

# The Commercialization of Mental Health on Social Media: Branding, Influencers, and Consumer Trust

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## Abstract

The commercialisation of mental well-being content on social media has created digital spaces where therapy culture, wellness promotion, influencer marketing, and emotional storytelling intersect with business strategy and consumer behaviour. Influencers, therapists, wellness brands and small-business owners have found ways to commercialise mental health conversations through sponsored content, courses, counselling, subscriptions, affiliate marketing and digital products on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and X (formerly Twitter).

This paper examines the commercialisation of mental health on social media and the relationships of branding, influencer culture, ethics and consumer trust in digital business ecosystems. The research examines parasocial relationships, realness, emotional branding and ethical risks of commercialised mental health communication.

**Keywords:** Commercialisation of mental health, social media influencers, digital marketing, consumer trust, influencer branding, and therapy culture.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Social media has progressed into a potent commercial ecosystem, where emotions, identities and experiences are commercialised through influencer branding and digital marketing. The dialogue around mental health, once limited to the healthcare setting, is now very visible online. Influencers are talking openly about anxiety, burnout, trauma and emotional wellbeing in an effort to build communities and drive involvement.

This conversion has opened up opportunities for awareness and availability, but it has also raised ethical concerns around manipulation, realness, emotional misuse, and commercialisation.

In recent years, mental health has moved from being a largely clinical and private concern to a highly visible and widely addressed topic in the digital public sphere. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) have played a central role in this evolution. What was once confined to therapy rooms, academic journals, and medical institutions is now usually shared through short videos, personal stories, motivational content, and influencer-led discussions. While this increased visibility has contributed to reducing stigma and promotes openness, it has also led to an emerging and complex phenomenon: the commercialisation of mental health.

The commercialisation of mental health on social media refers to the process by which psychological well-being, emotional struggles, and therapeutic language are reshaped into marketable content, products, and

brand identities. In this ecosystem, mental health is not only discussed but also packaged, branded, and sold. Influencers, wellness coaches, mental health activists and even businesses increasingly use mental health narratives to build audiences, promote involvement, and generate revenue. This includes sponsored content for self-help apps, online therapy platforms, wellness journals, mindfulness products, courses on emotional healing, and subscription-based mental health services. As a result, mental health discourse has become deeply interlinked with digital marketing strategies and consumer culture.

One of the most significant drivers of this commercialisation is the rise of social media influencers. Influencers occupy a unique position between personal storytelling and professional branding. Many share their lived experiences with anxiety, depression, burnout, or trauma, often presenting themselves as relatable figures who “understand” mental health struggles. This originality is a key factor in building trust with audiences. However, this trust is also what makes mental health content highly profitable. As influencers grow their platforms, they often coordinate with brands that align with wellness and self-care, turning personal sensitivity into a form of economic capital.

At the same time, social media platforms enhance content that is emotionally engaging, easily understandable, and highly shareable. Mental health content, particularly that which clarifies complex psychological experiences into relatable quotes, short validation, or viral explanations, fits well within these procedures. While this availability helps normalise interactions around mental health, it also risks generalisations. Complicated circumstances such as clinical depression, anxiety disorders, or trauma-related conditions may be reduced to overgeneralisations or curated content, potentially blurring the line between lived experience and underlying reality.

Branding plays a significant role in this ecosystem. Mental health has gradually become part of lifestyle branding, where wellness is presented as an identity rather than a process. Terms such as "self-care", “healing journey”, "mindfulness", and “trauma healing” are repeatedly used in branding strategies that appeal to emotionally engaged consumers. Companies and creators often position their products as important tools for achieving emotional balance or personal growth. This branding not only sells products but also develops a narrative in which mental well-being is something that can be refined, acquired, and constantly improved through utilisation.

However, the development of mental health raises important ethical and psychological concerns. One major issue is the question of credibility and competence. While lived experience is valuable, not all content creators have formal training in psychology or mental healthcare. As a result, audiences may encounter advice that is well-intentioned but not clinically accurate or suitable for serious mental health conditions. This can lead to rumours, self-diagnosis, or delayed professional treatment.

Another concern is the impact on consumer trust. Although influencers often appear accessible and accountable, the presence of endorsement deals and commercial content can complicate the boundary between genuine support and commercial interest. Audiences may struggle to differentiate between self-advocacy and paid promotion, especially when mental health opinions are deeply integrated in storytelling. This raises questions about whether trust in mental health messaging is being shaped by emotional connection rather than accuracy.

Moreover, the glamorisation of mental health on social media can help to normalise suffering in motivating and problematic ways. On the other hand, the idea of seeing other people talking about similar struggles could make people feel less alone. There is also a risk of idealising distress, or glorifying mental health issues. This may result in a minimisation of clinical conditions and a culture of utilisation of emotional pain as content.

This research paper examines the combination of branding, influencer culture, and consumer trust in the commercialisation of mental health on social media. The project seeks to understand how mental health narratives are created, shared and sponsored in digital spaces and how they shape public understanding of psychological well-being. This paper aims to critically discuss the benefits and risks of this fast-moving phenomenon, looking at the role of influencers, platforms and business organisations.

Eventually, social media has certainly contributed to raising awareness and openness around mental health, but it has also commercialised psychological well-being in the attention economy. This study works in the tension between awareness and commercialisation, authenticity and marketing, and support and consumption.

### Research Objectives

1. To analyse the commercialisation of mental health content on social media.
2. To study the role of influencers in the promotion of mental health products and services.
3. To assess the effect of branding on consumer trust.
4. To study ethical concerns associated with influencer-led mental health communication.

### Chapter 2: Literature Review

Existing work suggests the growing role of influencers in shaping public understanding of mental health. Authenticity, emotional connection, and one-sided social interaction are suggested to improve influencer reliability and consumer trust.

Research also shows that wellness influencers often merge emotional storytelling with commercialisation strategies such as collaboration, associate marketing and digital products. Critics say the commercialisation threatens to blur the distinction between emotional support and advertising.

STEWART & RILEY Q. (2023). This study investigates consumer perceptions of mental health influencers on TikTok, revealing that while users generally view such influencers positively, they also remain sceptical about the credibility and accuracy of their advice. Despite these concerns, influencer content continues to shape users' mental health beliefs and behaviours, highlighting the need for stronger mental health communication guidelines on social media.

Emily Adeane et al. (2025). Social media influencers, with their large and loyal online audiences, increasingly shape conversations around mental health, especially among young people. This study explores how New Zealand-based influencers perceive and engage with mental health discussions on social media platforms.

Rachel Lan (2025). This study explores how the 2023 data privacy controversy surrounding BetterHelp changed the emotional marketing strategies of YouTube influencers, moving away from the personal vulnerability narrative to more distant, metrics-based messaging. It reveals the impact of reputational crises on the credibility of influencers, emotional branding, and consumer trust in the promotion of digital mental health.

Judith Lind & Anette Wickström. 2027. Your vocation is an example of how social media influencers impacted the mental health literacy of teenage girls. (2026). In this chapter, we look at the broader social impact of influencer marketing, beyond its commercial facets. We will discuss the positive contributions and pernicious effects of influencer marketing on health, sustainability, politics and social identity. On a macro-societal level, it critically examines the influence of influencer culture on public discourse, institutional trust and social norms; the wider social implications of influencer marketing outside of its commercial use; and discusses its positive and negative effects on the areas of health, sustainability,

politics, and social identity. At a macro-societal level, it critically examines the influence of influencer culture on public discourse, institutional trust and social norms.

### Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

This study applies the following theoretical frameworks to understand how mental health content is commercialised on social media and how influencer interaction shapes consumer understanding and trust. These theories help explain the psychological, emotional, and financial systems behind influencer culture.

- **Theory of Parasocial Interaction:** This theory explains how audiences develop one-sided emotional relationships with influencers through regular online interaction. Followers often feel personally connected to influencers, which increases emotional attachment and trust in their suggestions, including mental health advice and products.
- **Theory of Source Credibility:** Source reliability theory suggests that consumers are more likely to trust information from individuals they perceive as reliable, authentic, and knowledgeable. Influencers who appear relatable and emotionally transparent often gain stronger audience trust, even without professional mental health accreditation.
- **Theory of Emotional Branding:** Emotional branding focuses on how emotions are used to create strong consumer relationships with brands and online personas. Mental health influencers frequently use personal storytelling, sensitivity, and emotional transparency to build loyalty and increase audience engagement.
- **Theoretical Foundations of Digital Capitalism:** Digital capitalism explains how online platforms monetise user attention, engagement, and emotions. Social media processes reward content that engages people emotionally. This means influencers have to continuously churn out content that is very personal and emotional to get views and make money.

Collectively, these frameworks provide insight into how emotional engagement, digital influence, and perceived credibility impact consumer behaviour and trust in the online mental health industry.

### Chapter 4: Research Methodology

The research is carried out by qualitative secondary research methodology. The method allows the study to critically examine existing literature, digital trends and media discussions surrounding the commercialisation of mental health on social media.

Data for the study were gathered from several reliable and scholarly sources, such as

- Refereed journal articles
- Books for the academy
- Books for academics
- Studies show
- Good digital and news sources, trusted media outlets
- Good digital and news sources

We applied a qualitative content analysis to identify repeating themes and patterns. Secondary research was selected, as it can provide a wide picture of up-to-date trends in both influencer marketing and digital mental health culture. It also allows the researcher to see different perceptions of psychology, marketing, media studies and digital communication, because it gives a broad understanding of current trends in influencer marketing and digital mental health culture. It also enables the researcher to look at different views of psychology, marketing, media studies, and digital communication.

### **Chapter 5: Commercialization of Mental Health**

Mental health is increasingly a digital product in the economy of social media. Influencers often commercialise through storytelling by sharing emotional stories, selling personal experiences, struggles, and recovery stories as marketable content.

Common commercialisation techniques include:

- Sponsored Stories
- Coaching Services
- Social media likes content that is highly relatable and emotionally engaging. This increases the likelihood of influencers sharing more personal experiences to maintain the visibility and interest of their content to their audience. Emotional sensitivity is thus a marketing tool in itself on digital platforms.

Social media systems reward highly relatable and emotionally engaging content. This means influencers are rewarded to share more personal experiences to keep their content visible and engaging to their audience. Emotional sensitivity, therefore, is a marketing asset in its own right on digital platforms.

There are advantages and disadvantages to the commercialisation of mental health. It has raised awareness and helped in normalising mental health but has also raised concerns about the exploitation of emotional struggles for profit and online clout.

### **Chapter 6: Influencers and Consumer Confidence**

Trust from the consumer is key in influencer marketing, especially for mental health content. People are more likely to connect with influencers who appear

- Real
- Identify
- Open-mindedness
- Emotionally transparent

They talk with their followers in informal ways that are emotionally relatable. Many followers find influencers to be more approachable and reliable than traditional institutions. It builds stronger emotional bonds, making their advice and recommendations more powerful.

But the more commercial mental health content has also cultivated a more unconvinced audience. As consumers get savvier about paid promotions and other covert advertising, like sponsored collaborations, some followers are beginning to question the reliability and intent behind influencer content.

This tension between emotional truth and commercial profit significantly affects consumer trust and relationships with the audience in the long term.

### **Chapter 7 Ethical Issues**

There are a whole host of ethical issues with all the increase of mental health content on social media. Not all influencers are professionals in the field of mental health, so it is easy to mislead and generalise a large audience.

They can inadvertently promote self-assessment, false hopes of recovery or unhealthy coping strategies. Sometimes the content is emotionally influencing for the sake of engagement and profit, not support and education. may unconsciously promote self-assessment, unrealistic recovery expectations and unhealthy coping mechanisms.

These issues highlight the need for greater digital ethics, transparency in sponsorship revelation, platform

responsibility, and stricter regulation of online mental health communication.

### **Chapter 8: Discussion**

The findings indicate that mental health content functions within broader systems of digital capitalism, where emotional engagement generates economic value. Influencers use emotional openness and relatability to attract audiences, while platforms commercialise user attention through advertising and automated content promotion.

Social media has helped normalise conversations around mental health and increased public awareness, especially among younger audiences. However, the commercialisation of these discussions often creates tension between providing genuine support and pursuing a commercial engagement strategy.

The study also exhibits that influencer culture has transformed traditional ideas of authority and expertise. Consumers increasingly rely on digital creators for emotional guidance, even when professional credibility may be limited. This reflects broader transformations in trust, communication, and digital consumer behaviour.

### **Chapter 9: Recommendations**

The study's findings lead to several recommendations that can improve ethical standards and consumer rights in online mental health spaces.

Recommendations are:

- Transparent sponsorship disclosures
- Ethical influencer guidelines
- More reliable platform moderation
- Consumer digital literacy initiatives
- Evidence-based communication on mental health

Social media companies need to do a better job of fighting inaccurate information on mental health and labelling ads as ads. Encourage influencers to work with licensed professionals to ensure that their communications are accurate and responsible.

Digital literacy programmes can also empower consumers to carefully review online mental health information, to recognise commercial motives, and to make informed choices about the content they consume.

### **Chapter 10: Conclusion**

The commercialisation of mental health on social media is a symptom of major changes in digital culture, influencer marketing and online consumer behaviour. Social media has also helped to reduce stigma and promote emotional transparency, making it easier to find and access discussions on mental health.

At the same time, the increasing use of branding, sponsorships and emotional marketing has raised serious questions about originality, ethics and consumer trust. The research looks at the relationship between emotional support and commercial profit-making in influencer culture.

To create healthier and more trustworthy online environments, we need ethical transparency, evidence-based communication, enhanced digital governance and better consumer digital literacy. Future research should continue to investigate the long-term psychological and societal impacts of the commercialisation of mental health in digital spaces.

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