[2], & Rahmi Hidayanti[3]
[1]*Universitas Wahid Hasyim, Indonesa, [2]Universitas Negeri Padang, Indonesia, [3]Poltekkes Kemenkes Padang, Indonesia
*Co e-mail: smbaktipertiwi16@gmail.com[1]

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media has transformed health communication patterns and increased the influence of digital opinion leaders in shaping health-related behaviors. Among these actors, health influencers have emerged as important sources of health information, particularly among university students who are highly exposed to digital platforms. However, empirical evidence regarding the role of health influencers in promoting Clean and Healthy Living Behavior (PHBS) in Indonesia remains limited. Purpose: This study aimed to examine the influence of health influencers on PHBS among university students in Padang City by analyzing four dimensions of influencer characteristics: credibility, attractiveness, relatability, and content exposure intensity. Methods: A quantitative explanatory survey was conducted involving 180 university students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression. Results: The findings revealed that perceptions of health influencers were generally high (mean = 4.19), while PHBS levels were also categorized as high (mean = 4.07). Regression analysis showed that all dimensions of health influencers significantly influenced PHBS both partially and simultaneously ($F = 42.875$; $p < 0.001$). Content exposure intensity emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.298$), followed by attractiveness, credibility, and relatability. Conclusion: The study highlights the strategic role of health influencers in promoting healthy behaviors and provides empirical evidence for developing more effective digital health communication strategies among young adults.

Keywords: *Health Influencer, Clean and Healthy Living Behavior, Social Media, Digital Health Communication*

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INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has brought significant changes to various aspects of people's lives, including public health. Increased internet penetration and social media usage have transformed how individuals access, understand, and respond to health information. Social media now serves not only as a means of communication but also as a primary platform for the rapid and widespread dissemination of health information (Sidabutar et al., 2024). This change marks a paradigm shift in health communication from conventional approaches to more interactive and participatory digital approaches.

Within this evolving digital environment, health influencers have emerged as prominent actors in disseminating health information. Health influencers are individuals who utilize social media to communicate health messages, share personal experiences, and promote specific health-related behaviors to their audiences. Their influence is often driven by perceived authenticity, relatability, and continuous engagement with followers, which differentiates them from traditional health communicators. Studies highlight that social influencers possess the capacity to shape health-related behaviors within their social networks, particularly when their communication is perceived as credible and consistent (Smit et al., 2022) .

The concept of clean and healthy living behaviors refers to a set of actions undertaken consciously to maintain and improve individual and community health. These behaviors include hygiene practices, healthy dietary habits, regular physical activity, and maintaining a clean environment. In the digital context, the promotion of such behaviors is increasingly mediated by online content, where users are exposed to repeated health messages in various formats such as videos, images, and interactive discussions. Social media facilitates not only the dissemination of information but also the formation of social norms and behavioral intentions related to health practices (Jia and Qi, 2024) .

Furthermore, the relationship between health influencers and audience behavior is often explained through psychological and social mechanisms, such as parasocial interaction and social influence. For example, recent research shows that exposure to virtual or digital health influencers can increase individuals' willingness to adopt preventive health behaviors, as audiences tend to develop perceived relationships and trust toward these figures (Chung, Wang and Meng, 2024) . This highlights how digital communication environments amplify the persuasive potential of influencers in shaping behavioral change.

In addition, systematic reviews emphasize that social media influencers can have both positive and negative impacts on health outcomes, depending on the quality and accuracy of the information shared. Influencers can effectively encourage behaviors such as healthy eating, exercise, and disease prevention, but they may also contribute to misinformation if content is not evidence-based (Powell and Pring, 2024) . This dual role underscores the growing importance of understanding how health influencers operate within the broader context of digital health communication.

Along with these developments, social media has become a primary channel for public health education. The interactive, real-time, and user-generated content characteristics of social

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media allow for a more dynamic exchange of information than conventional media. This makes social media an effective tool for improving health literacy, particularly among the younger generation, who have a high level of exposure to digital technology (Mustofa & Sani, 2024). Furthermore, easy and flexible access to health information contributes to changes in public information consumption patterns.

In this context, the phenomenon of influencers has emerged as a crucial actor in the digital ecosystem. Influencers are individuals who have the ability to influence audience opinions, attitudes, and behavior through content shared on social media. From a mass communication perspective, influencers can be positioned as digital opinion leaders, playing a role in disseminating information and shaping public perception (Ulya, 2024). The existence of influencers is increasingly relevant because the public tends to have high levels of trust in them, especially when the content they convey is perceived as authentic and relatable.

In particular, health influencers have become a growing phenomenon in recent years. They present a variety of content related to healthy lifestyles, diet, physical activity, and mental health. Their content is not only informative but also persuasive and based on personal experiences, making it more easily accepted by audiences (Rubiah et al., 2026). This demonstrates that health influencers have significant potential as agents of behavior change in the digital society.

The influence of health influencers on public behavior is inextricably linked to the persuasive communication strategies they employ. The use of personal narratives, engaging visualizations, and emotional engagement are crucial factors in increasing audience engagement. Furthermore, the intensity of exposure to health content on social media also contributes to increased knowledge, attitudes, and practices of healthy behaviors (Juanta et al., 2025). Thus, social media is not only a source of information but also a means of shaping behavior.

One form of health behavior focused on in this study is Clean and Healthy Living Behavior (PHBS). PHBS is a series of conscious actions taken to maintain personal and environmental health. PHBS implementation encompasses various aspects, such as personal hygiene, environmental sanitation, healthy eating patterns, and physical activity. PHBS plays a crucial role as a preventative measure in reducing disease rates and improving the community's quality of life (Mufidah et al., 2024).

However, the formation of healthy and clean behaviors is influenced not only by knowledge but also by social and environmental factors. In a digital context, social interactions on social media, including with influencers, can be a determining factor in changing health behaviors. Social learning theory explains that individuals tend to imitate the behavior observed by figures they deem credible and attractive. In this case, health influencers serve as behavioral models that can be observed and imitated by audiences.

Furthermore, the Health Belief Model (HBM) explains that the adoption of health behaviors is influenced by an individual's perception of risks, benefits, and barriers. Content delivered by health influencers can influence these perceptions, thus encouraging individuals to adopt healthy behaviors. Meanwhile, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) explains that the effectiveness of

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health messages is influenced by the persuasive channels used, whether central or peripheral. Influencers often utilize both channels to convey health messages.

Despite its immense potential, health communication through influencers also faces various challenges. One major issue is the prevalence of health misinformation and disinformation on social media. Not all influencers have a background in health education, so the quality and validity of the information conveyed can vary (Ulya, 2024). This has the potential to negatively impact the public if the information conveyed is inaccurate.

Furthermore, the potential for conflicts of interest in health product endorsements is also a significant issue. Influencers often promote certain products without sufficient scientific evidence, which can inappropriately influence audiences' health decisions. This situation highlights the gap between an influencer's popularity and their scientific credibility.

On the other hand, research on the influence of health influencers on healthy and clean living behaviors still has limitations. Most studies tend to focus on knowledge and attitudes, while studies examining concrete behavioral changes are relatively limited (Sidabutar et al., 2024). Furthermore, few studies integrate psychological, social, and digital aspects into a single, comprehensive analytical framework.

Although a number of studies have examined the effectiveness of social media in health promotion and the influence of influencers on health attitudes and behavioural intentions, the majority of studies still focus on aspects of knowledge, perception, or behavioural intention. Research specifically examining the multidimensional influence of health influencer characteristics on the implementation of Clean and Healthy Living Behaviours (PHBS) remains relatively limited, particularly in the context of Indonesian university students. Unlike previous research, this study integrates the four main dimensions of health influencers—credibility, attractiveness, relatability, and content exposure intensity—into a single analytical model to explain actual PHBS behaviour. Consequently, this study not only expands the application of Source Credibility Theory, the Health Belief Model (HBM), and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) within the context of digital health communication, but also provides empirical evidence regarding the mechanisms underlying the formation of health behaviour among digital native groups in Indonesia.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of the literature on digital health communication by demonstrating how influencer characteristics can serve as determinants of health behaviour. In practical terms, the findings of this study provide a basis for educational institutions, local governments and health organisations to design more effective social media-based health promotion strategies through collaboration with influencers who possess high levels of credibility and audience engagement.

Based on this description, this research is crucial to empirically examine the role of health influencers in shaping clean and healthy living behaviors in the digital era. This research is expected to contribute to the development of effective digital-based health communication strategies and serve as a basis for formulating health policies that are more adaptive to technological developments.

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METHODS

This study employs an explanatory quantitative design using a survey approach to analyse the influence of health influencers on students' Clean and Healthy Living Behaviours (PHBS) in the city of Padang. The study was conducted from January to March 2026, with the population comprising all active students at several higher education institutions in Padang City, namely Andalas University (35.6%), Padang State University (28.3%), Bung Hatta University (17.8%), Putra Indonesia YPTK University (10.0%), and other higher education institutions (8.3%).

The research sample comprised 180 respondents selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) active students, (2) aged at least 17 years, (3) active users of social media such as Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube, and (4) having accessed health influencer content within the last six months. The sample size met the recommendations of Hair et al., who suggest a minimum of 5–10 times the number of research indicators.

Data were collected using an online questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale. The health influencer variable was measured through the dimensions of credibility, attractiveness, relatability, and content exposure intensity, whilst PHBS was measured through the indicators of personal hygiene, healthy eating habits, physical activity, and environmental hygiene.

Prior to the main data collection, the instrument was tested for validity and reliability. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 26, employing descriptive statistics, validity and reliability tests, multiple linear regression, t-tests, F-tests, and the coefficient of determination (R^2).

This study has obtained ethical approval from the Wahid Hasyim University Health Research Ethics Committee under Number: 012/KEPK-FKM/II/2026. All respondents provided informed consent electronically prior to participating in the study.

RESULTS

1. Respondent Characteristics (General Descriptive)

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Characteristics	Category	Frequency (n=180)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Man	72	40.0
	Woman	108	60.0
Age	17–20 years	65	36.1
	21–23 years	92	51.1
	>23 years	23	12.8
Dominant Platform	Instagram	85	47.2
	TikTok	70	38.9
	YouTube	25	13.9
Access Intensity	>3 hours/day	110	61.1
	1–3 hours/day	55	30.6
	<1 hour/day	15	8.3

The majority of respondents were female (60%) and aged 21–23 (51.1%), indicating a predominance of the productive age group with high digital literacy. Instagram and TikTok were

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the primary platforms, indicating that the distribution of health influencer content is heavily concentrated in visual-based media. High access intensity (>3 hours/day) indicates significant exposure to digital content, including health content.

Table 2. of Instrument Validity Test Results

Variables	Number of Items	Range of r-count	r-table	Information
Credibility	5	0,621–0,812	0,361	Valid
Appeal	5	0,604–0,835	0,361	Valid
Proximity	5	0,587–0,799	0,361	Valid
Exposure Intensity	5	0,641–0,844	0,361	Valid
Healthy Living Practices	8	0,562–0,817	0,361	Valid

All items in the instrument had correlation coefficients higher than the table-specified r-value (0.361); consequently, all items were deemed valid and capable of accurately measuring the construct under investigation.

Table 3. of Reliability Test Results

Variables	Cronbach Alpha	Information
Credibility	0,842	Reliabel
Appeal	0,856	Reliabel
Proximity	0,819	Reliabel
Exposure Intensity	0,874	Reliabel
Healthy Living Practices	0,887	Reliabel

The Cronbach's alpha values for all variables were above 0.70, indicating that the instrument has excellent internal consistency and is suitable for use in further analysis.

2. Descriptive Statistics of Health Influencer Variables

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Health Influencer Variables

Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation	Category
Credibility	4.12	0.58	High
Attractiveness	4.25	0.52	Very high
Relatability	4.08	0.60	High
Exposure Intensity	4.30	0.55	Very high
Average Total	**4.19**	**0.56**	High

The average value of the health influencer variable was 4.19, indicating that respondents had a high perception of the influencer's role. The intensity of exposure (4.30) and attractiveness (4.25) were the dominant factors, indicating that frequency of interaction and visual/emotional aspects were key to the effectiveness of influencer communication. Credibility and closeness were also high, indicating trust and social identification between the audience and the influencer.

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3. Descriptive Statistics of Clean and Healthy Living Behavior (PHBS) Variables

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Clean and Healthy Living Behavior (PHBS) Variables

Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation	Category
Personal Hygiene	4.35	0.50	Very high
Healthy Eating Patterns	3.98	0.62	High
Physical Activity	3.85	0.70	High
Environmental Hygiene	4.10	0.57	High
Average Total	**4.07**	**0.60**	High

In general, respondents' PHBS levels were in the high category (mean = 4.07). The personal hygiene indicator had the highest score (4.35), indicating that personal behaviors are easier to adopt. Meanwhile, physical activity had the lowest score (3.85), indicating that behavioral changes requiring greater effort tend to be more difficult to achieve even when exposed to health content.

4. Inferential Analysis (Multiple Linear Regression Test)

a. Regression Model

Table 6. Regression Test Results (Partial Test / t-Test)

Variables	Coefficient (β)	t count	Sig. (p-value)	Information
(Constant)	1,215	3.102	0.002	Significant
Credibility	0.182	2,654	0.009	Significant
Attractiveness	0.205	2,981	0.003	Significant
Proximity	0.167	2,432	0.016	Significant
Exposure Intensity	0.298	4,215	0.000	Significant

- All independent variables have a significance value of $p < 0.05$, so they have a partial significant effect on PHBS.
- **Exposure intensity**has the most dominant influence ($\beta = 0.298$), indicating that the more frequently individuals are exposed to health influencer content, the higher the tendency to implement PHBS.
- **Attraction and credibility**also plays an important role in shaping behavior, which indicates that emotional aspects and trust are key factors in digital health communication.
- **Relatability**shows that the psychological relationship between audience and influencer also influences the adoption of healthy behavior.

b. Simultaneous Test (F Test)

Table 7. Simultaneous Test (F Test)

Model	F count	Sig. (p-value)	Information
Regression	42,875	0.000	Significant

The calculated F value of 42.875 with a significance level of 0.000 (<0.05) indicates that all independent variables simultaneously have a significant effect on PHBS. The regression model used is fit to explain the relationship between variables.

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DISCUSSION

1. Descriptive Statistics of Health Influencer Variables

The research findings indicate that health influencers have a significant influence on students' Clean and Healthy Living Behaviours (PHBS) in the city of Padang. All dimensions measured—namely credibility, appeal, relatability, and content exposure intensity—were found to contribute to an improvement in the respondents' health behaviours. These findings indicate that health influencers function not only as information disseminators but also as agents of behavioural change within the digital health communication ecosystem.

Among all the dimensions tested, content exposure intensity emerged as the most dominant factor influencing PHBS. This finding suggests that the frequency of students' interactions with health content plays a crucial role in the process of internalising health messages. The more frequently individuals are exposed to the same or similar messages, the greater the likelihood that these messages will be understood, remembered, and applied in daily life. From the perspective of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, behavioural learning occurs through repeated observation of models deemed relevant. Health influencers function as social models who provide examples of healthy behaviour that can be observed and emulated by the audience.

These findings can also be explained by the Health Belief Model (HBM), which emphasises the importance of cues to action in promoting changes in health behaviour. Health content consistently communicated by influencers has the potential to raise individuals' awareness of the benefits of healthy behaviour whilst strengthening their motivation to adopt it. Thus, repeated exposure to health content not only increases knowledge but also reinforces individuals' propensity to take preventive actions that support good health.

In addition to the intensity of exposure, the appeal and credibility of influencers also demonstrate a significant influence on PHBS. These results indicate that the effectiveness of health communication is determined not only by the content of the message but also by the characteristics of the communicator. According to Source Credibility Theory, messages originating from sources perceived as competent, trustworthy, and appealing tend to be more readily accepted by the audience. In the context of social media, which is dominated by visual content, the appeal of influencers acts as a factor that increases audience attention, whilst credibility is the factor that determines the level of trust in the information conveyed.

The results of this study are consistent with the findings of Barari et al. (2025), who state that an influencer's credibility and appeal are the primary mechanisms explaining the influence of influencers on changes in audience attitudes and behaviour. Similar findings were also reported by Zhao et al. (2024), who found that influencer attributes contribute significantly to the formation of attitudes and behavioural intentions by increasing the audience's trust in the messages received. In the context of health, the findings of Juanta et al. (2025) indicate that health education content delivered via social media is capable of promoting healthy lifestyle behaviours among the younger generation.

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However, the findings of this study do not fully align with the study by Sokolova and Perez (2021), which found that parasocial relationships with influencers only increased the intention to exercise without necessarily leading to actual behavioural change. This discrepancy in results suggests that the influence of influencers on health behaviour is heavily influenced by the characteristics of the targeted behaviour. Some health behaviours, such as maintaining personal hygiene, are relatively easier to adopt than those requiring more complex lifestyle changes, such as regular physical activity or dietary management. Therefore, the effectiveness of influencers in promoting behavioural change needs to be understood as a process influenced by various individual, social, and environmental factors.

In practical terms, the findings of this study suggest that digital health promotion strategies should not only focus on conveying accurate information, but also take into account the frequency of message dissemination and the characteristics of the influencers used. Collaboration between educational institutions, the government, and credible health influencers can be an effective approach to improving the adoption of healthy lifestyle practices among students. Furthermore, a stronger mechanism for verifying health information is required to ensure that content circulating on social media remains evidence-based and does not lead to health misinformation.

2. Descriptive Statistics of Clean and Healthy Living Behavior (PHBS) Variables

The research findings indicate that students' levels of Clean and Healthy Living Behaviour (PHBS) are generally in the high category. These findings suggest that the majority of respondents have adopted various health-promoting behaviours, including personal hygiene, environmental hygiene, healthy eating habits, and physical activity. This reflects a growing awareness of health issues amongst students who are growing up and developing in a digital environment with relatively broad access to information.

Nevertheless, there are variations in the level of implementation across each PHBS indicator. Personal hygiene was the aspect most widely practised by respondents, whilst physical activity was the indicator with the lowest uptake. This pattern suggests that not all forms of health behaviour have the same level of adoption. Behaviours that are simple, have long been habitual, and do not require additional resources tend to be easier to practise than those requiring a greater commitment of time, energy, and lifestyle changes.

These findings can be explained by the Health Belief Model (HBM), which states that individuals are more likely to adopt a behaviour when the perceived benefits outweigh the barriers faced. Maintaining personal hygiene generally involves relatively few barriers and offers benefits that are easily felt immediately, making it easier to adopt. Conversely, physical activity is often influenced by various barriers such as time constraints, academic workload, a lack of facilities, and low motivation to maintain an exercise routine in the long term.

The findings of this study are consistent with the research by Faridi and Puspita (2022), which found that personal hygiene behaviour is one of the easiest forms of healthy lifestyle practices to maintain among university students. These findings are also supported by Waluyani et al. (2022), who demonstrated that physical activity remains a major challenge in efforts to improve the health

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of adolescents and young adults. Although health literacy levels tend to be high, the consistent implementation of physical activity often faces various practical obstacles.

In the context of social media, the results of this study indicate that access to health information does not necessarily result in uniform behavioural change across all aspects of PHBS. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of the intention-behaviour gap, which explains the discrepancy between the intention to behave healthily and the actual practices carried out by individuals. Students may understand the importance of exercise or a healthy diet after accessing content from health influencers, but they may not necessarily be able to implement it consistently in their daily lives.

These findings have important implications for the development of digital health strategies. Health campaigns on social media need to be designed not only to improve knowledge and awareness, but also to help individuals overcome the barriers that hinder behavioural change. Health content that is practical, realistic, and relevant to students' lifestyles has the potential to be more effective than messages that are purely education-oriented. Furthermore, support from the campus environment through the provision of sports facilities, healthy canteens, and sustainable health promotion programmes is necessary to reinforce the impact of digital health communication.

Thus, the findings of this study indicate that social media and health influencers can act as catalysts for behavioural change; however, the successful and optimal implementation of healthy lifestyle practices still requires support from environmental factors, institutional policies, and broader social engagement. An approach that integrates digital communication with environmental interventions has the potential to yield more sustainable health behaviour changes among students.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that health influencers are a key factor in shaping students' Clean and Healthy Living Behaviours (CHLB) in the digital age. All dimensions of health influencers—namely credibility, appeal, rapport, and content exposure intensity—were found to have a significant impact on CHLB, with exposure intensity being the most dominant factor. These findings confirm that the effectiveness of digital health communication is determined not only by the quality of information, but also by the frequency of message delivery and the influencer's ability to build close relationships with their audience.

In practical terms, the research results provide a basis for the development of social media-based health promotion programmes through collaboration with credible influencers who have high levels of audience engagement. Educational institutions and the government can utilise this approach to strengthen PHBS campaigns among young people.

This study has several limitations, namely the use of a cross-sectional design, which is unable to explain causal relationships longitudinally; the use of self-reported data, which may introduce perceptual bias; and the limited scope of the sample, which was restricted to students in the city of Padang. Therefore, future research is recommended to employ a longitudinal or mixed-methods design and to involve a more diverse group of respondents in order to gain a more comprehensive

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understanding of the mechanisms through which health influencers influence changes in health behaviour.

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