

The Influencer Effect:
Exploring the persuasive communication tactics of social media influencers in the health
and wellness industry

by

Deborah Deutsch

Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

With the emergence of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, social media influencers (SMIs) have been a growing source of information in the health and wellness industry. Through their creative, informative, and appealing content, SMIs have the innate ability to reach and attain a large following on social media platforms. The purpose of this study is to ascertain an understanding of the persuasive tactics employed by SMIs in the creation and dissemination of information in the health and wellness industry. Using the theoretical framework of Aristotle's Rhetorical Appeals and Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, this qualitative study seeks to examine the key persuasive tactics used by SMIs in the health and wellness industry. Using content analysis, the social media content of SMIs was collected and analyzed to find emerging themes related to rhetorical appeals and narration. In addition, a comparative analysis of the persuasive tactics used by SMIs and subject-matter experts (SMEs) was conducted. Findings showed that SMIs rely heavily on appeals that allow them to present themselves as credible, relatable, and similar to their followers; SMEs rely strongly on the logos appeal using technical language, memes, and textual graphics to educate the audience. Through this study, using the findings of the content and comparative analysis, a list of best practices of key persuasive tactics has been established to enable SMEs to be more effective in encouraging online users to adopt health information.

Keywords: social media influencer, pathos, logos

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Jason. Words will never be able to express how grateful I am for your continued support through every new endeavor and new goal I continue to come up with. Thank you for always letting me chase my dreams, never questioning them, even when they seem absurd. Most importantly, thank you for supporting me throughout this entire process and providing me the opportunity to do this as a full-time student. I am eternally grateful for your love, encouragement, and unrelenting belief in me.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	16
Overview	16
Background	18
The Rise of the Social Media Influencer	21
Clarifying the Literature Gap	25
Situation to Self	28
Problem Statement	30
Purpose Statement	31
Significance of the Study	32
Empirical Significance	32
Theoretical Significance	32
Practical Significance	33
Research Questions	34
Biblical Perspective	34
Definitions	35
Summary	36
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	38
Overview	38
Situation to Communication Tradition	39
Craig's Seven Traditions of Communication.....	40
Theoretical Framework.....	41

Rhetorical Tradition	41
Related Literature	43
Persuasion	43
Persuasion in Health Communications	44
Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle	47
Ethos	49
Pathos	56
Logos	61
A Critical Evaluation of Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle in Health Communications	66
Narrative Paradigm	68
Narration and the Influencer Effect	71
A Critical Evaluation of Narrative Theory in Health Communications	73
Criticism of the Narrative Paradigm	75
Summary	77
Purpose Revisited	79
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS	81
Overview	81
Research Method and Design	82
Research Questions	83
Setting	84
Participants	85
Researcher's Role	89

Data Collection	90
Data Analysis	92
Trustworthiness	96
Credibility	97
Triangulation	97
Negative Case Analysis	98
Persistent Observation	98
Confirmability Audits	99
Audit Trail	99
Reflexivity	99
Transferability	99
Ethical Considerations	100
Summary	101
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS	103
Overview	103
Participants	104
Hybrid Participants	107
Content Analysis Results	107
Research Questions Findings	109
Ethos	110
Expertise	110
Trustworthiness	111

	10
Character.....	112
Attractiveness	113
Homophily	114
Pathos.....	114
Psychological Connectedness.....	115
Parasocial Relationships	116
Engagement	117
Logos	122
Clear and Structured Content	122
Mythos	123
Rhetorical Appeals Used by SMEs.....	126
Comparison of SMI and SME Use of the Ethos Appeal	128
Validity of Judgement	130
Consistency of Content Creation.....	131
Comparison of SMI and SME Use of the Pathos Appeal.....	131
Psychological Connectedness.....	131
Parasocial Relationships	132
Engagement	133
Comparison of SMI and SME Use of the Logos Appeal	134
Deductive Reasoning.....	134
Vocabulary	135
Visual Arrangement	136

Figure 16.....	137
Example of a branded meme by an SME	137
Comparison of SMI and SME Use of the Mythos Appeal	138
Summary.....	138
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION	140
Overview	140
Summary of Findings	142
Discussion.....	144
Persuasion through the Ethos Appeal	145
Persuasion through the Pathos Appeal.....	147
Persuasion through the Logos Appeal	149
Persuasion through Narration	149
Differences in the use of Rhetorical Appeals between SMIs and SMEs.....	150
Implications	152
Methodological Implications.....	152
Practical Implications	154
Delimitations and Limitations	155
Delimitations	155
Determining the Selection and Size of the Sample	155
Selection of Instagram as an Observed Social Media Platform	156
Time Frame for Data Collection.....	156
Limitations.....	156

Lack of SMEs Actively Using Social Media.....	156
Curated Nature of Social Media	157
TikTok.....	157
Additional Social Media Platforms	158
Future Research	158
Reflexivity	160
Summary.....	161
REFERENCES	163

List of Tables

Table 1 Group A: Social Media Influencers	87
Table 2 Group B: Subject-Matter Experts	88
Table 3 Template for Data Collection.....	93
Table 4 Data Collection (General Observation)	94
Table 5 Rhetorical Analysis (Coding)	96
Table 6 Genders of Participants (SMIs)	105
Table 7 Average Age of SMI Participants by Gender	106
Table 8 Nationality of SMI Sample	106
Table 9 Genders of Participants (SMEs)	107
Table 10 Rhetorical Analysis	109
Table 11 Examples of Vocabulary Used by SMIs	122
Table 12 Hashtags Commonly Used by SMIs.....	122
Table 13 Comparative Analysis of the Use of Rhetorical Appeals between SMIs and SMEs	128

List of Figures

Figure 1 Example of Online Content Created by the CDC	46
Figure 2 Example of Content Created by an SMI	47
Figure 3 Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle	49
Figure 4 Example of a Meme Posted by an Industry Organization.....	65
Figure 5 Example of a Meme Posted by an SME.....	65
Figure 6 Rhetorical Appeals Used by SMIs	109
Figure 7 Example of the Use of Logos by SMI6.....	123
Figure 8 Example of the Use of Logos by SMI12*.....	123
Figure 9 Rhetorical Appeals Used by SMEs	126
Figure 10 Most Reoccurring Persuasive Tactics by SMIs.....	128
Figure 11 Most Reoccurring Persuasive Tactics by SMEs.....	128
Figure 12 Profile summary of an SMI.....	129
Figure 13 Profile Summary of an SME	129
Figure 14 Screenshot of an SME Instagram Page	136
Figure 15 Screenshot of an SME Instagram Page	136
Figure 16 Example of a Branded Meme by an SME.....	137
Figure 17 Example of a Branded Meme by an SME.....	137

List of Abbreviations

Center for Disease Control (CDC)

Public Service Announcement (PSA)

PubMed Identifier (PUMID)

Social media influencers (SMI)

Subject-matter expert (SME)

Video blog (VLOG)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

In May of 2022, Kim Kardashian, a reality star and one of social media's most prominent influencers, told the world that she lost 16 pounds in three weeks to fit into one of Marilyn Monroe's iconic gowns. She stated, "I would wear a sauna suit twice a day, run on the treadmill, completely cut out all sugar and all carbs, and just eat the cleanest veggies and protein" (Hines & Abrahamson, 2022). Not only did this spark vast interest from individuals seeking to lose weight, but it also led to an onslaught of criticism from health and wellness experts, sparking concerns about not only the physical effects for individuals who copy this weight-loss method but also potential mental health issues as well. Catherine Varney, a board-certified obesity specialist at UVA Health stated that "normalizing this behavior by indirect promotion in the media is harmful" (Davis, 2022).

Social media influencers (SIMs) like the Kardashians have revolutionized the creation and utilization of health information to influence individuals in changing their behaviors and attitudes. Research indicates that 43% of social media users turn to influencers for advice on lifestyle choices, 37% for insights into well-being, and 30% for guidance on fitness (Du-plaga, 2020). Furthermore, a study on influencer marketing revealed that a whopping 92% of social media users place more trust in influencers compared to traditional marketing channels (Eyal, 2018; Kim & Kim, 2021). Despite the fact that many of these influencers may lack the formal education, experience, and credentials to offer health and wellness advice, their substantial following has conferred them with credibility, demonstrating the effectiveness of their persuasive communication methods.

Nonetheless, this practice continues to attract criticism from experts in the health and wellness field (Hendry, Hartung, & Welch, 2021). These subject-matter experts (SMEs) often view social media influencers (SMIs) as unreliable and inadequately qualified sources of health education. Some health influencers are seen as using social media to promote unconventional and occasionally controversial ideas about health and medicine (Zou, Zhang, & Tang, 2021, p.1).

Despite the reservations and disapproval from SMEs, the utilization of influencers in the promotion of health and wellness, as well as for marketing products and campaigns, remains an effective strategy for targeting and persuading young adults, who are a primary audience for these influencers (Duplaga, 2020). Through their personal content creation, interpersonal communication skills, and their ability to come across as relatable, authentic, and trustworthy, young adults consistently turn to SMIs as a source of information on a variety of topics, particularly in the realm of health and wellness. Over the past decade, SMIs have demonstrated themselves as a contemporary and efficient method for boosting engagement and convincing audiences (Borchers, 2019; Gupta et al., 2021; Kostygina et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2017). Despite criticisms from SMEs, it is essential to recognize the effectiveness of the communication methods employed by SMIs and consider them as an alternative messaging strategy for SMEs and health and wellness organizations worldwide.

This study aims to explore the persuasive tactics employed by SMIs to influence their followers in adopting health information. It will also use theoretical frameworks like Aristotle's rhetorical triangle and Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm theory to gain a better understanding of how both SMIs and SMEs use rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, and logos) in their social media

posts. Additionally, this study will examine how the skillful use of storytelling (mythos) is employed by SMIs as an effective persuasive tool in health communications.

In Chapter One, we will provide background information on the issue, defining social media influencers and their impact on health communication. We will also acknowledge the current gaps in the existing literature. The self-situation will be introduced to validate the author's background, existing biases, and motivations for choosing this research topic. Furthermore, we will clearly outline the problem, purpose, and significance statements. Research questions will be provided to establish the study's structure and purpose. Finally, a biblical perspective will be presented to demonstrate the relevance of this topic to the story of Jesus and His disciples, who sought to communicate the word of God despite disapproval from the Pharisees. This serves to highlight that our most influential figure has always been and continues to be Jesus Christ.

Background

This study will provide a thorough understanding of the role of social media and SMIs in health communications. It will provide a historical context of the health and wellness industry as it relates to the evolution of influencers, the impact of social media and SMIs on health communications, and explore the effects of SMIs on the promotion of health and wellness information

The Original (OG) Influencers

Over the last 70 years, the evolution of the fitness influencer has transformed how health and wellness information is developed and used to persuade individuals to adopt a healthy lifestyle. With the introduction of television, in 1951, Jack Lalanne, known as the “Godfather of Fitness”, starred in the first televised fitness show, keeping America entertained and working out for over 34 years (Brooks, 2009).

Industry experts credit LaLanne with several pioneering achievements in the fitness realm. He was the first to host a nationwide exercise television program and educate the public on the significance of combining exercise and nutrition. LaLanne also holds the distinction of creating various pieces of gym equipment that remain fixtures in modern gyms, including the leg extension machine, weight selector machines, and machines with cables and pulleys. Additionally, he's recognized for founding the first health club in the United States (Goldman, 2009). LaLanne's charismatic personality and his engagement with the American public played a significant role in advancing the promotion of health and wellness, setting the stage for future influencers.

By the 1980s, the ubiquity of video cassette recorders (VCRs) in American households gave rise to the emergence of fitness stars like Richard Simmons. Much like LaLanne, Richard Simmons harnessed the power of television and video to encourage the public to adopt healthier lifestyles. According to Richard Simmons' website, over the past four decades, he has created 65 fitness videos, with sales exceeding 20 million copies, including the iconic "Sweating to the Oldies." Simmons not only motivated people to embrace healthy living but also initiated a revolution in fitness communication, inspiring other fitness experts such as Denise Austin, Tamilee Webb, and others to enter the scene and continue promoting healthy behaviors.

Over the last 30 years, the landscape of fitness influencers underwent another transformation. With the advent of the internet and social media platforms, individuals with internet access gained the ability to share information with a global audience. Fitness professionals used platforms like YouTube to provide educational content and workout videos. Celebrities leveraged social media to endorse health and wellness products. Fitness enthusiasts from around the world

seized the opportunity to establish themselves as influencers, contributing to the development and dissemination of health communications.

Social Media's Impact on Health Communications

Social media has proven to be a powerful medium in actively reaching, influencing, and changing the health and wellness of individuals worldwide (Dunlop et al., 2016; Goodyear et al., 2019; Goodyear et al., 2021). According to recent statistics, nearly 90% of adults in the United States have used social media platforms to search for health information (Stone, 2021). Through social media, how we communicate, collaborate, consume, and create content has been fundamentally transformed (Lynn et al., 2020). Like other industries, the health and wellness industry has been directly impacted by social media. Research has shown that due to the functionality of social media and its ability to reach and engage with a diverse population, it can be used to positively influence healthy behaviors and encourage behavioral change (Goodyear et al., 2021). Health-related benefits of social media include increased interaction; more available, shared, and tailored information; increased accessibility to health information; peer/social/emotional support; and health surveillance (p.2).

As it relates to communication methods, social media has shifted how the health industry communicates with the public. The emergence of social media has led to a systemic shift from traditional print and text-based communications toward communication via images and videos, allowing for anonymity, multi-platform interaction, and temporal content (Freeman et al, 2020; Goodyear et al, 2021; Goodyear & Armour, 2019; Highfield & Leaver, 2016). According to Gupta et al., 2021, “the true meaning of communicating via social media platforms is engagement and two-way interaction” (p.1469). Social media platforms help to shape the visibility of influ-

encers through algorithmic processes and user engagement, thus digitally mediating and reshaping health knowledge (Hendry et al., 2021).

Through social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, people around the globe have established digital communities through the sharing of multimodal communications, including pictures and videos. Platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, have reformed the means of interaction and communication online by becoming the medium of choice for obtaining information and providing an opportunity for discussion on any topic, including health (Cappella et al., 2014; Gupta et al., 2021). Research shows that young adults (18-25 years old) spend more time with media and technology than any other activity, preferring mediums that facilitate social interaction, such as Instagram (Coyne et al, 2013; Vaterlaus et al, 2015; Xenos & Foot, 2008) and TikTok. Instagram remains popular worldwide, with 140 million users in the United States, 120 million users in India, 95 million users in Brazil, 78 million users in Indonesia, 54 million users in Russia, 37 million users in Japan, 31 million users in Mexico, and many more in other countries around the globe (Bentley et al, 2021).

The Rise of the Social Media Influencer

With the rise in popularity of social media platforms as a source of health-related information, the creation and the rapid rise of SMIs ensued. SMIs are influential non-traditional celebrities who have become famous through their content and interaction on social media platforms (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). The role of the SMI ranges from content creator to marketer, to educator, creating content that is aimed at individuals with similar interests (Bentley et al., 2021). SMIs have also been defined as independent online endorsers

who can persuade and shape the attitudes and behaviors of their followers (Freberg et al., 2011; Gupta et al., 2021).

At the beginning of the social media evolution, influencers consisted of celebrities and sports stars who used social media to endorse products or their personal brand. As more individuals became active on social media and online communities were established, SMIs not only consisted of celebrities but of average citizens. Unlike celebrities, influencers are unique in that they are normal individuals who, through their social media activity, have been successful at “self-branding” themselves (Abidin, 2016; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Park et al, 2021; Schouten, Janssen, & Versapaget, 2020). As per Duplaga (2020), some SMIs may have the ability to achieve a status similar to that of a celebrity through the sharing of their daily routines and images with their following. Similar to celebrities, SMIs have established a personal brand, also called the ‘human brand’ (Kay et al., 2019, p.250). Followers aspire to have the same lifestyle as the influencer while also viewing them as touchable celebrities (Kim, 2021; Ki & Kim, 2019).

SMIs possess a unique capacity to connect with young adults in a manner that SMEs are unable to replicate. Despite the potential absence of the professional qualifications that SMEs typically hold, SMIs can cultivate close relationships with their followers by sharing personal details about their lives, thereby creating a sense of intimacy (Zou, Zhang, & Tang, 2021). By presenting themselves as "fitness experts" or "nutrition gurus" within their online persona, they establish a level of credibility with their audience. Aristotle's source credibility theory underscores three crucial factors for message effectiveness, which include the influencer's perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness to the audience (Dureau et al., 2022). Recent research suggests that, due to the natural quality of an influencer's content, they are deemed more

relatable and trustworthy by consumers and advertisers (Kim, 2021), positioning them as credible sources of information.

SMIs inherently excel in engaging and interacting with their followers, thus upholding their credibility and fostering loyalty among their audience. Their communication often takes on an informative, persuasive, and interactive nature (Zou, Zhang, & Tang, 2021), leading their followers to believe in their competence in providing reliable information and advice (Freberg et al., 2011; Gupta et al., 2021). As noted by Hendry et al. (2021), SMIs' capacity to amass and retain their following is intrinsically tied to their ability to project authenticity. This is achieved by what Hendry et al. (2021) classify as the “storying the everyday” (p.4). Through the habitual posting of the daily activities of their lives (storytelling), followers believe that the SMI appears more like them, thus enhancing their authenticity and relatability.

Effects of SMIS on the Health and Wellness Industry

Step into any gym and it is easy to see the “influencer effect”. Young adults are filming their workouts, taking gym selfies, and posting online to share their workouts with their followers. SMIs have been a motivational force behind the increase in young adults adopting the #fit-spiration lifestyle. Currently, young adults, ages 18-34, account for 60.6% of all gym memberships in the United States (Andre, 2022). Through the sharing of content related to their lifestyle and their engagement with their followers, research has shown that SMIs can encourage behavioral change and influence attitudes, as it relates to health and wellness (Durau, Diehl, & Terlutter, 2022).

The success of SMIs has led organizations, governing bodies, and corporations to pay influencers to endorse products, campaigns, and initiatives. As a case in point, during the COVID

pandemic, governing bodies around the globe wanted to ensure that information was successfully disseminated to the masses. For example, in Finland, the government worked with influencers to promote COVID-19 health and safety messaging, even classifying SMIs as “crucial actors to society alongside doctors, bus drivers, and grocery store owners” (Heikkila, 2020; Archer, Wolf, & Naloor, 2021, p.110). In 2021, to curb COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among young Americans, the White House enlisted more than 50 SMIs, paying up to \$1,000 a month, to promote the vaccine to their followers (Lorenz, 2021). The use of influencers has been used as a supplement to industry experts as they have proven to be more successful at reaching a larger audience. According to Kay et al. (2019), industry experts assert that SMI’s success at engaging their audience is the primary reason for the success of influencer-endorsed campaigns.

While SMIs have the unique ability to not only target their audience but actively maintain their attention and loyalty, there is much debate about the overall effect they have on health communications. Critics question the credibility and validity of the information that is shared. Due to the lack of regulation on the dissemination of health and wellness information, health information shared on social media is not subjected to the same degree of quality control by industry experts (Lynn et al., 2020; Sinapuelas & Ho, 2019). This allows for the opportunity for influencers to create content and disseminate false and, at times, harmful information. Research has shown that through the promotion of health misinformation and faddism (i.e. fad diets), individuals will delay or fail to seek medical treatment (Ayoob et al., 2002; Lynn et al., 2020; Vestergaard, 2019), possibly proving deadly in some instances. In many cases, according to Lynn et al. (2020), the information shared is often lacking accepted scientific evidence or is contrary to industry standards, and, at times, deceptive, unethical, and misleading.

Furthermore, the validation of the credibility of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) is notably lacking, giving rise to challenges within the industry. For instance, in Australia, the Federal Health Department initiated the #GirlsMakeYourMove campaign to encourage physical activity among young women. As part of the communication strategy, paid SMIs were employed to promote the campaign. However, due to the absence of stringent verification and background checks on these influencers, it was revealed that some of them had also accepted payment for endorsing alcoholic beverages and promoting unhealthy weight loss products and regimens (Bennett, 2018). This controversy resulted in public backlash, the prohibition of influencer use by government agencies, and a decision to utilize health and government spokespersons as primary online influencers (Archer, Wolf, & Nalloor, 2021).

While SMIs may not hold the same professional endorsements as Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) in the health and wellness sector, they have successfully captured the attention and endorsement of young adults. Currently, there exists a lack of regulation governing the information disseminated by SMIs and a deficiency in processes for verifying their qualifications, allowing for the continued, unrestricted dissemination of both information and misinformation. Consequently, SMEs, industry regulators, and global health organizations must implement more effective strategies in the development and dissemination of health communications to counteract the proliferation of misinformation.

Clarifying the Literature Gap

The landscape of digital communication has evolved rapidly in the last 15 years, resulting in a substantial increase in literature on this subject. The emergence of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) is a relatively recent concept, particularly in the context of communication studies. It

wasn't until 2013, when Instagram introduced its paid advertisement feature, that companies and organizations gained the ability to collaborate with influencers for branding purposes, allowing SMIs to be compensated for promoting products they genuinely enjoyed (Weinstein, 2021). This development significantly boosted the popularity of SMIs among consumers seeking information in specific areas of interest. While research has extensively explored the marketing aspects of influencers, there remains limited research on the specific communication strategies employed by SMIs, especially in the realm of health communications.

Existing research primarily focuses on assessing the marketing advantages and the influence of SMIs on consumers' purchasing behaviors, rather than on understanding their impact on behavioral changes among their followers (Duplaga, 2020). From a marketing perspective, while there is substantial research on branding, celebrity endorsements, and influencer marketing, there's a significant gap in the literature concerning SMIs and their role in the health and wellness industry. Research on the public's inclination to follow SMIs' advice and their attitudes toward health-related information shared by SMIs is scarce (Gupta et al., 2021). Specifically, in the realm of healthy nutrition, the utilization of SMIs in marketing efforts is notably under-explored (Folkvord et al., 2020). Although literature exists about SMIs from a marketing perspective in the fitness domain, limited research delves into SMIs from a strictly behavioral and communicative angle.

Moreover, in the context of rhetoric within health communications, there's an extensive body of research on persuasion, particularly regarding behavioral and attitude changes. Nevertheless, there's a shortage of literature, especially in the digital media context, concerning the use

of rhetoric in the domain of SMIs (Gupta et al., 2021). This research aims to bridge the gap between SMIs and the application of rhetoric in health and wellness.

Regarding the information disseminated by SMIs, while evidence exists about influencer-generated misinformation, this particular area remains understudied. Marks, DeFoe, and Collett (2020) note that SMIs often convey explicit and implicit health messaging on social media that promotes false assumptions, often unbeknownst to their followers. Although this study does not center on misinformation, it acknowledges the influence of influencers on health communications and highlights an area that demands more exploration by researchers.

Furthermore, there is a considerable gap in the literature concerning a comparison of the communication methods between SMIs and Subject Matter Experts (SMEs). Presently, there is a lack of guidance for SMEs, including policymakers, professionals, or organizations, on how to effectively utilize social media, especially within the health and wellness industry (Goodyear et al., 2021). While there is limited information on the communicative methods of SMEs, recent research has focused on the public's mistrust of SMEs, a sentiment that has been exacerbated by the response of public health officials during the COVID-19 pandemic. To gain a comprehensive understanding of SMIs' communication methods, it is imperative to comprehend how they can fill the gaps left by SMEs in their endeavors to disseminate health information.

The relatively new phenomenon of SMIs is a significant reason for the gaps in the existing literature. In an era where digital technology plays a pivotal role in communication, ongoing studies are essential to examine various sources of information, including the use of SMIs in disseminating health information. This proposed study aims to address the gaps in the current literature related to SMIs as communicators and offers an opportunity to explore the impact that SMIs

have on health communications. It also seeks to uncover lessons from their communication methods that could enhance the effectiveness of SMEs in reaching a broader audience.

Situation to Self

At the age of 15, I was introduced to my inaugural fitness influencer, Gilad Janklowicz, the star of a daily morning television show known as "Bodies in Motion." As an adolescent grappling with the weight changes accompanying puberty, I sought a means to stay in shape during the summer break. Each morning, I tuned in to join Gilad and his team in a 30-minute workout. His routines were both challenging and enjoyable, providing valuable education and, most importantly, motivation. Gilad's interactions with his fellow cast members, including his mother, and his inspiring words to the audience cemented my loyalty. This experience equipped me with fundamental knowledge of exercise and strength training principles, elevating my self-confidence. In fact, it was this influence that steered me towards a successful career in the fitness and nutrition industry.

For 22 years, I enjoyed a fulfilling and thriving career as a fitness professional. I commenced my journey as an aerobics instructor at 21, earned my certification as a personal trainer three years later, and managed the largest fitness program for the Navy in Yokosuka, Japan, at the age of 32. My career culminated as the lead training instructor at Navy Fitness headquarters in Washington DC, where I educated military personnel worldwide. In this role, I encountered the impact of social media influencers and recognized the need for experts in the field to adapt their communication with young adults to remain relevant.

With the growing popularity of Social Media Influencers (SMIs), I confronted the challenge of addressing misinformation with my clients and students. Despite holding a graduate de-

gree in Exercise Science and amassing 22 years of industry experience, I found myself challenged by individuals who had acquired knowledge from the internet or SMIs. Serving as the lead instructor for Navy Fitness, it became my responsibility to ensure that sailors were well-versed in the scientific principles of exercise and nutrition and to counteract the effects of misinformation.

Now, as a researcher, I must rely on factual information while also adhering to the ontological assumption that recognizes the need to be open to multiple perspectives, as articulated by different individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With this research endeavor, my objective is to gain a comprehensive understanding of why younger fitness enthusiasts favor information from influencers over experts. To achieve this, I must employ an epistemological approach, seeking proximity to the participants in the study. By immersing myself in their environment, I can gain deeper insights into who they are and how fitness directly influences their lives.

From an axiological perspective, I pledge to uphold ethical standards throughout the research process. This requires acknowledging the value-driven nature of the study and reporting any values and biases that may influence it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For me, this is a deeply personal endeavor. While I appreciate the transformative influence of influencers on the fitness industry and their ability to attract broad audiences and promote healthy living habits among young adults, I harbor concerns about the substantial dissemination of misinformation online. This misinformation, in some instances, may be trivial, but in others, it can be perilous, especially in matters related to nutrition, hazardous exercise routines, and extreme fitness programs. Furthermore, as a former proprietor of a personal training business, I possess experience in crafting an online

persona to generate business and promote fitness and nutrition, as well as collaborating with numerous micro-influencers.

Even though I've retired from the industry, my passion for the current state and future of fitness, particularly in terms of communicating with young adults, remains fervent. Through this research, I aspire to aid my former colleagues and current and future health and wellness professionals in expanding their audience and extending their reach. My aim is to provide them with communication strategies to effectively engage with their audience, thereby fostering a loyal following. Lastly, I endeavor to illustrate the relevance of teamwork in successfully disseminating accurate and purposeful information to health and wellness enthusiasts. My ultimate goal is for this research to equip SMEs with a deeper understanding of SMIs. Rather than critiquing the communication methods of SMIs, they can draw lessons from them.

Problem Statement

The central issue at hand is the profound impact of SMIs as sources of health information for online users, which has resulted in a substantial transformation in the development and dissemination of health and wellness information. This shift has led to an excessive reliance on SMIs and a noticeable gap between SMEs in the health and wellness industry and their connection with online users. Research has revealed that younger segments of social media users find inspiration predominantly from influencer-generated posts (22% of Generation Z, compared to 6% of baby boomers) (Duplaga, 2020).

Despite the extensive educational and professional qualifications of SMEs in the field, they face challenges in engaging and resonating with young adults due to their current communi-

cation methods. It is observed that online users actively seek fitness and nutrition guidance from SMIs who are not bound by the same stringent publication standards and regulations as health experts (Hendry et al., 2021). In many instances, health information shared by SMIs gains traction and acceptance, even in the absence of scientific evidence (Lynn et al., 2020). To counteract the prevalence of misinformation, SMEs must find ways to enhance their persuasiveness in their communication and capture the attention of social media's online users.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study is to determine how and why SMIs are more persuasive in their efforts to communicate health information to online users in comparison to SMEs. For the purpose of this study, SMIs are defined as “individuals who have amassed a large following (100,000+ followers) through the sharing of information on social media”. SMEs are defined as “an individual who has a degree in higher education, professional experience in the field, and maintains required credentials for their respective industry”. This research aims to gather data by examining existing literature and conducting content analysis of the social media content generated by SMIs and SMEs. The objective is to describe and make comparisons regarding how SMIs and SMEs utilize rhetoric to communicate with their followers and the ways in which they construct meaning through their content. The anticipated outcome of this study is to enhance our comprehension of the effective communication strategies employed by accomplished SMIs. By identifying and analyzing these strategies, it is envisaged that a set of best practices can be formulated for SMEs within the health industry. These practices will facilitate improved engagement and interaction with their audience.

Significance of the Study

This study will provide insight into the persuasive appeal that SMIs have had on health communications, specifically as it relates to the health and wellness industry. The Society of Health Communications defines health communications as “the science and art of using communication to advance the health and well-being of people and populations” (Society for Health Communication, 2022). The study holds significance on multiple fronts: empirical, theoretical, and practical. In terms of empirical importance, there is a dearth of research examining SMIs from a rhetorical tradition perspective. From a theoretical standpoint, the study will employ established concepts such as Aristotle's rhetorical triangle and Fisher's narrative paradigm. In practical terms, this research endeavors to offer SMEs valuable insights into how they can effectively engage and interact with their audience.

Empirical Significance

Currently, while there is extensive literature on SMIs from a marketing perspective, there is minimal research as it pertains to persuasive communicative methods in health communications, particularly as it relates to SMIs and social media. The study will provide information on the rhetorical appeals used by SMIs and how they use narration as a form of persuasion in the messaging of health communications. Through this study, the gaps in the literature in this area of interest will be filled, providing a better understanding of what communication strategies SMIs employ and the impact they have on health communications.

Theoretical Significance

Theoretical underpinnings for this study involve the application of Aristotle's rhetorical triangle and Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm theory. Aristotle's rhetorical triangle elucidates

how individuals employ rhetorical appeals, encompassing ethos, pathos, and logos, to sway their audience. Remarkably, this model, originally formulated by Aristotle, retains its relevance in the contemporary age of digital communications, especially in the context of SMIs and their capacity to convince their followers to accept their "truths" as valid. Under the ethos appeal, SMIs establish their credibility, enhancing their persuasive influence. The pathos appeal enables SMIs to emotionally connect and engage with their followers, thus amplifying their persuasive impact. Furthermore, through the utilization of the logos appeal, SMIs employ clear, concise language and provide information that appears fact-based and logically sound, thereby reinforcing their messaging. When combined with the narrative paradigm theory, these two theories, along with other critical variables like authenticity and relatedness, serve as a valuable framework for discerning the key persuasive communication tactics employed by SMIs. This framework holds significance for future investigations in the domain of digital media communications.

Practical Significance

This research endeavor holds the promise of delivering valuable insights to SMEs in the health and wellness industry, enabling them to enhance their communication with online users. As pointed out by Goodyear et al. (2021), there currently exists a notable absence of guidance for policymakers, professionals, and organizations concerning the effective use of social media to promote physical activity and nutrition guidance. Through the discoveries generated by this study, a set of best practices will be formulated to illustrate how SMEs can broaden their audience by mastering the "art of persuasion." These practices will serve as a practical guide for SMEs looking to connect with and engage a larger demographic of online users effectively. It will also provide the governing bodies in the industry an opportunity to explore establishing their

own expert “influencers”. The goal is not to eliminate the misinformation shared by SMIs on social media, but to provide more fact-based information more persuasively to help counter the misinformation because “the solution to misinformation is more information” (Greg Gutfeld, 2022). By employing the successful communication strategies of SMIs with the promotion of evidence-based information, SMEs may be more effective in establishing their presence on digital media platforms.

Research Questions

The following research questions will be used as the foundation for this study to explore the effect of SMIs on health communications in the health and wellness industry and how they can effectively persuade online users to adopt health information:

1. **Research Question 1:** How are the rhetorical strategies of ethos, pathos, logos, and mythos used by SMIs in the dissemination of health information on Instagram and TikTok?
2. **Research Question 2:** What are the differences in persuasive communication tactics between SMIs and SMEs in the sharing of health information on social media?

Biblical Perspective

The ongoing surge of influencers in the realm of health and wellness has given rise to a growing divide between SMEs and SMIs. While both groups share the common objective of advocating for a fitness-centered way of life, their methods and approaches to promoting health-related measures vary. SMEs often argue that SMIs lack the credibility to disseminate health-related information due to their absence of professional credentials, formal education, and practical

experience in the field. On the other hand, SMIs assert that they are merely sharing information they believe will benefit their followers.

Drawing a biblical parallel, it's worth noting the historical tension between the Pharisees and Jesus, along with His disciples. Despite the fact that Jesus' disciples lacked formal religious training, they were guided and taught by the ultimate "influencer," Jesus Christ. They experienced the goodness and power of God through Jesus, which inspired them to share His teachings and spread Christianity globally. In contrast, the Pharisees, who were religiously educated, engaged in ongoing debates, criticism, and ultimately, persecution, including the execution of the disciples. According to the Pharisees, the disciples were not qualified to teach the word of God. However, the success of the disciples' message and their ability to connect with the people played a pivotal role in the global spread of Christianity.

In personal reflection on faith and the significance of this study, it's important to acknowledge that while there may be disagreements with some of the misinformation shared by online influencers, their impact on motivating people worldwide to adopt healthier lifestyles is recognized and appreciated. Rather than critiquing and criticizing influencers, it is more beneficial to learn from them. As the Bible reminds us, "As irons sharpen iron, so one person sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17, New International Version, Holy Bible).

Definitions

1. *#FITSPIRATION*: A common hashtag used by influencers to represent fitness inspiration
2. *Influencer*: One who can persuade and influence one to follow a brand, product, program, or online persona

3. *Health communications*: Health communications, according to Littlejohn et al, is “the exchange of symbolic messages related to personal, organizational, and public health” (p.347).

20

4. *Health and Wellness Industry*: An industry that incorporates the components of the complete well-being of the body, mind, and spirit, including, but not limited to, nutrition, exercise, personal care, weight loss, and meditation.

5. *Influencer effect*: The effect that influencers have on their followers to elicit change

6. *Subject Matter Expert (SME)*: For this study, an SME is defined as an individual who has a degree in higher education related to the health and wellness industry, has professional experience in the field, and maintains the required credentials for their respective industry.

7. *Social Media Influencer (SMI)*: For the purpose of this study, an SMI is defined as an individual who has amassed a large following (100,000+ followers) through the sharing of information on social media

8. *Vlog*: A form of blogging that occurs through video.

Summary

The rapid progress in digital media technology has transformed virtually every facet of our lives, with a particularly profound impact on how we communicate, engage, and establish connections with others. The ascent of social media platforms has given birth to online communities, where individuals can interact and exchange information. “Human beings are highly social creatures who act in socially structured environments where communication plays a key role” (Xu, Li, & Shan, 2021). It is also in these communities that new persuasive leaders have emerged through the form of the SMI.

Within the health and wellness sector, Social Media Influencers (SMIs) continue to play a pivotal role in creating and sharing information across various social media platforms. They remain a popular go-to resource for individuals seeking insights on matters related to health and wellness. Despite the fact that many of the prominent SMIs may not possess the professional qualifications or educational background that SMEs in the health and wellness field typically have, and may, at times, have been a source of inaccurate information, SMIs have demonstrated proficiency in captivating and establishing connections with a substantial audience. Their innate capacity to communicate in a manner that resonates with their followers and to address engaging topics and content in a relatable manner is noteworthy (Ge & Gretzel, 2017). Through the use of persuasive communication methods and their ability to be perceived as “authentic” and “relatable”, SMIs have established not only credibility with their followers but established an emotional connectedness with their large following of online users, often bypassing industry SMEs as the primary source of information for online users.

This chapter began with a discussion on the evolution of influencers in the health and wellness industry and discussed the effects of social media and SMIs on health communications. The problem was identified and the problem statement was defined. The significance of the study, including the empirical, practical, theoretical, and global significance was explained. The research questions were provided to establish the purpose and framework for the study. Lastly, a biblical perspective reflecting the area of study was provided.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

SMIs have emerged as influential figures in the health and wellness industry over the past decade, serving as valuable sources of information, support, and peer interaction (Cheung et al., 2022). They possess a natural talent for deploying persuasive communication strategies, allowing them to effectively engage and maintain a substantial following across various digital platforms. Through the creation of captivating and educational content, SMIs can amplify their brand or industry's message, essentially acting as megaphones for their niche (Cheung et al., 2022; McQuarrie et al., 2013).

One distinctive feature of SMIs is their capacity to integrate rhetorical appeals and storytelling into their social media content, establishing them as trustworthy figures. In contrast to SMEs, SMIs possess a unique ability to establish emotional connections with their audience. Consequently, they excel in the "art of persuasion" and are adept at convincing online users to embrace health information, even in cases where the information they disseminate may be misinformation (Cheung et al., 2022; McQuarrie et al., 2013).

This research primarily focuses on examining the persuasive communication strategies employed by SMIs and their impact on online users' adoption of health-related information. Persuasion remains an essential technique in health communication, both for SMIs and SMEs. SMIs effectively employ rhetorical appeals, including ethos, pathos, and logos, along with the narrative aspect (mythos) to influence their audience's attitudes and behaviors related to specific health issues. In addition to investigating the use of rhetorical appeals in health communication by SMIs, this study aims to identify the key distinctions in persuasive communication tactics be-

tween SMIs and SMEs. Ultimately, this research seeks to equip SMEs with the necessary digital communication skills to effectively convey health and wellness information to online users.

In Chapter Two of this study, communication theory and Robert Craig's (1999) communication traditions will be explored. The rhetorical tradition, as it pertains to rhetoric and persuasive communication, will serve as the theoretical framework for this research. Furthermore, Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle and Walter Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm will be introduced and linked with existing literature to underscore the theoretical relevance of this study.

Situation to Communication Tradition

According to, theories are developed to provide an understanding of a phenomenon and serve as a conceptual framework to develop and seek new knowledge. The theories not only help communicators formulate strategies that enable them to successfully communicate but also provide an understanding of the skills necessary for effective communication (Wallace et al, 2009). Theory provides a framework for the researcher by guiding them through the process of observation and collection. “When a researcher investigates and collects information, he needs a clear idea of what information is important to collect. He needs a clear lens in which to look for.” (Costley, 2006, p. 2). Theory also provides a pathway for communication scholars in the area of future research. For communication scholars, theory is the cornerstone of the knowledge attained past, present, and future.

It wasn't until the conclusion of World War II that the field of communication studies underwent a significant transformation, finally establishing itself as a distinct and dedicated theoretical area of study. As noted by Craig and Xiong (2021), the post-war era saw a surge of interest in cybernetics, information, and communication, which culminated in the reorganization of

communication research as an interdisciplinary social science. This reshaping of the field led to the expansion of the term 'communication theory' to encompass relevant concepts and theories drawn from a multitude of disciplines.

However, as observed by Craig (1999), the assimilation of diverse disciplinary approaches posed challenges in conceiving communication theory as a cohesive and unified field. Craig sought to prove the potential practical relevance of all communication theories, no matter which discipline they originated from with the goal of “constructing a field, a common ground, a common (meta) discursive space, in which all communication theories can interact productively with each other and with communication practice” (p.131). To help establish coherence in metadiscourse, Richard Craig (1999) introduced a constitutive meta-model called the Seven Traditions of Communication.

Craig’s Seven Traditions of Communication

The goal of communication theory, according to Craig and Xiong (2021) is not a single ‘correct’ theory but is rather to “cultivate ‘dialogical-dialectical coherence’ in metadiscourse among all theoretical traditions” (para. 8). This metadiscourse not only helps to frame communication problems, but it also helps to translate matters of widespread concern into more specialized theoretical languages (Simonson et al., 2012). Through Craig’s constitutive meta-model, communication theory is divided into seven traditions: (1) semiotic; (2) phenomenological; (3) cybernetic; (4) sociopsychological; (5) sociocultural; (6) critical; and (7) rhetorical. Each tradition represents a way of discerning communication, complementing each other to establish a larger picture of the complex and multi-faceted field of communications (Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2017). To study the persuasive communication methods of social media influencers used in

the health and wellness industry, the rhetorical tradition will be applied as the theoretical framework to support this study.

Theoretical Framework

Rhetorical Tradition

The rhetorical theory was theorized as the “practical art of discourse” in the era of the ancient Greek scholars and sophists (Craig, 1999). Before Aristotle, rhetoric represented the art of argument, particularly as it related to the oratorical and political spectrum. However, Aristotle countered this definition, redefining it as the “art of persuasion”. More specifically, he believed that “rhetorical study, in its strict sense, is concerned with persuasion” (Roberts, 2004, p. 17), as it is a combination of the “science of logic and of the ethical branch of politics; and it is partly like dialectic, partly like sophistical reasoning” (p.46).

According to Aristotle, rhetoric is a “theoretical activity which discovers knowledge through examining the words, arguments, and topics utilized by the orator” (Lyons, 1994, p. 441). Not only does rhetoric focus on the “argument”, but the symbols used in the construction and delivery of the argument. Foss (2017) defines symbols as “something that stands for or represents something else by virtue of relationship, association, or convention (p .4). In rhetoric, there are five canons (general principles) that we apply to more effectively communicate. According to Pudewa (2016), the canons include the following:

- 1) Invention: The process of conceptualization; determining what to say.
- 2) Arrangement: The process of organizing the symbols (i.e. story sequence, paragraph structure.)

3) Elocution (Style): The process of determining how something is said and presented (i.e. sentence structure, word choice, expressions).

4) Delivery: The process of the mechanics involved in presenting the speech (i.e. verbal and nonverbal cues including, vocal modulation, projection of the voice, eye contact, gestures).

5) Memory: The process of how we process and retain information.

Rhetoric comprises three fundamental elements: the speaker or writer, the audience, and the purpose of communication. As per Foss (2017), the rhetor constructs the message by employing symbols. The message is the means through which the speaker endeavors to convince the audience, employing various types of rhetorical appeals, which include ethos, pathos, and logos. Ethos pertains to the credibility and character of the speaker, pathos involves emotional appeal, and logos emphasizes the purpose and rationale behind the message, as outlined by Ge and Gretzel (2017). These three appeals together form Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle.

In contemporary digital communication, the scope of rhetoric extends beyond traditional oratory. In today's context, SMIs have become prominent "rhetors" within online communities worldwide. Influencers can be regarded as adept users of rhetoric, given their skillful use of the language of social media and their capacity to come across as relatable and trustworthy to online audiences (Ge & Gretzel, 2017). Through their social media content, which includes text, images, and videos (symbols), they engage with their audience, disseminate information, and persuade individuals to take action. They employ persuasive techniques through each of the rhetorical appeals in their digital content and interactions with their audience, thereby establishing credibility, fostering connections with their followers, and effectively conveying their message.

Rhetoric can also be seen not only as a tool for persuasion but as an "invitation to understanding" (Foss, 2017, p.5).

This study, anchored in the rhetorical tradition and guided by the theoretical frameworks of Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle and Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm, aims to gain insights into the strategies employed by SMIs to persuade and encourage their audience to adopt health information. Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle, with its three rhetorical proofs (ethos, pathos, and logos), will enable the study to explore how SMIs and SMEs presently utilize each appeal in crafting their social media content. Fisher's (1985) narrative paradigm introduces an additional persuasive approach, mythos (storytelling), into the analysis.

Related Literature

In this section, existing literature and research on the rhetorical and persuasive communication methods employed by SMIs will be introduced. The literature will provide insight into how rhetorical and persuasive tactics can be applied in health communications and are currently used by SMIs to address the primary research question of the study. Additionally, an overview of the Aristotelian rhetorical triangle and Fisher's narrative paradigm will be provided to show their relevance to the theoretical framework of this study.

Persuasion

In Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, he stated, "A statement is persuasive and credible either because it is self-evident or because it appears to be proved from other statements that are so. In either case, it is persuasive because there is somebody it persuades" (Roberts, 2004, p. 28).

Wallace et al (2008) define persuasion as "a process of social influence, involving the preparation and presentation of verbal and nonverbal messages to others to influence their beliefs, val-

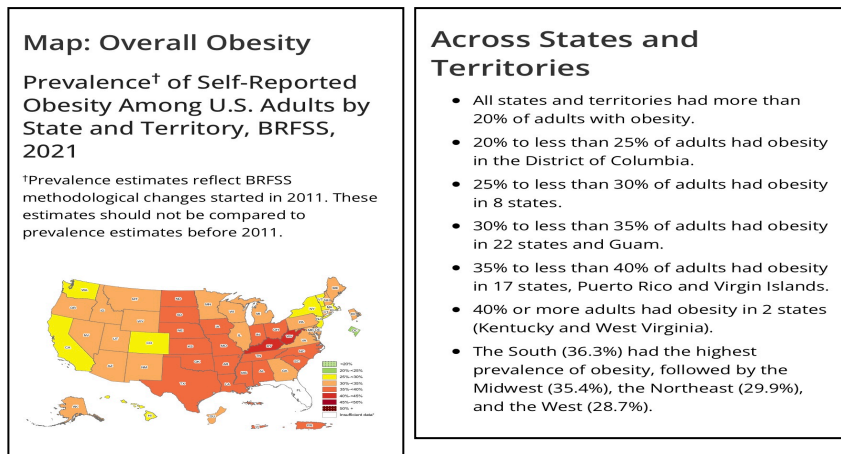
ues, attitudes, or actions” (p. 331). On the other hand, Rossi and Yudell (2012) defined persuasion as the act of having a person come to believe something through the merit of reasons another person advances” (p.193). Persuasion, often referenced as “manipulative”, is an effective tactic in eliciting behavioral change and changing attitudes, particularly in the realm of health communications.

Numerous factors play a role in determining the effectiveness and acceptance of persuasion. As outlined by Hovland et al. (1953), the influential aspects of persuasive communication that can lead to attitude change are myriad. The credibility of the source is a pivotal element in persuasive communication. The ability of a speaker to be persuasive is closely tied to their credibility. This credibility can stem from the educational and professional background of the speaker, which provides them with expertise. Additionally, the speaker's character and their capacity to come across as attractive, authentic, and relatable also contribute to their credibility. Next, effective persuasive communication incorporates characteristics like subtlety, impartiality, and timing (Lumen Learning, 2021). These factors in the message content can significantly impact its persuasive power. A well-structured, balanced, and timely message is more likely to resonate with the audience. Also, the emotional state of the audience and the context in which the message is delivered play a vital role in determining the persuasiveness of the message. Speakers must be conscious not only of how they present themselves but also of the attributes of the message and their audience's emotional receptivity to it.

Persuasion in Health Communications

Figure 1

Example of Online Content Created by the CDC



By reading or listening to advertisements for a health campaign, it becomes easy to discern how rhetoric is used as an act of persuasion. To illustrate, regarding the health issue of obesity, there are different tactics employed to persuade the audience to change health and lifestyle behaviors. Experts and leading health organizations, such as the CDC, take a rational, logical approach to addressing the issue. In discussing the obesity epidemic with their audience, the website page “Overweight and Obesity” for the CDC lists statistics about the current obesity rates in the United States, facts and data related to being overweight, and includes a map of the United States to indicate obesity levels in each state (Figure 1).

Conversely, influencers choose a more emotional approach, incorporating testimonials of their weight-loss journey or barriers encountered during their weight-loss efforts. For example, Jodi Boam (@jodiboam_fitmom), a professional bodybuilding and fitness competitor, used Instagram to narrate her struggle to lose the weight incurred from her pregnancy and other physical and mental issues that have affected her ability to get back into her pre-baby physique. Boam

also uses her experience to encourage other women on post-baby weight loss and fitness (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Example of Content Created by an SMI



In the realm of health communication, there are diverse approaches to conveying messages. Some health agencies and experts opt for a logical and fact-based approach (logos), while others, like SMIs, choose to leverage testimonials and narratives to connect with their audience on an emotional level (pathos). Each of these tactics serves a specific purpose: to persuade the audience to alter their behavior or attitudes in the context of specific health concerns. As emphasized by Shen et al. (2015), a fundamental objective of health communication is to craft effective messages that successfully persuade the target audience to change their attitudes and behaviors in connection to specific health issues. This highlights the multifaceted nature of health communi-

cation, where both evidence-based, logical arguments and emotionally resonant narratives play a role in achieving this goal.

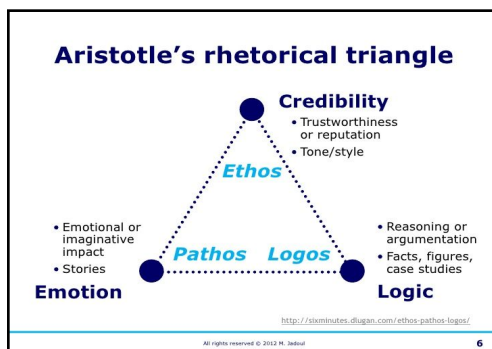
According to Cameron (2009), “theory in health communication research is used to “understand, explain, and predict health beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors of individuals, groups, and mass audiences. Persuasive theories are one subset of theories applicable to health communication” (p. 309). In health communications, according to Littlejohn et al (2017), messages are studied from two predominant perspectives: 1) messages, through the use of narratives, construct the nature of health and illness; 2) messages are used to encourage and persuade individuals to adopt healthy behavioral choices. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, Aristotle’s rhetorical triangle and Fisher’s (1984) narrative paradigm will be introduced.

Aristotle’s Rhetorical Triangle

Aristotle believed that individuals are more likely to be persuaded as a result of the logic of an argument, the emotional appeal of an argument, or factors related to the source of the messaging (Falk et al, This belief led Aristotle (circa 4th century BC) to develop the Aristotelian rhetorical triangle (also called the Aristotelian triad or Aristotelian rhetorical appeals) (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Aristotle’s Rhetorical Triangle



According to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, there are three modes of persuasion, 1) the personal character of the speaker; 2) putting the audience into a frame of mind; and 3) proof provided by the words of the speech itself. We know this more traditionally as ethos, pathos, and logos. With the use of rhetoric, ethos relates to the perception of credibility, trust, and character of the speaker; pathos appeals to the emotions of the audience, and logos appeals to the logic and rationality of the message. To effectively support the message, a balance of all three appeals should be used due to the nature of persuasion, which, according to Aristotle, is “the faculty of discovering all the available means of influence” (Brecher, 2017).

Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle remains a fundamental framework for effective writing and speaking in contemporary communication. Understanding the rhetorical situation, which comprises the audience, author, purpose, and medium, is crucial for comprehending how the use of each rhetorical appeal can shape an argument or persuade the audience. In the field of health communications, for instance, the choice of appeal should align with the attitudes and characteristics of the target audience to ensure effective persuasion. In many persuasive contexts, as Demirdogen (2010) points out, some individuals may be either unmotivated or unable to process rational (logos) appeals. In such cases, speakers may need to rely on more emotionally persuasive appeals (pathos).

Traditionally, communication campaigns often focused on the rationality of the argument, but scholars are increasingly recognizing what Aristotle proposed nearly 2,000 years ago: that each rhetorical appeal (ethos, pathos, and logos) serves a distinct purpose in the “art of persuasion.” As indicated by Guilford (2015) and McGregor (2021), while each appeal can stand alone,

their combined use in an argument results in a more well-rounded and persuasive message. This underscores the importance of balancing and integrating these appeals in persuasive communication to effectively reach and influence the audience.

Ethos

The first and “most important” element of Aristotle’s theory of persuasion is ethos. While the official Greek translation of ethos is “ethics”, as it pertains to rhetoric, ethos refers to the character that the speaker wishes to present, defined as the “charisma” and “credibility” of the speaker (Demirodogan, 2010). Aristotle regarded ethos, the apparent credibility of a source, as “almost the most important means of persuasion” (Zarefsky, 2008, p. 630). Ethos, according to Aristotle’s Rhetoric, consists of three qualities: practical wisdom (phronesis), virtue (arete), and goodwill (eunoia). It is through these qualities that an individual (speaker) is determined as a credible source of information.

Aristotle referred to source credibility as “a listener’s favorable disposition toward the speaker”, implying that the positive nature of the communicator can “have an influence on the receiver’s acceptance of the message” (Kim & Kim, 2021, p. 224). This led to the development of the source credibility theory which posits that ethos (source credibility) is established through expertise and trustworthiness. In the 1950s, with growing interest and research on the topic of persuasion, the Yale Group observed the effects of credibility on persuasion and found that credibility was composed of two core components: expertness and trustworthiness (Hendriks et al., 2015). Havland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) defined expertise as “the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions,” and defined trustworthiness as “the degree of

confidence in the communicator's intent to communicate the assertions he considers most valid" (Ohanian, 1990, p. 41).

In the next few decades, research on source credibility continued to evolve. In 1990, upon research on the perceived credibility of celebrity endorsers in advertising, Ohanian (1990) established that "the effectiveness of a message depends on source's "familiarity," "likeability," and "attractiveness" to the respondent" (p. 41). Therefore, he established that source credibility consisted of three factors: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. In 1998, Jorgensen (1998) made the argument that ethos, one of Aristotle's rhetorical appeals, is analogous to the contemporary concept of source credibility. This is because the persuasive impact of a message depends on how the audience perceives the speaker in terms of their expertise, trustworthiness, and character. However, in the context of today's social media landscape, one can observe that credibility is shaped by a broader range of factors. These include not only expertise, trustworthiness, and character but also attractiveness and homophily. All of these elements are visibly utilized to establish credibility, not only for the source but also for the message itself. This expanded understanding of credibility reflects the changing dynamics of communication in the digital age, where factors such as attractiveness and similarity to the audience play a significant role in influencing the perception of credibility.

Expertise. Expertise can be defined as "the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions" (Hovland et al, 1953, p.21). It has also been referred to as sources that are perceived to be "trained, experienced, authoritative, skilled, and informed" (Berlo et al., 1969, p.567; Lowry et al., 2014). Factors contributing to the perceived experience of the communicator may include the quantity and quality of the information, the de-

gree of ability, education, and professional achievements of the communicator, as well as the validity of their judgment (Kim & Kim, 2021). Geiger et al. (2022) opine that source expertise appears to increase the credibility of a message when the desired outcome of a particular situation is noncontroversial and when the pathways for achieving a particular outcome are complex (p. 3).

In a study focused on online users and their trust in online health communications, researchers found that individuals consider source expertise to be a critical factor in assessing the quality of the information being shared (Mun et al., 2013). SMEs establish their credibility through their educational background, professional qualifications, and the use of scientifically supported content. In contrast, SMIs rely on different indicators to establish their credibility. As noted by Durau et al. (2022), what matters for the acceptance of influencer information is not necessarily whether the influencer is an expert in the traditional sense, but rather how they are perceived by their audience. “Influencers, by default, have a status of expertise among their followers” (Lou & Yaun, 2019, p. 68). Whether it is through the blue-check verification on the profile status on their social media accounts or the publishing of professional and educational credentials (i.e. CPT, MS Exercise Science), SMIs and SMEs employ visual cues to actively display their level of expertise in a particular area of interest. Furthermore, Kim and Kim (2021) found that expertise is not recognized by followers upon the initial viewing of one’s profile, but after followers spend more time and encounter more interactions with influencers. Maintaining an active and consistent presence on social media is a key persuasive tactic employed by SMIs to maintain the credibility and trustworthiness of their followers.

Trustworthiness. Hovland et al (1953) defined trustworthiness as “the degree of confidence in the communicator’s intent to communicate the assertions he considers most valid” (p. 21). Trust is a key component in the rhetorical appeal of ethos. Ethos is established through “the display of knowledge, understood as trustworthiness derived from the impression that the speaker is competent, qualified, and knows what they are talking about” (Offerdal et al., 2021, p. 258). In terms of Aristotelian rhetoric, exactly “who” the speaker “is” depends on how the audience “reads” him; if the audience “reads” him as being worthy of trust, then the rhetor’s ethos appeals have been successful (Baumlin & Meyer, 2018, p. 10).

As it relates to SMIs, trustworthiness means “the honesty, character, and credibility of the source as perceived by the online user” (Yilmazdogan et al., 2021, p. 301). In a study of the effect of citizen influencers (CIs), Martensen et al (2017) found that trustworthiness directly drives the persuasiveness of influencers, as well as serves a mediating role between each of the other characteristics of source credibility. In addition Oxman et al. (2022) found that trust, if undermined by health authorities’ lack of transparency and inability to be perceived by the public as honest with the public, can negatively impact the ability to obtain public health goals.

In a study focused on influencer marketing, Lou and Yuan (2019) discovered that the consistent creation and sharing of informative social media posts serve a dual purpose. Not only does this practice capture the attention of followers, but it also plays a significant role in building trust among those followers. The continuous provision of valuable and informative content contributes to the establishment of trust in influencers.

Moreover, in a study concerning SMIs and the cultivation of trust with their followers, Kim and Kim (2021) found that influencers can foster interpersonal trust and loyalty through the

ongoing exchange of resources between the influencer and their followers. Followers who benefit from this resource exchange and experience positive outcomes are more likely to place their trust in the influencer as a source of future advice and recommendations. This emphasizes the importance of sustained and reciprocal engagement between influencers and their audience in building trust and loyalty. In the domain of communications, according to Kim and Kim (2021), “if a speaker sends behavioral and social cues that promise future rewards, the receiver’s trust in the speaker is likely to increase” (p. 225).

Character. Aristotle refuted the argument that character does not contribute anything to “power” or influence of the speaker. Instead, he posited that character may be the most effective means of persuasion that a person possesses (Roberts, 2004). In Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, he stated that “persuasion is achieved by the speaker’s personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others” (p. 24). From a biblical perspective, the Apostle Paul defined good character through nine characteristics or “fruits of the spirit, including love, joy, peace, patience, kindness goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. As it relates to the credibility of the speaker, one’s character can be determined by their sincerity and affinity with their audience.

Through the display of an outward presentation of self that portrays sincerity and realness, the rhetor can evoke the perception of authenticity and relatedness. It is also important that speakers display an ethos that aligns with the audience’s culture as it allows the audience to view the rhetor as having a common and believable connection with them (Pickering, 2021). The perception that SMIs are “people like us” allows SMIs to earn the trust of their followers (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Archer et al., 2021). By having the trust of their followers, followers are more in-

clined to accept the shared information as true and credible, even in instances where the information may not be correct. “The value of authenticity for learning is not whether health information is objectively true, but rather how learners perceive health information as authentic” (Hendry et al., 2021, p.5; Petraglia, 2009). When the rhetor can prove that their character is good, authentic, and relatable, they can establish credibility with their audience, thus making ethos an effective appeal in their persuasive communication tactics.

Attractiveness. Although the adage “don’t judge a book by its cover” may seem noble, given that it relates to source credibility, the physical attractiveness of the communicator still proves to be a factor in establishing the credibility of the source. Research consistently demonstrates the impact of physical attractiveness on both the perceived credibility of a communicator and the reception of their message. Studies have revealed that physically attractive individuals are often perceived as being kind, interesting, sociable, strong, modest, and responsive, as noted by Dion et al. (1972) and Kim and Kim (2021). While Kim and Kim (2021) concluded that attractiveness itself may not be a primary factor in building trust, the positive attributes associated with attractive individuals enhance their overall credibility and the acceptance of their messages. For instance, when a SMI promotes a fitness workout program, they frequently utilize their own fit and toned physique to illustrate the program's effectiveness.

Nevertheless, concerning source credibility, attractiveness encompasses more than what meets the eye. From a credibility standpoint, attractiveness also encompasses the likability and the perceived similarity (homophily) of the communicator. Kim and Kim (2021) discovered that a key aspect of influencers' success, particularly in marketing, is their ability to present themselves as

ordinary individuals, in contrast to the glamorous image of celebrities. This portrayal makes them seem more relatable and trustworthy to their audience.

Homophily. Homophily is defined as the amount of similarity perceived to be shared by members of a social group (McPherson et al., 2001) leading to the tendency to interact with others with similar traits, ideas, likes, and dislikes (Osie-Frimpong et al., 2022). Homophily comprises four dimensions: attitude (the degree of similarity in attitudes, thinking, and behavior), background (the degree of similarity in one's social background), values (the degree of similarities in morals and values), and appearance (degree of similarity in terms of visual attributes) (Bu et al, 2022; Ladhari et al, 2020). According to Gupta et al. (2021), the idea underlying homophily is that people prefer to associate themselves with individuals who appear to be similar to them or share similar interests.

Homophily, or the tendency for people to associate with others who are similar to them, has been found to have several significant effects on information-seeking and the perceived quality of information. Research by Bu et al. (2022) has shown that homophily encourages individuals to seek information, and it also contributes to an increase in the perceived quality of that information. Recent studies have highlighted that when consumers can relate to an influencer and feel a sense of identification with them, they are more likely to view the influencer as trustworthy (Kim, 2021).

Studies have further established a direct relationship between perceived homophily and an individual's social influence, as evidenced by research by Norwak (2013) and Osie-Frimpong et al. (2022). They have found that individuals tend to favor and find information credible when they perceive similarities between themselves and the information source. This alignment in

views, experiences, and opinions between SMIs and their followers makes the messages of SMIs more trusted compared to industry messages, as these messages are seen as reflecting the consumers' own experiences (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014; p. 593; Wu & Wang, 2011). The degree of similarity that followers share with SMIs reinforces the credibility of the information source, thereby enhancing the credibility of the information being disseminated.

Pathos

While Aristotle believed that ethos was the “most important” means of persuasion, he also believed that it is important to have a direct understanding of the audience. According to Ihlen (2020), “It is simply not possible to persuade anyone if you are not able to, somehow, make a connection with what they believe to be true or with some of their values” (p. 165). Through this understanding, speakers are better equipped to appeal to their audience emotionally. Pathos is a psychological appeal that incorporates the mood and tone of the speech that directly appeals to the passions, emotions, and will of the audience (Demirdogen, 2010). One definition of emotion is as follows: “a state of arousal affected by cognition (beliefs and awareness) and context (Wallace et al, 2009, p. 349). By tapping into the emotions of the audience, the speaker can persuade them to agree with the speaker and/or message (Gagich & Zickel, 2017). Pathos is generally used when the audience is unable or unmotivated to process the rational appeals (logos) (2010).

According to Jorgensen (1998), persuasion relies heavily on emotional appeals to achieve the persuasive goals of the speaker. While traditionally, emotional appeals were expressed through verbal and written arguments, pathos appeals are expressed through various tactics, in-

cluding 1) expressive descriptions that help the audience to feel or experience an event; 2) vivid imagery of the people, place, or events to help the audience to “experience” the events; 3) sharing personal stories to establish a connection or invoke empathy; 4) using emotion-laden vocabulary to put the audience in a specific mindset; and 5) using information that evokes an emotional response (Gagich and Zickel, 2017), such as happiness, anger, or fear.

The use of the pathos appeal, particularly in health communications, continues to be a source for debate, particularly among rational choice theorists. While some consider pathos as a “revocation of reasoning” (Davoudi et al., 2020), others, including Aristotle, understand the significance of “tapping in” to emotional appeals. As per Oliveira Fernandes and Oswald (2023), “the most persuasive arguments are usually deemed to be those that resonate with the audience’s most deep-held values: the deeper the value raised by discourse is held, the more the argument will be impactful on the audience in terms of pathos” (p. 3). SMIs, for example, continue to use the pathos appeal in their online content as a way to engage with their audience and establish psychological connections, parasocial relationships, and engagement with their followers. While SMIs may lack the professional and educational qualifications to be considered “health experts”, their ability to emotionally appeal to their audience and establish a sense of likability from their audience, provides a sufficient supplement to the ethos appeal.

Psychological Connectedness. SMIs have created their online persona by posting highly engaging, relatable, self-generated content that not only portrays them as experts in their area of interest but as an ordinary person, through the presentation of their lifestyle as a whole (De Jans et al., 2017; Rohde & Mau, 2021). SMIs can “create a powerful online identity by packaging and communicating authentic personal narratives through a combination of photos, videos, and activ-

ities” (Audrezet et al., 2020; Childers et al., 2019; Khamis et al., 2016; Tafesse & Wood, 2021, p. 2). As a case in point, a fitness influencer may share a personal training video along with a photograph of them engaging in personal activities outside of fitness, such as a photograph of them attending a concert or interacting with family. Their willingness to openly share their daily routines and images with a large audience enables their followers to easily identify with them (Duplaga, 2020). Additionally, by putting the focus on themselves through the use of first-person pronouns (e.g. “I” and “me”) when describing personal challenges, is indicative of their vulnerability and achieves a level of psychological closeness with their followers (Lee & Theokary, 2021). Meanwhile, Saaty (2020) found that language choice directly influences the audience’s emotional response.

Parasocial relationships. Existing literature shows that SMIs have the innate ability to establish connections with their followers in the form of parasocial relationships. According to Hendry et al. (2021), their innate ability to connect with their followers through the establishment of parasocial relationships is one of the key contributing factors critical to SMIs gaining and keeping audience attention. Against the backdrop of social media, parasocial relationships can be defined as “illusory” relationships created between an online user and an SMI (Sokolova and Perez, 2021). According to Balaban and Szabolics (2022), parasocial interactions are similar to social interactions in the context that the psychological processes are parallel to those in face-to-face activities and relationship building.

Existing literature finds that when influencers share personal information, followers will often develop true and intense feelings of affection for the influencer, often reinforced by the frequency and duration of online engagement, the level of interaction with the followers (i.e. com-

ments, shares, and likes), and the recall of these interactions and experiences (Ladhari et al., 2020; Sanchez-Fernandez & Jimenez-Castillo, 2020; Schouten et al., 2019). Through the process of “liking” followers’ comments or responding to direct messages, SMIs can establish a connection with online users. It is this feeling of connectedness and the ability to create relationships with their followers that define the characteristics of influencers’ success (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019; Hou, 2019; Vanninen et al., 2022).

Engagement. SMIs develop content that allows for the opportunity to engage and interact with their followers. On social media, engagement refers to “collective kind of engagement, manifested in behavioral (collective action, group participation), cognitive (the importance placed on content), and affective (experience) forms” (Ngai et al., 2020, p. 5) The focus on collectivity allows for an open, orientation to dialogue and interaction with followers, active participation between the SMI and followers, collective action by individuals, and the intention to act (2020).

SMIs employ a variety of strategies to foster audience engagement. According to Saaty (2020), the utilization of hashtags on social media plays a significant role in facilitating connections, interactions, and engagement with the audience. Hashtags are symbols employed to symbolize current trending topics or trends that have the potential to evoke emotions among online users. As an illustration, Saaty (2020) cites the example of #BaltimoreUprising, a hashtag used on Twitter that ignited strong emotions and passion among a large audience. As per Ngai et al. (2020), hashtags function as symbols that enable individuals to identify emerging trends within digital communities, locate relevant content related to a particular area of interest, and facilitate synchronous conversations on social media platforms. “Since Instagram is widely used across

many demographics, hashtags allow for connections and community building” (Herman, 2017, para. 22).

The use of music is also a tactic often employed to evoke emotion from the audience. In a study on social media advertisements, Hamzah et al. (2019) found that background music in advertisements compliments the storyline, helping to hold the attention of the audience. In a similar study, Kiholm and Gardemyr (2017) observed that music provides fruitful effects that positively affect the emotions of the audience. As an aural effect, Fillmore (2022) found that sound, such as music, is capable of eliciting the attention of the audience. In fact, music can “bring words to life” (para.9). SMIs use this tactic regularly in their social media posts by attaching a song or sound effect to their pictures and videos.

Research has also shown that the self-presentation of the SMI is effective in encouraging engagement. Utilizing self-presentation strategies such as the broadcasting of their day-to-day life, allows SMIS to actively engage with followers, attract viewers, and create intimacy (Kim, 2021). Additionally, by creating content that is delivered via first-person narration, the SMI is perceived as more warm and personal, leading to more engagement (Chang et al., 2019; Vanninen et al., 2022). Creating content that not only offers informational and entertainment value but content that provides cues to their personality contributes to the manner in which the followers react to their posts (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Vanninen et al., 2022). In addition to self-presentation, SMIs will often use questions to encourage interactivity with their followers. Asking questions and encouraging feedback, demonstrates the influencer’s responsiveness and is likely to elicit trust and likability from their followers (Lee and Theokary, 2021)

SMIs who incorporate diversity into their content creation tend to achieve higher levels of engagement from their followers. A study on social media content by Tafeese and Wood (2021) revealed that, given the vast amount of information available on social media, content originality and creativity are pivotal in capturing the attention of followers and motivating them to engage.

Moreover, Tafeese and Wood (2021) also established that influencers with a broad range of interests can stimulate greater engagement. Sharing a wide variety of information and not concentrating solely on a single topic is perceived by followers as more engaging and less repetitive. SMIs can foster interaction with their followers even without exclusively promoting health-related content. This approach proves to be a successful strategy for enhancing follower loyalty, increasing the popularity of the SMI, and creating a stronger sense of intimacy between followers and SMIs, as indicated by studies conducted by Gao & Feng (2016) and Zou et al. (2021).

Logos

Logos consists of the logical and rational appeal of an argument. Aristotle stated that “persuasion is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments” (Roberts, 2004, p.25). According to Jorgensen (1998), “logos consists of a logical appeal to argument and sound reasoning, where the persuasive force is gained from the applied forms of deductive and inductive logic” (p. 403). By means of this persuasive tactic, the speaker seeks to appeal to the intellect and reasoning of the audience. Reasoning can be defined as a “systematic mental process of moving from one side to another in order to reach a new conclusion” (Wallace et al, 2009, p.345).

The speaker must focus on the content of the message and emphasize facts and logical explanations to effectively apply this appeal (Savolainen, 2014). According to de Oliveira Fernandes and Oswald (2023), “the content of the message, along with stylistic choices implemented in its articulation, are directly responsible for the representation of the message that the audience will form” (p. 3). Use of the logos appeal include, 1) employing comparisons between one thing and another to support the speaker’s claim; 2) cause/effect thinking; 3) deductive reasoning; 4) inductive reasoning; 5) using examples and multiple sources of evidence to support an argument; 6) an explanation of the significance of the information; and 7) the use of coherent thought (Gagich and Zickel, 2017).

Concise, Clear, and Structured Messaging. Saaty (2020) asserts that the focus of logos “should be well-formed by a well-prepared writer so that it conducts a logical argument and evidence about it, which is applicable to a current situation” (p.118). When presenting information from a logos appeal, research exemplifies the importance of incorporating structure into the message by focusing on the conciseness, clarity, and arrangement of the message. Hamzah et al. (2019) postulate that clarity is responsible for enhancing the audience’s overall understanding of the main ideas of the content; conciseness guides the audience toward an understanding of the correlations between specific features in the content; and arrangement creates a flow with the elements of cohesion and coherence, allowing the audience to easily follow the content.

SMIs may not possess the skills of professional copywriters or trained public relations specialists, but they have a unique way of communicating that is just as effective in reaching a broad audience. To captivate the attention of social media users, SMIs rely less on their expertise in content or the quality of production and focus more on their choice of language and their dis-

tinctive personality (Leo & Theokary, 2021). In their research examining social media influencers from a marketing perspective, Leo and Theokary (2021) found that "how something is said," including the words used, the tone, and the persona adopted, plays a crucial role in attracting attention, views, and new followers

According to Averbeck and Miller (2014), elements of content such as sentence structure and word choice can have both positive and negative impacts on follower expectations. To ensure clarity and conciseness in their content creation, successful SMIs establish a visible structure in their content. They organize and present their posts with consistent materials and structures that enhance the overall user experience (Cheung et al., 2022; Faisal et al., 2020). For instance, an SMI might maintain a regular structure for their daily and weekly content, rotating images, videos, and memes on a recurring schedule. SMIs also skillfully manage the layout of their posts, employing visual elements such as text size, color, shape, and labels, and creating appealing designs (Cheung et al., 2022; Faisal et al., 2020). To establish their brand, SMIs may use consistent color schemes and backgrounds to maintain uniformity in their content. This not only enhances the attractiveness of their posts but also reinforces the coherence and rationale behind their messaging.

Enthymemes. Aristotle believed that “speeches that rely on example are as persuasive as the other kind, but those which rely on enthymemes excite the louder applause” (Roberts, 2004, p.28). Enthymemes can be defined as statements that deal with probable, common-sense knowledge based on four kinds of fact including probabilities, examples, infallible signs, and ordinary signs. Aristotle defines probabilities as “a thing that usually happens”, for example “when two statements are of the same order, but one is more familiar”, infallible signs are those that exhibit

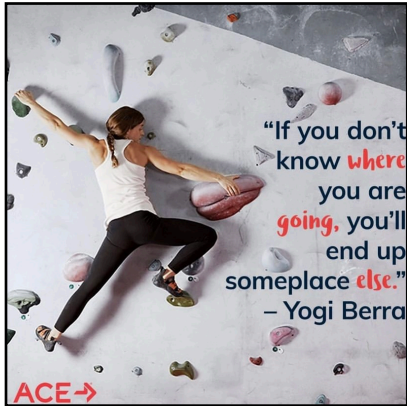
“complete proof...meaning that the matter has been demonstrated and completed”, and ordinary signs argue “some universal or particular proposition” (Roberts, 2004, pp. 32-34). According to Fredal (2018), enthymemes are effective as they enable the audience to participate in the argument being presented to them by supplying the “missing piece” of the argument. Additionally, Fredal (2018) states that “by leaving the major premise of the argument unstated, the rhetor can shorten the argument, avoid boring the audience, and resist critical inquiry into the validity of the suppressed premise” (p.25).

The utilization of logos through enthymemes can be achieved using both verbal and nonverbal communication methods. In verbal communication, the use of analogies and metaphors is often employed to articulate a situation in a manner that logically illustrates how future events can unfold (Davoudi et al., 2020). Nonverbally, enthymemes can be conveyed through visual elements, such as pictures and videos, which necessitate the audience to construct meaning from them (Smith, 2007; Finnegan, 2001). In the contemporary context of digital media communications, this concept is exemplified through the use of memes.

Memes are images created and shared to amuse, entertain, or inform the audience, often carrying a symbolic meaning regarding a particular topic, culture, or event. In the area of health and wellness, the use memes are used to share information, facts, and statistics through the use of infographics (Figures 4 and 5). They remain a popular and effective tool for both SMIs as well as SMEs in their use of logos appeal.

Figure 4

Example of a Meme Posted by an Industry Organization

**Figure 5**

Example of a Meme Posted by an SME



Microblogging. In an era of digital media, the formal oration of speech has been exchanged for microblogging. Microblogging refers to the writing of short instant messages online through a social network (i.e. Twitter, Instagram) (Ebner et al, 2010). In a study of the Aristotelian appeals and the rhetoric of Twitter, Saaty (2020) found that through microblogging,

“Twitter logos can be described as the driving force behind the persuasive presentations of truth” (p. 118). Additionally, Rodnes et al. (2021), in a study exploring how microblogs can be used to facilitate dialogue in the classroom, found that microblogging allows for the combination of written and oral discussions that strengthen group connections and encourage explicit reasoning and engagement in others’ ideas.

Social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook offer users the ability to share information through concise written messages. This microblogging feature on social media allows individuals to present arguments to their audience and receive immediate feedback. SMIs leverage microblogging to share insights about their lives, discuss the products they use or endorse, and establish connections with their followers. In a study examining microblogging in the context of a barista influencer, Viki Rahardja, Apridita, and Nofandrilla (2021) observed that microblogging enables influencers to create and distribute content swiftly, in a manner that is both immediate and clear, employing straightforward language. In the case of Rahardja, microblogging is utilized to share his experiences in the coffee industry, offer tips on perfecting latte art techniques, and engage in open discussions with fellow baristas and consumers. This study revealed that employing a creative, distinctive, inspiring, and easily comprehensible writing style can capture the attention of a broad audience, thereby enhancing its persuasive appeal (2021).

A Critical Evaluation of Aristotle’s Rhetorical Triangle in Health Communications

The use of rhetoric is evident in contemporary health communication campaigns. In health communications, public health professionals aim to “prevent” and “promote” information pertaining to particular health issues. The strategies that are employed are often rhetorical, centering on persuasive strategies intended to move people from words to action (Malkowski &

Meloncon, 2019). For example, in employing the ethos appeal, the citing of prominent medical experts or scientific studies is used to enhance the credibility of the information source (Shiavo, 2013). Through the pathos appeal, personal experience, and testimonials are used to invoke “fear”; heightening uncertainty and anxiety, thereby encouraging the audience to rely on their emotions in their decision- making process (Peng, Lim, & Meng, 2022). Lastly, when it comes to health communications, persuasion through the logos appeal incorporates fact-based messaging that appeals to the logic and reasoning of the audience.

Each of the rhetorical appeals serves a unique role in the art of persuasion, but when it comes to health communications, especially concerning medication instructions and preventive treatments, the use of logos takes on a prominent role. Providing logical and fact-based information is a critical element of health messaging. However, relying solely on this approach may not be as persuasive as one might expect. For instance, in situations where the target audience has low functional health literacy, the use of logos as the primary messaging strategy may fall short in effectively persuading the audience. Functional health literacy is defined as the “ability of self-care, following medical instructions, and understanding the healthcare system” (Chu & Mejia, 2013). The audience should be able to comprehend the information that is being presented to them and when there are barriers to that understanding (i.e. language, education, culture), the logos appeal may not be most persuasive.

In health campaigns, while logos plays a predominant role in the communications of health professionals and public health agencies, it is important to incorporate all rhetorical appeals in the messaging. “The importance of the combined use of all the three means of persuasion lies in the fact that logos, ethos, and pathos are complementary since they activate specific

sides of the listener's mind and emotions to varying extents" (Ilie, 2006; De-Micile, 2021, para. 6). For the United Kingdom and Italy, this was a proven tactic during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In public speeches regarding the COVID-19 virus made by Prime Minister Conte (Italy) and Prime Minister Johnson (UK), all three appeals were used to persuade their audience to take action. Both PMs conveyed their leadership and the reliability of COVID-19 policies through ethos, used logos to defend government interventions by providing reasons to believe in the virus risks, and offered instructions and coping responses. Additionally, the theme of "togetherness" was employed through pathos to appeal to the audience's emotional senses, instilling hope and optimism (De-Micile, 2021).

While health agencies craft persuasive content, it sometimes assumes that these agencies or experts understand the issues that need to be addressed, people's health preferences and goals, and what's best for the community (Oxman et al., 2022). However, Oxman et al. (2022) also discovered that messages designed to persuade may have adverse effects, negatively influencing how individuals make informed decisions, eroding public trust in health authorities, and resulting in non-compliance. Although rhetorical appeals are effective tools in health communication, the rhetorical context, particularly concerning the functional health literacy of the audience, must be taken into account when using each appeal to successfully persuade the audience and ensure their adoption of health information.

Narrative Paradigm

As Christians, we know of the power of storytelling. It was through the generational passing down of stories that allowed us to learn of God's gift of creation, His almighty power, His authority, and His love and forgiveness. From the story of Adam and Eve to the story of the mass

exodus to the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ, each story embodied in the Bible is embodied in our faith as Christians. Each story helped to build our foundation as Christians and guide our lives in our service to Him. One of the greatest storytellers was our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Through his use of parables, Jesus understood the value of storytelling as it allowed him to persuade thousands of followers to trust, love, and become faithful followers.

Today, narration continues to be a powerful tool in persuasion. In the understanding that storytelling is in our human nature, the theory of the narrative paradigm emerged. Walter Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm suggests that rhetoric (argument) is not the only form of rationality operating in messages. While each rhetorical appeal is important, the use of narrative is equally important in communication. Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm consists of five core assumptions: (1) Humans, by nature, are storytellers; (2) The dominant mode of human decision-making and communication involves the presentation of 'sound justifications,' which may take different forms in various communication scenarios, genres, and mediums; (3) The generation and application of sound justifications are influenced by historical context, individual experiences, cultural factors, and personal characteristics, as well as the forces outlined in the Frentz and Farrell language action paradigm; (4) Rationality is shaped by the human condition as narrative beings – their inherent sense of *narrative probability*, their understanding of what constitutes a coherent narrative, and their ongoing practice of assessing *narrative fidelity*, ensuring that the stories they encounter align with the stories they hold as truthful in their own lives (narrative probability and narrative fidelity) . . . and (5) The world is an array of narratives from which one must select in order to lead a fulfilling life, a process that involves continuous reinterpretation (p. 7-8).

Fisher (1984) argues that “human beings are fundamentally storytelling creatures; therefore, the most persuasive or influential message is not that of rational fact, but instead, a narrative that convinces us of “good reasons” for engaging in a particular action or belief” (p.120). Just as rhetoric was used to encourage debate in the public forum, narratives facilitate the sharing of ideas and experiences. Through the multiplicity embedded in narratives, a source for social negotiations and conversations between people is created (Flory & Iglesias, 2010).

In the past, persuasion was conventionally believed to arise primarily from rational thought (logos). However, the use of narratives has demonstrated its effectiveness in the art of persuasion. According to Fisher (1984), unlike traditional rationality, narrative rationality relies on two crucial factors: narrative probability and narrative fidelity.

Narrative probability is linked to the coherence of a story, specifically the consistency in the behavior of the characters. To be persuasive, one must communicate in a manner that makes sense to the audience. This necessitates a coherent narrative structure. According to Fisher (1984), the audience judges the coherence of a narrative by assessing whether the story "hangs together." For instance, readers or audiences may attribute narrative coherence based on the story's credibility, consistency, and authenticity. On the other hand, narrative fidelity pertains to the credibility and relatability of the story.

As Fisher (1984) states, “Does it ring true?” For example, does the story match our own beliefs and experiences and how does it fit into the concept of the world we know (Li et al., 2019). “Narratives are intrinsically persuasive because they describe a particular experience rather than general truths. Narratives have no need to justify the accuracy of their claims; the story itself demonstrates the claim” (p. 117).

Narration and the Influencer Effect

SMIs are the storytellers of social media. Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok enable influencers to share their everyday experiences and build a rapport with their followers. This connection is forged through their daily posts and interactions with their audience, as well as their skill in crafting narratives that resonate with people who share similar interests. Furthermore, by seemingly sharing unfiltered personal stories, influencers can enhance the genuine quality of their messages, which enables them to disseminate information using techniques like fostering familiarity and relatability (2022). Through the consistency and credibility of their narratives, SMIs create a perception of authenticity and relatability that can emotionally, logically, and ethically engage their audience.

Authenticity. According to Petraglia (2009), ‘persuasion is at the core of authentication; authenticity is not an intrinsic property possessed by information, it is a judgment, a decision made on the part of the learner based on prior experience and sociocultural context’ (p. 179). Perceived authenticity can be defined as “the perceived uniqueness, originality, and/or genuineness of a person, organization, or idea” (Luoma-aho et al, 2019, p. 354; Molleda, 2010). Meanwhile, Hendry et al. (2021) posit that the success of an influencer in gaining and keeping their following relies on a perception of authenticity.

Authenticity enhances the understanding of the message as it improves message receptivity and enhances the perceived quality of the message (Audrezet, Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020). “The value of authenticity for learning is not whether health information is objectively true, but rather how learners perceive health information as authentic” (Petraglia, 2009; Hendry et al., 2021, p. 5). In particular, narratives allow influencers to talk about particular health information

in a way that suggests that they are authentic and credible sources of information (Wellman, 2022).

In the context of SMIs in the health and wellness industry, through the narration of their daily activities and the transparency of their posts, followers perceive influencers as “real” and “authentic”. Additionally, the attempts to be “real” provide a counter-narrative to the “picture-perfect” imagery used by other online users, thus cultivating authenticity among influencers (Hendry et al., 2021). SMIs develop content that allows online users to see a real and personal side of their lives, therefore projecting a level of perceived authenticity to their audience.

SMIs also seek to appear authentic “to create closeness with their followers” (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022, p. 239; Kuhn and Riesmeyer, 2021). Through their engagement in ‘storying the everyday’ and the sharing of both mundane and vulnerable life experiences, SMIs are successful at cultivating authenticity (p.545). “The perceived unedited sharing of personal stories increases the authentic feel of the message and provides a way for influencers to spread information using tactics of familiarity” (Wellman, 2022, p. 50). According to recent studies, ephemeral tools, such as Instagram stories, positively impact the perceived authenticity of online users (Kreling et al., 2022). Through “stories”, SMIs share pictures, vlogs, and memes that illustrate their daily life experiences. Additionally, perceived authenticity is strengthened when SMIs reply to follower comments or create content in response to audience requests (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022) as they can create a connection with their followers.

Relatedness. Narratives in health communications help to build community and a sense of relatedness between the author and the audience. Chen and Bell (2016) opine that the similarities between the audience and the narrative’s protagonist (not the narrator’s point of view), have

a direct impact on the persuasiveness of the narrative. Storytelling provides people with an opportunity to connect and relate, allowing individuals to think about viewpoints outside of their own, as well as share experiences with others (Hughes et al., 2022). For instance, influencers who have struggled with weight loss or other health-related issues may appear more credible when discussing the products or programs they used to overcome their health issue. Through transformation pictures and the documentation of their experience on Instagram, their endorsement of a particular product or program may be perceived as more trustworthy and credible by online users (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016).

Another study on public service announcements (PSAs) found that when real people were used as spokespeople versus actors, overweight viewers will be stimulated to seek information as the spokesperson was perceived as genuine (Phua & Tinkham, 2016; Xu, Li, and Shan, 2021). Research continues to support the idea that SMIs are viewed as, not only more trustworthy but more credible for providing in-depth and thoughtful information due to the perception of being “authentic” and “ordinary people” (Delbaere et al., 2020; Johnson & Kaye, 2004).

A Critical Evaluation of Narrative Theory in Health Communications

According to Littlejohn et al. (2017), narratives used in health communications illustrate what it means to be healthy or unhealthy, as well as the consequences of illness and health. In health communications, narrative messaging often comes in the form of anecdotes, testimonials, and other stories to capture the attention of the audience by engaging them cognitively and emotionally (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007; Kreuter et al, 2007; Shen et al, 2015). Narratives continue to demonstrate their effectiveness in changing attitudes and behaviors as they relate to health topics. In a study conducted on users’ intentions to adopt social media health information, Li et al.

(2019) found that “creating a good story in health communications is important, maybe even more so than providing logical, scientific arguments or statistical figures” (p.123). This was re-confirmed in another study conducted by Kreuter et al (2010)

In a study examining the impact of narratives in pre-cancer screenings, Kreuter et al. (2010) discovered that narrative forms of communication can enhance the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing cancer-related health disparities. The study involved 484 African-American women who were divided into two groups: one group watched a narrative video featuring testimonials from breast cancer survivors, while the other group watched an informational video that presented facts. The results revealed that individuals who viewed the narrative video reported fewer obstacles to undergoing mammography and a stronger intention to get a mammogram compared to those who watched the informational video. Additionally, women who watched the narrative video were more likely to recall and share information from the video, including its content, messages, and messengers, three to six months later.

Ting et al. (2020) also found that narratives create a sense of community and support for patients, with narratives like survivor stories often carrying more emotional weight than facts or statistics. While facts and statistics provide valuable information, as Ting et al. (2020) observed, they may not be as effective at motivating individuals to take preventive measures. For instance, numerous forums exist where cancer survivors can share their personal narratives. The American Cancer Society's Cancer Survivors Network serves as a public, open platform for individuals to exchange their experiences with others. Through these stories, individuals can learn from each other, gaining insights into topics such as the latest treatments, chemotherapy side effects, and medications, which can help them make informed decisions regarding their own treatment. Nar-

ratives possess a "pathos" appeal as they elicit emotional responses from the audience, encouraging them to take action. Furthermore, narratives offer an alternative avenue for the industry to connect with communities that may lack the functional health literacy necessary to comprehend "facts" and "data."

Criticism of the Narrative Paradigm

While narratives appear to be an effective tool in persuasive communications, scholars believe that Fisher's narrative paradigm is too broad, particularly as it relates to Fisher's argument on narrative rationality. Fisher posits that "the only way to determine whether or not a story is a mask for ulterior motives is to test it against the principles of narrative probability and fidelity" (Fisher, 1985, p.364). However, scholars continue to argue that narrative rationality is too broad in terms of assessing and interpreting the validity of a narrative. Warnick (1987) argues that while a narrative may resonate with the audience and be relevant to their lives, it does not necessarily make it a good story. With storytelling, "there usually exists tacitly boundaries between what can and cannot be narrated" (Bourdieu, 1977; Morooka, 2002, para. 8).

While narratives may be personal accounts of historical events in one's life, the act of applying "tacit boundaries" through the omission or alteration of details may occur. For example, an SMI may tell the story of their weight-loss transformation and in doing so, facts may have been purposively omitted to protect the credibility of the source and message, as well as protect the audience (i.e. use of performance enhancement drugs, extreme dieting, plastic surgery). While the story appears to have narrative fidelity and probability with the audience, key details may be purposively omitted or altered to reflect the altered reality of the author, thus remaining unbeknownst to the audience.

According to critics, Fisher posits that the most persuasive message does not come from a rational argument, but rather a narrative that convinces the audience of “good reasons” for engaging in a particular action or belief (Dainton & Zelley, 2004). According to Morooka (2002), there is much more to the motive behind narration than establishing “good reasons”, rather:

The biggest problem with the narrative paradigm is that any story is deemed good insofar as it rings true with what particular audiences perceive as true in their daily lives. That is, by reducing the tests of good reasons to those of narrative probability and fidelity, Fisher overlooks the fact that coherent and consistent stories are often used as means of social control. (para. 8)

The use of narratives as a tool for social control is evident in various domains, including the media, politics, and the public health sector. A notable example of Morooka's critique can be observed in the narratives employed to encourage Americans to receive the COVID-19 vaccination. Media outlets, politicians, and prominent public figures shared stories about individuals and families who had lost loved ones to COVID-19. They also narrated accounts of unvaccinated individuals who succumbed to the virus and expressed regret on their deathbeds, wishing they had received the vaccination.

For those who were already in favor of vaccination, the narratives crafted by the government and leading health organizations like the CDC effectively persuaded them to comply with vaccination recommendations. However, for those who opposed the mandatory COVID-19 vaccination, these narratives, from their perspective, lacked narrative rationality, thus failing to convince them to comply with vaccination recommendations. In some cases, these individuals became even more resistant to the idea. Jansen (2003) notes that persuasive messages, especially

when embedded deeply within a narrative, may be perceived as a threat to one's freedom, leading to heightened skepticism, immediate rejection, and increased resistance.

While narratives continue to be a popular and effective persuasive strategy, skepticism and criticism persist regarding the effectiveness of narrative rationality as a complement to traditional rationality. Nevertheless, despite the criticisms, the use of narratives remains a prevalent and influential tactic in persuasive communication aimed at instigating changes in behavior and attitudes.

According to Gradner et al (2013), the narrative paradigm integrates all three pillars of persuasion: ethos, pathos, and logos to “present one's audience with ‘good reasons’ that generate a sense of ‘what is good’ and ‘what is reasonable’” (p.5). As with rhetorical appeals, when done with careful consideration of the source, the audience, and the message, narratives can be an effective tactic in the “art of persuasion”.

Summary

Digital media technology has brought about a significant transformation in how we communicate, be it on a personal, interpersonal, or professional level. SMIs have harnessed these technological advancements, positioning themselves as prominent figures in the health and wellness sector. Leveraging their creativity and the ability to actively engage with online users, SMIs have managed to establish a level of credibility with their followers, even if they lack full qualifications in a particular area of expertise. Furthermore, they excel in connecting with their audience on an emotional level, making them effective and persuasive communicators in the health and wellness field.

The art of persuasion, utilizing rhetorical appeals like ethos, pathos, and logos, alongside the incorporation of narratives (mythos), remains a widely adopted strategy among both SMIs and SMEs in the health and wellness industry. Through Aristotle's rhetorical triangle, communicators can tap into their audience's beliefs, emotions, and reasoning. Although Aristotle emphasized the importance of "ethos," each appeal plays a crucial role in persuading the audience to adopt a message or change their behavior or attitude. In the realm of health communication, rhetorical appeals, especially logos and pathos, continue to be pivotal strategies for influencing individuals to modify behaviors or attitudes related to specific health issues.

Moreover, the utilization of storytelling remains an effective persuasive tool, particularly in the context of health. The narrative paradigm posits that humans are innate storytellers, and narratives can convince us of "good reasons" for embracing specific actions or beliefs. Fisher's narrative paradigm delves into the effectiveness of storytelling as a persuasive strategy. Research, including Kreuter et al. (2010), has demonstrated how the incorporation of narratives in pre-cancer screening videos enhances information retention among patients and increases their likelihood of taking preventive measures related to pre-cancer screenings. Through the use of narratives, messages appear more genuine and relatable, fostering an emotional connection between the speaker and the audience.

This study, guided by the rhetorical framework, aims to provide insights into the persuasive techniques employed by both SMIs and SMEs in their endeavors to persuade individuals to adopt health information. Chapter One established the rationale for exploring the role of SMIs in health communications. Chapter Two reviewed existing literature on SMIs and their communication methods. Additionally, it presented literature supporting the rhetorical framework, including

the rhetorical triangle and narrative paradigm, as the foundational theories of this study. Chapter Three details the methods used in the content and comparative analysis of digital media by SMIs and SMEs in the field of health and wellness, along with an overview of the overall research process.

Purpose Revisited

The purpose of this study is to explore the rhetorical and persuasive communication tactics of SMIs and their ability to persuade online users to adopt health information. SMIs have the unique ability to reach a large audience, establish credibility with their followers, and engage and connect with individuals in their respective online communities. Unlike SMEs, who rely primarily on logic and scientifically backed resources in communicating, SMIs can attract and maintain a large audience through various communication tactics, including the incorporation of rhetorical appeals and storytelling. The study's research questions will allow for a complete understanding of the persuasive nature of the communication tactics employed by SMIS in the health and wellness industry. It will also provide SMEs with the knowledge of how to be more persuasive in their messaging.

1. **Research Question 1:** How are the rhetorical strategies of ethos, pathos, logos, and mythos used by SMIs in the dissemination of health information on Instagram and TikTok?

The first question seeks to explore how SMIs the rhetorical appeals, including ethos, pathos, and logos, as well as mythos (narration) in their social media content on Instagram and TikTok. This question is grounded in the framework of Aristotle's rhetorical triangle. The litera-

ture and research attained will be utilized for discussing the key persuasive and rhetorical strategies that are used in health communications.

2. Research Question 2: What are the differences in persuasive communication tactics between SMIs and SMEs in the sharing of health information on social media?

The second research question seeks to evaluate the differences in rhetoric between the social media content of SMIS and SMEs. Understanding the differences in rhetorical and persuasive messaging between SMIs and SMEs will improve the understanding of the gaps in communication between SMEs and online users.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this study is to understand and explore the rhetorical nature of the digital communication strategies employed by SMIs in the delivery of health information. Additionally, this study seeks to understand and compare how SMIs and SMEs deliver health communication through social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Through a qualitative approach, the author endeavors to gain a comprehensive understanding of the persuasive communication methods employed by SMIs to encourage online users to embrace health information. Subsequent chapters will delineate the methodology, research design, procedures, and the measures implemented to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of this study, encompassing ethical considerations.

Qualitative research adopts a naturalistic approach, seeking to comprehend a phenomenon by examining it and interpreting the significance attributed to it by individuals (Cypress, 2014). To explore the role of SMIs in health communication, a content analysis was conducted on 15 highly influential SMIs and 15 SMEs within the health and wellness sector. All the social media profiles scrutinized are public accounts on the platforms Instagram and/or TikTok. There was no direct interaction between the researcher and the SMIs and SMEs. The social media content of both SMIs and prominent health and wellness organizations was gathered and analyzed to identify emerging themes in the persuasive communication strategies employed to sway online users into adopting health information. These emerging themes will be expounded upon in Chapter 4. The subsequent section will provide an extensive account of the research design, the

researcher's role, an explanation of the data collection and analysis process, and address any ethical concerns associated with the study.

Research Method and Design

To explore how SMIs use persuasion to influence their followers to adopt health communication information, qualitative research was used. Creswell (2014) defines qualitative research as an approach used for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals and groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Qualitative methods, according to Lakshman et al (2000), take a holistic perspective that preserves the complexities of human behavior, exploring the “what”, “why”, or “how” of a social phenomenon. To explore the persuasive communication methods of SMIs, the rhetorical analysis approach was used.

Rhetorical analysis provides an understanding of the rhetorical strategies speakers/authors use to persuade their audience to do and think about something. According to Marcotte and Stokowski (2021), there are three goals of rhetorical analysis, 1) explain what is happening in the content; 2) explain why the author may have chosen a particular rhetorical appeal or combination of appeals in their content; and 3) explain how those choices may affect the audience. Traditionally, rhetorical analysis focused on oratorical texts (i.e. speeches), however with today's emergence of digital communication technology, rhetorical analysis has been extended to include posts and comments on online forums (i.e. discussion groups and blogs) and social media platforms (Anand et al, 2011; Savolainen, 2014).

Though not formal arguments (classical rhetoric), social media communication engages “new literacies” in the contemporary interpretation of rhetoric (Fife, 2010; Marcotte & Stokowski, 2021, p.3). Digital communication content, such as social media posts, contains written and

visual texts in which rhetorical qualities can be found. The persuasive potential of this content is found through the nature of the content, forms, and styles of written texts, and the visual images used and can be analyzed with Aristotle's three rhetorical appeals: ethos, pathos, and logos (Marcotte & Stokowksi, 2021; Rodden, 2008). Rhetorical analysis is more than summarizing what is composed or produced regarding content; it is about discerning what rhetorical appeal the author is using to persuade their audience.

Research Questions

A fundamental step in the research process is to have an understanding of the purpose of the study. Therefore, research questions have been established that help to not only narrow the purpose of this qualitative study but also focus on precisely what we are trying to understand (Terrell, 2016). The development of the research questions was worked deductively, from general to specific questions (Punch, 2014). According to Foss (2018), research questions tend to focus on four key components of the communication process, including (1) the rhetor; (2) the audience; (3) the situation; and (4) the message. Through this study, the author seeks to explore the key characteristics of social media content developed and explore how rhetorical appeals and persuasion are used in the dissemination of health information by SMIs. Additionally, through a comparative analysis of SMI and SME social media content, the author seeks an understanding of the key differences in persuasive communication tactics and how they encourage online users to adopt health information.

Research Question 1: How are the rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos used by SMIs in disseminating health information?

Research Question 2: What are the differences in persuasive communication tactics between SMIs and SMEs in the sharing of health information on social media?

Setting

The data collected for this study was retrieved from the social media platforms - Instagram and TikTok. The SMI's use of social media in the dissemination of messages is one of the keys to their success. The social media platform, Instagram, is the biggest and most popular platform for influencers, particularly as it relates to influencer marketing (Bentley et al., 2021). Instagram has established itself as the “most important social network for influencers as it enables the most effective interaction with their own network” (Hashoff, 2017, p. 2; Pilgrim & Bohent-Joschko, 2019). According to the International Health, Racquet, and Sportsclub Association (IHRSA) (2022), there are over 400 million daily users of Instagram; 180 million use the hashtag #fitness; 150 million Instagram users actively engage with the video application of Instagram Stories every day.

This platform is also popular for both influencers and online users ages 18-35. According to recent statistics on social media platform usage, Instagram is predicted to reach close to one billion users by 2023; remaining a popular social media platform among young adults with nearly 80% of Instagram users being Y and Z generations (Yilmazdogan et al., 2021). Additionally, recent statistics show that 21.5% of all Instagram users have more than 10, 000 followers; 5.6% have more than 50,000, amounting to millions of potential influencers (Hanelein et al., 2020).

Platforms such as Instagram provide a rich content format consisting of images and videos versus a text-based platform such as Twitter, allowing SMIs to attract and obtain a significant following (Haenlein et al., 2020). Instagram also added the interactive ability to share “sto-

ries” and “reels”. Instagram stories are a multimodal communication strategy that includes 60-second videos or pictures that appear in a slideshow format available to be viewed by followers. SMIs can post multiple pictures throughout the day without having to post them on their profile timeline. Additionally, to match the popularity of the video-sharing platform, TikTok, Instagram added the “reels” feature to its platform. Through “reels”, SMIs can post videos and share them with all Instagram users, thereby increasing their reach and increasing their following.

Besides Instagram, data was also gathered from the social media platform, TikTok. Similar to Instagram, TikTok stands as a prominent digital platform extensively utilized by Social Media Influencers (SMIs). In 2018, amid the burgeoning popularity of video-oriented social media platforms, TikTok made its foray into the realm of digital media. TikTok offers online users the capacity to craft and disseminate brief videos, typically ranging from 15 to 60 seconds in length, to a global audience. According to recent statistics, there are roughly 136 million active users in the United States, with 43% falling within the age bracket of 18 to 24, and users spending an average of 46 minutes per day on the platform (D’Souza, 2022). Boasting over one billion daily active users (D’Souza, 2022), TikTok has emerged as a favored social media platform for SMIs to share information, endorse products or programs, and cultivate substantial followings.

Participants

Participants for this study were chosen from a purposive sampling of SMIs and SMEs with active online profiles on Instagram and/or TikTok. Purposive sampling relies on the researchers’ situated knowledge of the field and rapport with members of targeted networks (Barratt et al., 2014, p.5). To conduct a comparative analysis of the communication methods of SMIs and SMEs, the social media content of the two groups of participants (Group A and Group B)

will be analyzed. All participants will be assigned an individual code (SMI1 -15; SME 1-15) to help organize the data.

Table 1

Group A: Social Media Influencers

Group A: Social Media Influencers			
Code	Activation Date	# of Followers	Specialty
SMI1	June 2013	1.1M	Fitness
SMI2	Feb 2013	134K IG	Fitness
SMI3* (Hybrid)	Aug 2013	1.2M	Fitness, PhD
SMI4	June 2012	17.6M	Fitness & Nutrition
SMI5	June 2012	2.6M	Fitness
SMI6	Aug 2021	1.3M	Fitness & Nutrition
SMI7	Dec 2011	13.9M	Fitness & Lifestyle
SMI8	Apr 2012	4.6M	Fitness & Nutrition
SMI9	July 2011	15.9M	Fitness & Nutrition
SMI10	Mar 2013	503K	Nutrition
SMI11	June 2013	2.1M	Fitness
SMI12* (Hybrid)	June 2020	1.3M	Nutrition, RD, LDN
SMI13	Dec 2013	15.6M	Fitness
SMI14	June 2012	1.4M	Fitness/Crossfit
SMI15	Jan 2012	8.2M	Fitness

Group A (see Table 1) consists of 15 predominant social media influencers. The criteria established in selecting SMIs include: 1) SMIs must be non-celebrities; 2) have over 100K followers; and 3) actively develop content for multiple social media platforms that relate to the

health and wellness industry. For this participant sample, 7 participants were male and 8 participants were female. The SMIs were selected in accordance with various online sources citing 2022 top influencers. In the selection process of participants, consideration was given to ensure variety in specialties and personal backgrounds, including ethnicity and geographic location.

Group B, as detailed in Table 2, comprises 15 individuals and entities operating in the health and wellness domain, primarily representing SMEs. The selection criteria employed for the inclusion of SMEs encompass the following: 1) Possession of a Master's Degree and/or Ph.D. pertinent to the health and wellness sector; 2) Accumulation of professional experience amounting to no less than 600 hours of practical engagement within the field; and 3) Sustenance of an active online presence on social media platforms, typically entailing the generation of 2 to 5 posts each week. Furthermore, the health organizations incorporated within this cohort were meticulously chosen based on their recognition as nationally accredited and globally acknowledged bodies specializing in health and wellness. These organizations actively maintain accounts on Instagram and/or TikTok.

Table 2

Group B: Subject-Matter Experts

Group B: Subject-Matter Experts				
Code	Activation Date	# of Followers	Specialty	Credentials
SME1		106K	Exercise Science	PhD Exercise Science;
SME2	Sep 2015	197K	Exercise Science	PhD
SME3	Jan 2015	144K	Exercise Science	PhD; Performance Coach

Group B: Subject-Matter Experts				
SME4		5,377	Health and Wellness	NASM Master Trainer
SME5	Jan 2016	329K	Health and Wellness	PhD; Researcher and educator
SME 6	June 2017	268K	Wellness	M.D.
SME7	July 2019	9,141	Nutrition	MS, RDN
SME8* (Hybrid)	July 2012	806K	Nutrition	PhD Nutrition Science
SME9	May 2012	45.3K	Nutrition	Dietician; Sports Nutrition Coach
SME10	May 2013	41K	Nutrition	RD
SME11	May 2013	237K	Health and Wellness	Accredited Certifying Body
SME12	Feb 2013	56.8K	Health and Wellness	Accredited Certifying Body
SME13	Feb 2013	82.9K	Health and Wellness	Accredited Certifying Body
SME14	Nov 2013	134K	Fitness and Nutrition	Industry Educator in Performance and Corporate Wellness
SME15	Oct 2014	379K	Nutrition	Certifying Body

Within this particular sample, 5 participants are SMEs specializing in nutrition, another 5 are SMEs concentrating on fitness, and the remaining 5 represent prominent health and wellness organizations. The SMEs who were invited to partake in this study were identified based on their established eminence within the industry, functioning as educators, trainers, coaches, and registered dietitians. Additionally, relying on my previous professional involvement in the fitness sector, I sought recommendations from active associates working within the health and wellness domain to formulate a list of SMEs worthy of consideration. Selection for inclusion was extended to those SMEs who garnered endorsements from multiple sources, and the final determination was predicated on their educational background, professional expertise, and active engagement

on social media. It's important to note that a number of the recommended SMEs did not exhibit active involvement in social media, an aspect that will be addressed and expounded upon in Chapter 5. Furthermore, a couple of participants, namely SMI3, SMI 12, and SME8, have been categorized as hybrid participants, as their roles can be delineated as both SMIs and SMEs.

Procedures

For this study, new personal Instagram and TikTok accounts were established by the researcher to avoid issues with existing algorithms embedded in the current account, additionally, it will help to maintain the organization of the SMIs and SMEs on a daily timeline. Through personal access to Instagram and TikTok, the researcher followed the profile pages of the participants in Group A and Group B, if available. A sample of posts from three months (January - March 2023) were recorded, averaging 3-5 posts per week for each participant. Additionally, the Instagram stories, when available, were captured and transcribed. A database was established to maintain the collected data points.

Owing to the extensive amount of data collected (830 data points), meticulous notes were taken regarding the context of each post. This included the specific mode used to communicate, a detailed description of the mode, transcription of the written blog, and any tags added to the post. All data collected was organized, coded, and analyzed through the process of rhetorical content analysis. In addition, a comparison analysis of the use of rhetorical appeals in the social media content of SMIs and SMEs was conducted and will be presented in Chapter 4.

Researcher's Role

The researcher has an extensive background as an SME in the health and wellness industry and holds a master's degree in Exercise Science and Communications. The researcher is cur-

rently pursuing a Ph.D. in Communications at the time of this study. Additionally, the researcher has experience with social media platforms, Instagram and TikTok, and social media content creation. With experience in the industry and experience as a micro-influencer, the researcher has ethnographic knowledge of the fitness community, allowing her to understand the terminology shared and understood among fitness enthusiasts. These experiences will help to provide accuracy with the data collection and analysis.

Terrell (2016) stated that in qualitative research, research is generally conducted from an emic (insider) perspective as the researcher maintains direct involvement, collaborates, and interacts with the research participants. For this study, the researcher was a non-participant and did not interact with any of the selected SMIs or SMEs whose content was being collected and analyzed. While the researcher has experience as an SME in the health and wellness industry, to avoid bias, the researcher practiced bracketing. Bracketing, according to Starks and Trinidad (2007), is when the researcher can recognize and set aside prior knowledge and assumptions with the goal of interpreting the participants' accounts with an unbiased and open-minded approach. While having preconceived knowledge of the subject and familiarity with the context can be advantageous to the research, it is important that this does not affect the interpretations of the results (Bengtsson, 2016).

Data Collection

The data collection for this study consisted of content analysis of the social media content of SMIs and SMEs, including postings and videos, on the social media platforms, Instagram and TikTok. The researcher collected a series of posts over three months from each selected influencer, including Instagram posts, stories, reels, and TikTok videos, to examine the persuasive

communication tactics of SMIs. Additionally, to conduct a comparative analysis, social media content from the selected SMEs and health organizations was collected. All content was transcribed and coded for further analysis.

The following data was collected from each Instagram post:

- 1) Captions (Micro-blogs): Sentences were transcribed from each post; paragraphs were summarized to capture particular persuasive tactics employed by the participants.
- 2) Followers: The number of followers for each participant was recorded.
- 3) Visual descriptions: The context of the pictures posted was detailed (i.e. textual/visual description, location, picture/video quality).
- 4) Interaction: Response comments from SMIs and SMEs to online-user comments were collected and transcribed, particularly in posts that encouraged interaction.
- 5) Tags: Hashtags, location tags, corporate, and other personal tags used by both SMIs and SMEs were collected as representatives of the symbols used by SMIs and SMEs.
- 6) Video/Audio: If the SMI or SME used video or audio for a post, the post was described in detail.
- 7) Instagram Stories/Reels: Screenshots of the Instagram stories over three months were captured. Detailed descriptions were provided for each video.

The following data will be collected from TikTok:

- 1) TikTok videos: All videos were transcribed and described fully.
- 2) Captions: If available, captions of videos were transcribed.

Table 3*Template for Data Collection*

Data Collection (SAMPLE)							Notes
CODE	Date	Platform	Mode	Visual Description	Caption/Audio Transcription	# of Likes/ Shares	
SMI1							
SMI15							
SME1							
SME15							

Data Analysis

To analyze the collected data, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on the social media posts authored by both SMIs and SMEs. As described by Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017), the aim of qualitative content analysis is to systematically distill a substantial volume of textual data into a well-organized and concise summary of the primary findings. Content analysis serves as a valuable tool for deciphering communication patterns and gaining deeper insights into various aspects, including behaviors, attitudes, values, emotions, and opinions (Crosley, 2021).

In the context of this study, the goal was to gain a deeper comprehension of the persuasive communication strategies employed by SMIs and the attributes within their content that contribute to their persuasive impact on online users. This was achieved by applying a rhetorical analysis approach. Through the use of rhetorical analysis, the researcher aimed to elucidate the underlying dynamics within the textual and visual content. This included understanding what the

content conveyed, why the creators opted for specific rhetorical appeals, and how these choices could influence their audience. As advised by Jeffrey and Zickel (2017), the initial step in this analysis is data immersion. During this phase, the researcher immerses themselves in the data to develop an overall sense of the content before breaking it down into distinct units for examination (Forman & Damschroder, 2007).

The first step involved forming general observations of the content. This encompassed providing an initial impression of the content's impact (e.g., the emotional responses it elicited or notable aspects within a given post). These observations were collated in Table 4. Additionally, during this observation phase, apparent themes were identified and supplemented with relevant notes. Memoing also commenced at this stage, where general hypotheses about the data, anticipated data directions, and observed connections between various themes were recorded. This comprehensive process facilitated a holistic understanding of the collected content.

Table 4

Data Collection (General Observation)

Data Collection General Observation (Step 1)						
Participant	Post Date	Platform	Mode	General Observation	Themes	Notes
SMI1						
SMI15						
SME1						
SME15						

The second step of rhetorical analysis is to re-read/view and summarize the post. According to Gagich and Zickel (2017), it is important to describe the main points that the author is making before analyzing them. Upon a second review of the content, the rhetorical situation of the posts (i.e. author, audience, setting, purpose, and text) was summarized. The researcher also identified the author and their background as it relates to the subject of the content. As it pertains to the audience, the audience is any one person or group of people who is the intended recipient of the message and also whom the creator of the post is trying to persuade. Additionally, identifying the setting requires looking at the occasion or event that prompted the creation of the post. To identify the purpose, it is important to understand the motivating factor behind the creation of the message. For example, what did the creator hope to achieve or hope to persuade their audience to achieve? And lastly, what format was the text created with and why was it created that way? (2017).

The third step of the data analysis was the process of reduction. The phase of reduction, as per Forman and Damschroder (2007), is a systematic approach to the data that helps to reduce the amount of raw data to that which is relevant to the research questions, break the data into themes and thematic segments, and reorganize the data into categories that address the research questions specifically. This phase required another thorough analysis of the posts and looking at how the creators shaped the content about the rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, logos, and mythos).

To effectively manage and make sense of the extensive amount of collected data, a coding process was employed as an organizational method. MAXQDA, a software tool designed for qualitative and quantitative data analysis, was utilized in this study to conduct the coding and

data analysis. Coding constitutes a pivotal phase in qualitative analysis and involves the researcher assigning specific codes, tags, or labels to individual data points to facilitate organization. As explained by Punch (2014), the purpose of labeling data is to ascribe meaning to each piece of information. In both Group A and Group B, the two distinct sets of data, content was categorized based on shared themes relevant to the persuasive communication strategies used by SMIs and SMEs.

A hybrid approach to coding was employed, combining both deductive and inductive coding techniques. Deductive coding entails that codes emerge as the researcher progresses through the coding process, whereas inductive codes draw upon a set of codes informed by research questions or previous research (Crosley, 2021). The hybrid approach allowed the use of established codes from prior research and existing literature (inductive coding), such as ethos, pathos, logos, and mythos. Simultaneously, it permitted the introduction of new codes via deductive coding, which emerged from the data itself, for instance, 'advertising.' The hybrid coding strategy facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the data.

Once the data had been coded, it was subjected to analysis to identify overarching patterns and generalizations that could inform the key persuasive tactics employed by SMIs contributing to their success in the realm of health information adoption within the health and wellness industry, as outlined in Table 5.

Table 5

Rhetorical Analysis (Coding)

Rhetorical Analysis				
Rhetorical Category	Primary Theme	Evidence from Data	Additional Themes	Explanation/ Notes
Ethos	(i) Expertise (ii) Trustworthiness (iii) Character (iv) Attractiveness (v) Homophily			
Pathos	(i) Psychological Connectedness (ii) Parasocial interaction (iii) Engagement			
Logos	(i) Structure (ii) Enthymemes (iii) Microblogging			
Mythos	(i) Authenticity (ii) Relatedness			

Additionally, a comparative analysis of the persuasive tactics of SMIs and SMEs was conducted. The purpose of the comparative analysis is to determine if there were similarities or differences in the manner in which SMIs and SMEs employed rhetorical appeals and narration in their digital media content. This information will be presented in Chapter 4 and provide information on how SMEs can be more persuasive in the delivery of their messaging to online users in Chapter 5.

Trustworthiness

As Christians, our words actions, and values are a direct representation of our faith and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We are representatives of His kingdom and His word, therefore, as Christians, we must represent Him in a manner that is aligned with our Christian principles. Through our research, we must ensure that we maintain the integrity of our research, the

integrity of ourselves as researchers, and the integrity of the academic institution whom we represent. This requires us to employ measures that strengthen the trustworthiness of our work. “We are to be honest, compassionate, and generous not because these things are rewarding, but because they are right in and of themselves- because to do so honors the will of God and his design for human life” (Keller & Alsdorf, 2016, p.208).

As a researcher, it is important to establish strong criteria for the reliability and validity of the study, thus establishing the trustworthiness of the research. In qualitative research, the aim of trustworthiness is “to support the argument that the inquiry’s findings are worth paying attention to” (Elo et al, 2014, p. 2; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Maintaining the trustworthiness of the study requires that measures are put in place through every phase of the data collection and data analysis phase to ensure accuracy and rigor. Lincoln and Guba (1985) established four criteria for ensuring trustworthiness in research, including (1) credibility; (2) dependability; (3) conformability; and (4) transferability.

Credibility

The credibility of the research concerns the focus of the research and how well the data addresses the intended focus (Elo et al, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012). To maintain credibility, the researcher can employ the use of strategies such as triangulation, negative case analysis, and reflexivity. For this study, triangulation, negative case analysis, and persistent observation were used.

Triangulation

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), triangulation is the corroboration of evidence through multiple data sources. For the purposes of this study, multiple resources were collected,

including social media posts of SMIs and SMEs and recordings/transcripts of Instagram and TikTok stories. The data was to assess (1) the communication methods of both SMIs and SMEs, (2) the key differences in persuasive methods between SMIs and SMEs, and identify persuasive tactics that can be employed by SMEs in their efforts to reach a larger online audience.

Negative Case Analysis

During the data collection process, the researcher may discover information that contradicts the themes uncovered through the analysis. Negative case analysis allows the researcher to reference the data that may contradict the themes discovered in the research (Terrell, 2016). For this study, any data that was discovered that contradicts the themes that were established through coding will be mentioned in the results (Chapter 5).

Persistent Observation

With persistent observation, the researcher constantly reads and rereads the data, analyzing and revising the concepts accordingly (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This was done specifically in the coding process of the data analysis to help identify the key characteristics most relevant to the problem being studied (i.e. SMI persuasive communication methods).

Dependability and Confirmability

According to Terrell (2016), dependability in research signifies the consistency and replicability of the results of the study; confirmability requires the researcher to discuss their neutrality throughout the process. While triangulation can be used to enforce confirmability, three additional measures can be taken, including (1) confirmability audits; (2) audit trail; and (3) reflexivity.

Confirmability Audits

Confirmability audits provide an external perspective on the research's execution. Inviting individuals who were not part of the research process to assess the project enables an extra evaluation of the accuracy of the findings, interpretations, and conclusions derived from the collected data (Terrell, 2016). In this study, a former colleague from the fitness industry, currently pursuing a Ph.D., conducted this audit.

Audit Trail

An audit trail is a comprehensive record that meticulously outlines each phase of the research process. It offers complete transparency, from the study's commencement to the presentation of its findings. This documentation aids researchers in retracing their actions, leading to a more comprehensive comprehension of the study's outcomes (Terrell, 2016). In this study, an audit trail was established by utilizing journals, weekly discussion posts, notes from regular meetings with my advisor, and records maintained throughout the research journey.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is used when the researcher makes any biases they may have known, as it relates to the research they are conducting. Korstjens and Moser (2018) point out that in qualitative research, the researcher must remain self-aware and reflexive about their role in the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. It is equally important to be aware of any biases or preconceived assumptions they may bring to the study. This was accomplished through the process of taking notes throughout the collection and analysis phase of the study.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability of the results of the study can be transferred to other contexts (i.e. participants, settings). Providing a thick description of the participants and the research process enables readers to assess whether the findings of the study are transferable to their own settings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 122). In this study, a thick description was provided of the entire research process to ensure applicability to future research. While this study focuses on the persuasive communication tactics of SMIs in the health and wellness industry, there is an opportunity for transferability to other industries as SMIs are key communicators across various industries, including faith-based institutions.

Ethical Considerations

The principal ethical considerations in social research encompass issues such as potential harm, consent, deception, privacy, and data confidentiality (Punch, 2014). In this study, adherence to the "do no harm" principle was a paramount concern, with a conscientious effort to minimize any potential harm to the participants (Sanjari et al, 2014). For this study, the data collected was retrieved from public accounts made available to all Instagram users. The researcher only accessed Instagram and TikTok profiles that were set to "Public" in order to ensure that there was no breach of privacy. When accounts are set to "public", online users expect their content to be open and available to view by all users. However, to maintain ethical standards, all online sources were de-identified in an attempt to maximize privacy; the names of the SMIs and SMEs used for the content analysis will not be published. Additionally, there was no direct contact between the researcher and any SMI or SME whose content was collected and analyzed for this study.

As Christian researchers, we must seek to conduct and interpret our research in a manner that benefits the community. When conducting our research, we must respect our participants and the information that is collected from them. We must be transparent with our purpose, consistent in how we use our instrument of measurement, and truthful in our interpretation of our data. We must refrain from bias and elaboration of data. Finally, in the capacity of Christians, we must seek areas of study that will not only benefit our community but honor our Lord. As the Apostle Paul stated, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved” (Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 1 Corinthians 10:31-33)

Summary

This research aims to comprehend how SMIs and SMEs employ persuasive techniques in conveying health-related messages on popular social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. The primary objective is to delve into the digital communication strategies and the key persuasive methods utilized to encourage online users to embrace health information. After careful consideration, qualitative content analysis with a rhetorical analysis approach was selected as the most suitable methodology.

By adopting a rhetorical analysis approach, this study involved collecting and scrutinizing the social media content of the top 15 SMIs in the health and wellness sector over a three-month period. The analysis was conducted to identify prevalent themes and concepts related to both the message content and the individuals delivering it. Additionally, content from leading SME organizations was analyzed to draw relevant comparisons.

The ultimate goal is to gain insights into how SMIs effectively employ persuasion to motivate their followers to embrace health information. In doing so, the study aspires to develop a strategic framework that can aid health communication experts in mitigating the spread of misinformation through various social media channels, including Instagram and TikTok.

Chapters One, Two, and Three provide a comprehensive rationale for studying the impact of SMIs on the creation, dissemination, and comprehension of health communications. The theoretical framework, expounded upon in Chapter Two, combined with the proposed research methodology, will contribute to bridging the gaps in existing literature regarding the communication strategies of SMIs, offering valuable insights to SMEs involved in health communication.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Overview

This chapter provides an overview of the outcomes from a content analysis carried out on the social media content of SMIs over a period of three months. The data was gathered from two popular social media platforms, Instagram and TikTok, encompassing original written posts, images, and videos from a total of 30 participants, including SMIs, SMEs, and industry organizations. Throughout this three-month period, a total of 830 social media posts were amassed. In this study, Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle and Fisher's (1984) Narrative Paradigm served as the theoretical framework, guiding the content analysis using an inductive approach that focused on the rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, and logos) and the narrative appeal (mythos) as primary themes. As new themes emerged, a deductive approach was integrated into the analysis process, offering a more comprehensive exploration of the collected data. Furthermore, a comparative analysis was conducted to evaluate the social media content of both SMIs and SMEs, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods. This analysis aimed to uncover significant differences in persuasive strategies employed by these two groups (SMIs and SMEs) in the dissemination of health-related information on social media.

This chapter will provide a thorough background on the participants, providing key demographics and areas of specialty. Additionally, the results of the content analysis will be used to address the prevalent themes and answer the three research questions established for this study.

The research questions for this study include:

Research Question 1: How are the rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, logos, and mythos used by SMIs in disseminating health information on Instagram and TikTok?

Research Question 2: What are the differences in persuasive communication tactics between SMIs and SMEs in the sharing of health information on social media?

Through the content and comparative analysis, findings for each research question will be provided. A detailed discussion of the findings for each question will be provided in Chapter 5.

Participants

As detailed in Chapter 3, the data collection process included a sample set consisting of 15 SMIs (Group A) and 15 SMEs/industry organizations (Group B) for a total of 30 participants. SMIs were selected using multiple online sources such as upfluencer.com and smallbusinessstren-z.com; SMEs were selected through recommendations from current health and wellness professionals who are actively working in the fitness and nutrition industry. The sample consisted of individuals who actively have a social media presence on Instagram and/or TikTok and produce content that is related to the health and wellness field.

Group A consisted of six (6) males and nine (9) females (Table 6). The average age for this sample was 31.2 years (male) and 34.8 (female) (Table 7). The nationality of the sample includes nine (9) Americans, two (2) British, one (1) Dutch, one (1) Australian, one (1) Canadian, and one (1) Venezuelan. Except for SMI13, English was the primary language used by the participants (Table 8).

Table 6

Genders of Participants (SMIs)

Gender	Number of Participants
Male	6
Female	9

Table 7*Average Age of SMI Participants by Gender*

Gender	Average age of participants (years)
Male	31.2
Female	34.8

Table 8*Nationality of SMI Sample*

Nationality of SMI Participants			
Participant	Ethnicity	Participant	Nationality
SMI1	American	SMI9	Greek/Australian
SMI2	Dutch	SMI10	American
SMI3	American	SMI11	American
SMI4	American	SMI12	American
SMI5	American	SMI13	Venezuelan
SMI6	Canadian	SMI14	American
SMI7	American	SMI15	British
SMI8	British		

The sample of SMIs was diverse in the background and area of specialty in the health and wellness industry. Three SMIs are former or current athletes (two (2) professional bodybuilders (SMIs 4 and 11), and one (1) Crossfit athlete (SMI14)) who share content that relates to their competitive industry, as well as fitness and personal content. In addition, seven (7) SMIs (2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 13, and 15) are considered fitness influencers, sharing personal fitness routines and life-

style activities. Three SMIs (8, 10, and 12) focus heavily on nutrition, posting content on meal preparation and instruction on healthy recipes. SMI1 created content focused on health and life-style, with most of her content focusing on motherhood. Additionally, 13 of the 15 SMIs actively produce content on both Instagram and TikTok; SMIs 10 and 14 do not have an existing account on TikTok.

Group B consisted of 10 SMEs who are actively working in the health, fitness, and/or nutrition industry, as well as five (5) leading industry organizations. For this sample, there were five (5) males and five (5) females (Table 9). Unlike the SMIs, due to the lack of available public information, the ages of six (6) of the SMEs were inaccessible. Additionally, nine (9) of the SMIs can be classified as Caucasian Americans and one (1) Asian American.

Table 9

Genders of Participants (SMEs)

Gender	Number of Participants
Male	5
Female	5

Note: This table reflects the five (5) human SME participants. The remaining five (5) SMEs are leading organizations in the health and wellness industry.

Group B comprised a diverse educational and professional background. Five (5) of the SMEs have Ph. Ds in their respective field (Exercise Science, Nutrition Science); four (4) are registered dietitians (RD); one participant has a master's degree and serves as a Master Trainer for NASM; and one is a Cardiologist with a strong focus on health and wellness. Six of the 10

SMEs are actively producing content for Instagram and TikTok; four SMEs have a social media presence on Instagram only. In addition, four of the five industry organizations actively participate on both Instagram and TikTok.

Hybrid Participants

Upon observing the content of the SMIs and SMEs, there were three hybrids identified within the sample: SMI3, SMI12, and SME8. For the purpose of this study, hybrid participants are classified as individuals who were SMEs but have an influencer-like following on social media. For example, SMI 3 is a top fitness influencer with a Ph.D. in the field of Exercise Science but has a following of over 1.2 million users. SMI12 is a Registered Dietician and has over 1.3 million followers on Instagram. Conversely, SME8 has a Ph.D. in dietetics and is a registered dietician who has built an influencer-like persona, amassing over 710,000 followers on Instagram.

Content Analysis Results

Content analysis of social media posts collected over three months from SMIs and SMEs was conducted to effectively address the established research questions for this study. For this study, 830 data points were collected, including 466 SMI posts and 364 SME posts. Using inductive coding, rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, logos, and mythos) were applied as the primary themes in the analysis process. Numerous sub-themes that corresponded with existing literature and research were found under each primary theme. Additionally, reoccurring persuasive tactics under each primary and sub-themes were captured (see Table 10).

The use of advertising was found to be an additional emerging theme through the process of deductive coding. While this study focused on rhetorical appeals as key persuasive communi-

cation tactics, the emerging theme of advertising was found nearly equal in the content shared by SMIs and SMEs (5%, 4%). Both SMIs and SMEs used social media to promote or sell products and/or services. SMIs, in particular, used social media to promote products that they were being monetarily rewarded for, including, but not limited to clothing, supplements, and meal preparation services. SMEs used their platform to advertise their published articles, books, and/or online training services.

Table 10

Rhetorical Analysis

Rhetorical Analysis		
Primary Theme	Sub-Themes	Persuasive Tactics
Ethos	(i) Expertise (ii) Trustworthiness (iii) Character (iii) Attractiveness (iv) Homophily	(i) Credibility (ii) Validity of judgment, exchange of resources; constant generation of content (iii) Realness; honesty, sincerity, gratitude, transparency, relatable
Pathos	(i) Psychological Connectedness (ii) Parasocial interaction (iii) Engagement	(i) Openly sharing; first-person; emotion-laden vocabulary; expressive description; humor; personal picture/video (ii) Familiarity (iii) Group/collective action; questions, hashtags; current events/hot topics; common terminology; diversity in content; music/audio

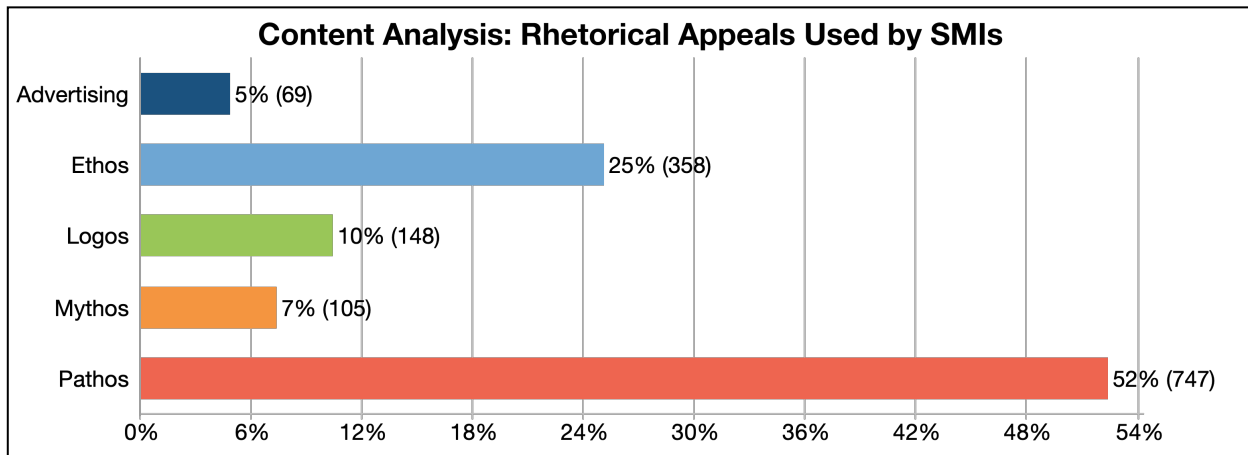
Rhetorical Analysis		
Logos	(i) Structure	(i) Clear and concise; vocabulary; visual arrangement
	(ii) Enthymemes	ii) Analogy; metaphor; inductive reasoning; deductive reasoning; memes; quotes
	(iii) Microblogging	(iii) Vlogging
Mythos	(i) Authenticity	(i/ii) Daily routine; narration of event; unedited sharing; testimonial
	(ii) Relatedness	

Research Questions Findings

Research Question 1: How are the rhetorical strategies of ethos, pathos, logos, and mythos used by SMIs in disseminating health information on Instagram and TikTok?

Figure 6

Rhetorical Appeals Used by SMIs



Note: This graph demonstrates the frequency of each appeal out of 1,427 coded items from SMI content,

Through the three-month observation period, SMIs were found to use various persuasive tactics through their social media content. Upon analysis, it was found that a majority of the content of SMIs consisted of material expressing the pathos appeal (52%). The remaining content consisted of 25% ethos, 10% logos, and 7% mythos. The outlier (advertising) comprised 5% of the social media content (Figure 6).

Ethos

According to the research, 25% of the content created by SMIs had an ethos appeal. The ethos appeal is used to establish the source credibility of the speaker with their audience. SMIs use various methods to establish their source credibility with their audience, including content that demonstrated their experience, trustworthiness, character, attractiveness, and homophily with their followers.

Expertise

While a majority of the SMIs lacked educational and professional credentials to be considered experts in the field, their experience as personal trainers, fitness enthusiasts, or athletes was used as a tactic to demonstrate their expertise. For example, in discussing his current success as a trainer, SMI8 states,

“When I started as a personal trainer over 10 years ago...”

Additionally, SMI14 uses his expertise as an experienced athlete in the sport of CrossFit as well as his personal experience in training himself and his team as a form of expertise. For example, in one post, he states,

“Introduced the TWR participants to my shoulder rehab, warm up, prehab routine before the first workout. Been doing this before almost every training session since the Games”

While there were only two accounts of SMIs using professional experience as a form for expressing expertise, SMIs were found to incorporate other measures in establishing their expertise/credibility as health and wellness influencers. The SMIs often appear in videos that demonstrate their physical strength, physicality, and ability to create workouts that may appeal to online users and establish credibility with their followers. Additionally, SMIs produce content that highlights their successes in their respective field. For example, SMIs 4 and 11 post pictures from their bodybuilding competitions while SMI14 provides content highlighting his career as a professional CrossFit athlete.

Trustworthiness

In establishing trust with their followers, SMIs were found to use multiple persuasive tactics that help to establish their trustworthiness. One tactic was the continual use of transparency in their content. SMIs, such as SMI6 and SMI9, express transparency in multiple posts. For example, in one post, SMI6 shared a personal journal passage with her followers, stating:

“I’m going to be completely honest with you- at the time I wrote this, I wasn’t in the best place, writing this helped me process my emotions in a way I could never do verbally. It’s not perfect, but it’s just a little bit of my perspective during a time when I wanted nothing more than to give up.”

In an additional post, she wrote,

“Being completely transparent with you all- it was hard walking out of the gym after this one.”

Moreover, SMI9 demonstrates high transparency in her content, particularly as it relates to her personal experiences with childbirth, motherhood, and overall health matters. As a new mother, she used her platform to share the postnatal recovery process in an openly transparent

manner, thereby establishing a level of perceived trustworthiness with her followers. For example, in one post, she discussed the demands of motherhood on her life, sharing the following:

"Honestly, between nursing, playing with Arna, breast pumping every 4 hours, recovering from my surgery and everything in between...normal meal times have pretty much gone out the window."

In another post-pregnancy post, she shared with her followers:

"I said I would keep you guys updatesgood and bad."

Consistency of Content Creation. In addition to transparency, existing literature supports the premise that the consistency of content creation enhances trustworthiness with online users. SMIs post daily, with 14 of the 15 SMIS posting content 5-7 days a week, producing and sharing content for Instagram and/or TikTok. Additionally, the use of Instagram stories was used by all SMIs, sharing fitness and health-related information, as well as personal pictures and videos.

Character

A common theme found with SMI content was the innate ability to demonstrate strong character, often through the expression of sincerity and gratitude for their successes, followers, and particular people and events in their lives. For example, SMI4 uses his Instagram posts to express gratitude for his followers and his career as the reigning Mr. Olympia Classic Physique. Comments expressing his gratitude include the following:

"I appreciate everyone who took time out of their Saturday to come and (hopefully) learn a thing or two, your attentiveness, respect and great questions made the event even better."

"Love you guys, grateful for your support every damn day"

“Couldn't be more grateful to be in this era of Classic Physique”

In a similar approach, SMIs 8 and 14 make similar comments. For example:

“Thanks everyone. Really made my day meeting you all”

“I really hope you find this helpful.”

“Thanks to everyone who came by the booth. It's always great meeting you.”

Attractiveness

In Chapter 2, it was noted that the physical attractiveness of the communicator plays a role in building credibility with the audience. The research findings clearly demonstrate that Social Media Influencers (SMIs) employ their physical attractiveness as a means to establish their credibility as influencers in the realm of health and wellness. This is particularly noticeable in the case of SMIs 7 and 15, who consistently utilize this persuasive strategy by prominently featuring their physical aesthetics to attract the attention of their followers and promote products. For instance, SMI 7 creates content wearing form-fitting attire, bikinis, or provocative clothing, with the camera positioned strategically to capture her posterior side. Furthermore, she often films in visually appealing settings, such as a New York City apartment balcony or a beach location. SMI15 similarly uses his aesthetics, posting pictures where he is shirtless in the gym or his home.

In line with the theme of attractiveness, SMIs also made attempts to appear as average individuals. To illustrate, multiple female SMIs would post pictures or videos with no make-up and regular clothes that hid their physiques. For example, SMI6, while she often posted content with her in a sports bra to accentuate her toned physique, she would also post regularly in sweat bottoms, no make-up, and messy, sweaty hair. Data reflecting “likes” showed a consistently

higher rate for SMI6 (100,000+) than SMI5 (50,000-70,000), despite the much larger following of SMI5 (SMI6 following: 1.5 million; SMI5 following: 14.1 million).

Homophily

A crucial strategy in the ethos appeal is the ability to connect with individuals who share similar interests and preferences. During the period under examination in this study, four of the SMIs were new mothers who utilized their platform to address themes related to health, wellness, and the experience of motherhood. SMIs 1, 9, 10, and 13 successfully established their credibility among their followers by tapping into the "mother" aspect. To illustrate, SMI 1 produces content that resonates with active women who are also mothers and wives, frequently sharing videos featuring her children and spouse. Additionally, she posts content that delves into the challenges of motherhood. For example, in one post, she stated:

"We mommas can't forget to do the things that make us feel like ourselves".

An additional example of homophily among SMIs includes posts from SMI9 and SMI13 shortly after the birth of their children, stating,

"I know a lot does tend to fall on mums during this newborn phase...and if you're currently doubting yourself or you feel like you're not doing enough, please know I am able to do what I do because I have the luxury of ongoing support around me "We women unselfishly sacrifice A LOT on this little miracle that soon will call us mother. "

Pathos

Upon analysis of the data, it was found that the pathos appeal was the most common appeal used by SMIs. Pathos is a valuable persuasive tactic used by the communicator to create an emotional appeal with their audience. The findings of this study showed that 52% of the collect-

ed data points consisted of the pathos appeal, which includes the following themes: psychological connectedness, parasocial relationships, and engagement.

Psychological Connectedness

With the pathos appeal, the speaker/communicator employs persuasive tactics that demonstrate a psychological connectedness with their respective audience. Existing literature identifies the act of openly sharing, the use of first-person pronouns, and using language that invokes an emotional response (i.e. humor) as key tactics in helping the communicator to easily identify with their audience. For this study, SMIs were found two emerging sub-themes, including the act of openly sharing and the use of humor in their social media content.

Openly sharing. One of the prominent persuasive tactics employed by SMIs under the pathos appeal was the generation of content that showed a personal look at their lives. The openly sharing of personal stories was a tactic regularly employed by 13 of the 15 SMIs. Examples include:

"It all had to fall apart to get here. Sometimes a breakthrough requires a breakdown. Our failures, biggest heartbreaks and disappointments can bring the most beautiful blessings. Trust that God is moving and working, even in the middle of a storm" (SMI1)

"I don't want all the struggles and hard parts to be for nothing" (SMI1)

"This makes me cry. I'm living the best days of my life right now and trying so hard not to miss one thing." (SMI1)

"It's crazy to imagine that a year ago I couldn't tie my shoelace without getting out of breath (SMI2)

“I’ve found that the more is expected of me and the more chaotic my life gets if I can have a day or two alone, or a weekend doing absolutely nothing, where I am intentional with my time to reflect inward I can keep my mind in order.” (SMI4)

“I’m going to share something I wrote a little while ago. Social media will forever remain a bittersweet concept to me. Here I am left questioning: how can I overcome the negative and use my platform in a way that empowers and uplifts people? How can I be the big sister for millions of people?” (SMI6)

Humor. A component of psychological connectedness is the ability to create content that stirs emotion. The data showed multiple SMIs using the persuasive tactic of humor in their daily content. For example, in discussing his food preference for vacation, SMI4 states:

“P.S. I’m picking the chicken nuggets over alcohol ALL day”

SMI11 additionally employs humor in her content. Examples include:

“No mice on my shoulders, got too many traps...lol”

“I’m a little bit country but a little bit hood rat...lol”

“It’s so hard...feel it” That’s what she said. Just two girls feeling each other’s biceps, not weird at all.”

Parasocial Relationships

The findings of this study demonstrate the tactics of SMIs used to establish and maintain parasocial relationships with their followers. In addition, SMIs communicate in a manner that appears as if there is a connection and friendship with their followers. Examples include,

“Booked a boxing camp in Thailand. Gonna take you with me through my experience.” (SMI2)

“And now, for all of you working out, there are people that are going to make comments... I want you to succeed it. Keep your head up Kings and queens.” (SMI2)

“Love you guys, grateful for your support every damn day” (SMI4)

“Your girl is back with the concrete craziness. Happy Monday let's get creative this week (SMI5)

“This year, we're not skipping out on upper body day's famiglia. Let's Go”.

“Love you guys” (SMI6)

“Know that you have inspired me 100X more. You've taught me a lot about myself. You were the only ones that have believed in me.” (SMI6)

“I also understand that a lot of women started following me when I announced my pregnancy, and have shared this journey with me too (I see you!!)” (SMI9)

Additionally, SMIs were found to interact with their followers by replying to comments. SMI6 regularly employed this tactic, for example, one interaction included the following dialogue:

Comment from a follower: “You motivate me to be the better version of myself”

SMI6 response: “That means the world to me. U don't even know. I'll always be here pushing you guys along. I love you sm.”

In another post, a follower writes: *“Dude your recipes are SO delicious and simple! Thank you so much for always sharing them!”* SMI6 responds: *“that makes me so happy. Anything for you guys.”*

Engagement

Another prominent theme that emerged under the pathos appeal was the use of engagement tactics, including the encouragement of group/collective action amongst followers, the use

of current trends or events in the creation of their content, the use of questions, popular hashtags, and common terminology in their posts, as well as incorporating music and audio to their pictures and/or videos.

Group/Collective action. One of the key characteristics of engagement is the act of producing content that encourages group and collective action. This was found to be a common persuasive tactic employed by all of the SMIs as a form of motivation and encouragement or as a method of increasing the interaction with their followers, as well as increasing their following. Examples include:

"If you'd like to follow along, please let me know. I'd be happy to share more content during the coming weeks!" (SMI2)

"Let me know if you have any questions in the comments." (SMI6)

"Let's start this week off strong" (SMI6)

"It's Monday! Let's get it fam" (SMI7)

"Please tag any mate you think might like this one at home" (SMI8)

"If you enjoy my Instagram recipes please share with your friends and tag them in comments. I'd really appreciate it." (SMI)

"Tag your friends in the comments below. Sharing is caring" SMI8)

Use of current events/trends. Another emerging sub-theme of engagement among SMIs was the use of current events or trending social media content. For example, SMI5 used the Super Bowl to produce a video demonstrating the various touchdown celebrations of past and present football players. In her post, she shared:

“The best touchdown celebrations of all time. Who you got, Chiefs or Eagles?” (Video of her on the football field doing different touchdown celebrations.)

A few days later, in recognition of Valentine’s Day, she shared a video of her doing an arial push-up with a red backdrop, with a short caption stating:

“Happy Valentine’s Day...I love you.”

Additional events, such as March Endometriosis Month and International Women’s Day were recognized by SMIs 9 and 7. Using her personal experience with endometriosis to provide a full post defining endometriosis and educating her followers on this disease, SMI9 stated:

“March is Endometriosis month...and if you don’t know what that is, you should.”

To recognize International Women’s Day, SMI7 posted a video of her dancing with her girlfriends on her balcony with the caption:

“Happy #internationalwomensday”

Lastly, current events were used by SMIs, including the incident involving the Chinese Spy Balloon and the rising cost of eggs. For example, SMI 11 posted a picture of her on a cliff in Montana looking up at the sky with the following caption:

“Out here looking for the Chinese Spy Balloon.”

SMI15 used the rise in the cost of eggs to make a humorous video. In a video, he opens his safe to show a gun and a dozen eggs inside the safe with a caption stating,

“I got mine. Stay ready (laughing emoji).”

The use of trending TikTok and Reel videos was also prevalent in the content shared by SMIs.

Trending songs and audio clips were shared by SMIs as background music or audio. In addition,

trends such as the use of the “bold glamour” filter was used by SMI11 who shared a video using the filter stating,

“My name is Ivonna. Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful.”

Questions. The act of asking questions in social media content provides an opportunity for engagement between the creator and the follower. The use of questions was found to be used by all of the SMIs to encourage them to comment on the posts. SMIs such as SMI5, incorporated a question in every post. Examples include:

“Which adventure are you joining?”

“What’s your fav book? I need recommendations.”

“How many seconds did you count?” (Referencing her lateral handstand video)

Additionally, SMI6 uses the questions to establish a closer connection with her followers. For example, she asked her followers:

“How can I overcome the negative and use my platform in a way that empowers and uplifts people?”

“Who’s ready to start the week off strong?”

Common terminology. A persuasive tactic of engagement was found through the use of particular vocabulary and hashtags that relate or appeal to a particular audience. For example, terms such as “sore af”, “chelts” and “jacked” are common among fitness enthusiasts and were used among various SMIs. In addition to using common terminology of the followers, trending acronyms are used, such as GRWM (“get ready with me”) or POV (“point of view”) (see Table 11). Hashtags were also prevalent among SMIs, using popular hashtags such as #motivation and

#workout in both Instagram and TikTok posts (see Table 12). Additionally, it was also found that words were purposefully misspelled as a form of personal expression.

Table 11

Examples of Vocabulary Used by SMIs

"I'm stokedddd"	"fav"	"let's goooo"	"Sore af"
"NGL"	"my boyyyyy"	"I lovveee"	"Here we gooooo!"
"Chelts"	"Jacked"	"Deets"	"AMIRIGHT?"
"Get cracking"	"Hanging hammies"	"Crispy"	"GRWM"
"POV"	"TBH"	"LFG"	"absolutely banging!"

Table 12

Hashtags Commonly Used by SMIs

#momsoftiktok	#selfcare	#motivation	#workout
#throwback	#dontskiprestdays	#ad	#fitness
#dogsoftiktok	#grwm	#stitch	#explore

Music/Audio. The use of music and/or audio clips attached to the videos and photographs was a popular tool used by all SMIs. For example, SMIs used trending songs on TikTok as background music for their workout videos. In many cases, the workouts or movements of the SMIs were choreographed to the music and/or audio clip. For instance, SMI5 choreographed specific gymnastic moves to correspond to songs selected for her posts. In addition, SMI6 and SMI11 often employed songs that were timed to match the movements or intensity of their

workouts. SMI11 also used motivational audio clips in her workouts. For example, one audio clip featured Canadian psychologist, Jordan Peterson stating,

“You don’t want to be too aggressive. You don’t want to be too assertive. You want to take a back seat...and all of that. It’s like...no...wrong, you should be a monster and then you should learn how to control it.”

Logos

Upon analysis of the content of SMIs, it was found that 10% of the content created used a logos appeal. In accordance with existing literature and research, there are three key categories defining the logos appeal: clear and structured content, the use of enthymemes/quotes, and microblogs.

Clear and Structured Content

The data showed that SMIs use easy-to-understand sentence structure and keep their posts relatively concise. This was found particularly with influencers who shared fitness workouts or recipes. For example, SMIS 6 and 12 provided clear instructions on how to make specific recipes, listing key ingredients and concise, step-by-step instructions. In addition to providing written instruction, videos were made to show them actively preparing the meals, with SMIs narrating the step-by-step approach of making each meal using clear visual and verbal cues, as well as including captioning on the video (see Figure 7). Additionally, for the SMIs who share daily workouts, an easy-to-understand format for the workout is used in the written post (see Figure 8). For example, SMIs 6 and 11 use simple phrases and emojis in the formatting of their posts. In addition to the written post, videos are provided to demonstrate the exercises described.

Figure 7

Example of the Use of Logos by SMI6

Brush 6 chicken thighs with 1 tbsp olive oil.

Season your chicken thighs with: 1.5 tbsp brown sugar, 1 tsp paprika, 1 tsp oregano, 1/4 tsp garlic powder, 1/2 tsp salt, 1/2 tsp chilli flakes

Preheat your oven to 425F. Line your pan with parchment paper and bake your chicken for 18-20mins.

Season potatoes with: 1/2 tsp salt, 1/2 tsp chilli flakes, 1 tsp paprika, 1 tsp oregano, and 1/4 garlic powder

Airfry the potatoes at 390F for 15-20mins or until crispy on the outside and we'll done on the inside.

Plate with any greens of your choice and enjoy 🍽️👉🍴

Figure 8

Example of Logos by SMI12

This one is perfect for at-home workouts or those busy gym nights. Will be doing this one again and I'm so pumped for it 🔥🔥 who's with me??

➡️ Begin with:

- Pull-ups (until failure)
- Banded pull-ups (until failure)
- Scapulars (2x8-10)

- 1 Single DB rows (4x10-12/side)
- 2 Overhand rows (4x10)
- 3 Reverse flys (4x10-12)
- 4 Bicep curls (4x8-10)
- 5 Zottman curls (4x8-10)

Mythos

The use of narration (mythos) was a common persuasive tactic employed to illustrate the authenticity and relatedness of the SMI with their followers, found in 7% of the SMI content.

The use of daily narration was employed by multiple SMIs, sharing details of their daily routine,

workouts, or special events. For example, SMI1 used narration often to detail the daily life of a mother of three young children, as well as providing a narration of personal health struggles. Using the “Stories” application of Instagram, SMI shared a VLOG discussing her recent nose reconstruction surgery. Appearing in bandages and eyes bruised, she discussed the surgery and the recovery process. Additionally, using a similar format three weeks later, SMI1 discussed a current health scare with her followers, stating,

“Oh you guys. I have been so tired. I don't feel like i fully catch up on sleep.I still feel super exhausted. The last couple of months I've been having these random sporadic heart palpitations that take my breath away. I'm going to get some blood work done.”

Additionally, SMI9 used narration on multiple occasions to detail life events, appearing authentic to her audience. For example, in one post, she filmed a video in her living room providing a fully narrated account of her recent childbirth story. She stated,

“My experience with the birth was that I was really nervous. I think because I had a cesarean before you're going into a surgery room. It's very cold. It's not what you think it is going to be. For some reason, I was under this illusion that it was going to be this nice, warm room.”

She continues to provide full details about the birthing process, as well as how she felt physically and emotionally. Eleven days later, she filmed another video narrating her C-section journey, giving advice to mothers about the surgery and recovery process, saying,

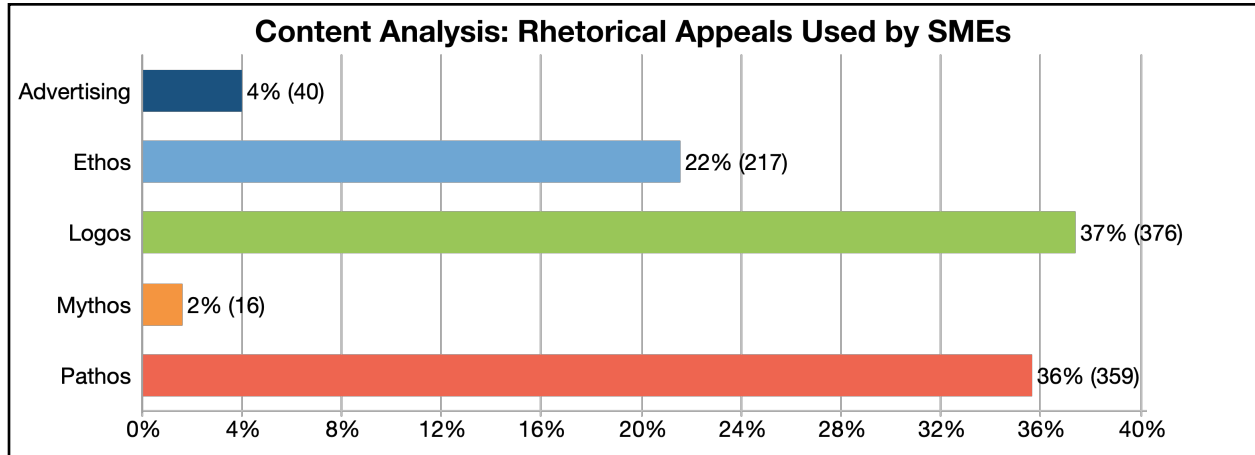
“If you're a person that's super self-conscious, forget about it. Everything just goes out the window. You're out of it. There's a lot going on and I just felt very unwell and shaky and they said it was normal.”

The use of narration to detail daily routines and activities was also a popular tactic of SMIs. SMI6 regularly posted content that consisted of narrations of her daily routine and activities. In one example, she created a video consisting of a compilation of her daily routine, narrating key activities including, waking up, making breakfast, getting ready for the gym, working out at the gym, going to school, and coming home for dinner. In another post, she shared a compilation video of images of every meal and beverage she consumed while on vacation, stating in her post:

“What I Ate in a Day on Vacation. Was I worried about losing progress this trip? Honestly, no. I was more focused on enjoying new foods, venturing beyond my comfort zone and taking in the beautiful moments.”

Research Question 2: What are the differences in persuasive communication tactics between SMIs and SMEs in the sharing of health information on social media?

In conducting content analysis of both SMIs and SMEs, the researcher was able to discern the key rhetorical differences in the social media content between SMIs and SMEs. Similar to SMIs, SMEs used all appeals, including advertisement, in the creation and sharing of information. However, the extent of usage of each appeal differed from that of the SMIs. As seen in Figure 9, 37% of the SME content analyzed used logos appeal, 36% pathos, 22% ethos, 2% mythos, and 4% advertising.

Figure 9*Rhetorical Appeals Used by SMEs*

Note: This graph demonstrates the frequency of each appeal out of 1,008 coded items from this participant group (Group B).

Rhetorical Appeals Used by SMEs

In conducting a comparative analysis, as displayed in Table 13, findings show that the usage of the ethos appeal and advertising are somewhat similar between SMIs and SMEs, finding the ethos appeal in 25% of SMI content and 22% in SME content; 5% of SMI and 4% SME of the captured content contained an advertising appeal. The biggest difference can be found in the use of pathos, logos, and mythos appeals. While SMIs were found to develop and share content with a predominance of pathos appeal (52%), 36% of the SME content analyzed had themes associated with pathos. The logos appeal was the predominant appeal used by SMEs, finding 37% compared to 10% of SMI content. Lastly, findings show that mythos was used minimally by

SMEs, showing 2% of the content containing themes associated with mythos appeal, compared to the SMIs 7%.

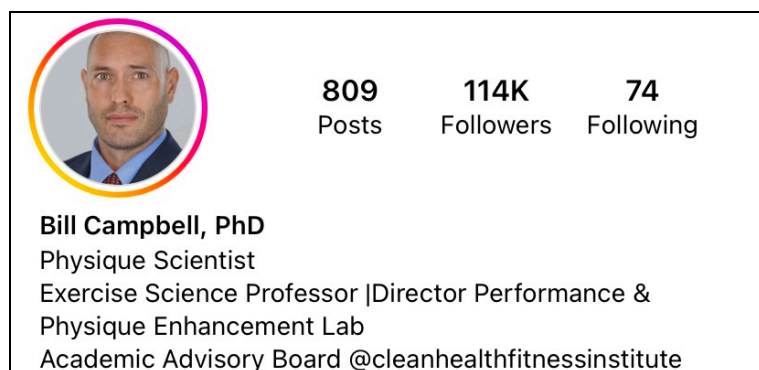
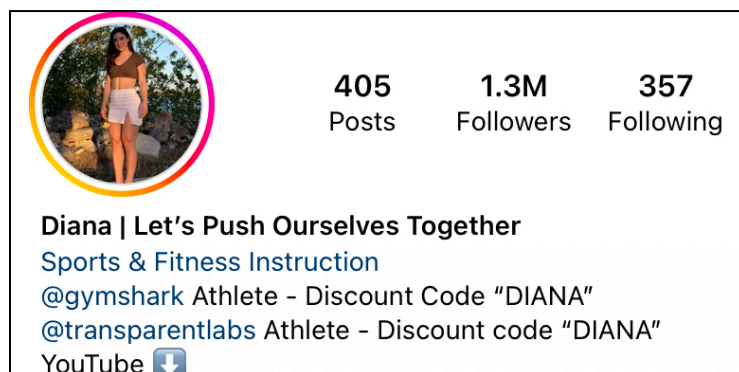
Table 13

Comparative Analysis of the Use of Rhetorical Appeals between SMIs and SMEs

Comparative Analysis		
Rhetorical Appeal	SMI	SME
Ethos	25%	22%
Pathos	52%	36%
Logos	10%	37%
Mythos	7%	2%
*Advertising	5%	4%

Note: This table demonstrates the percentage of usage of each rhetorical appeal by SMIs and SMEs, illustrating the differences between each appeal.

In examining the content of SMIs and SMEs, it was found that while all appeals were used in the creation of social media content, how they were used varied significantly among the sub-themes, as seen in Figures 10 and 11. For example, the use of music/audio was the most re-occurring tactic whereas SMEs used questions more frequently.

Figure 12*Profile Summary of an SME***Figure 13***Profile summary of an SMI*

Findings also showed that every SME included their educational and professional credentials in their profile summaries. In addition, they were found to include their expertise in their posts. For example,

"My Ph.D. was in "Nutrition, Exercise, and Preventative Health". I've spent my adult life trying to learn everything I can about the interactions between exercise and nutrition-and am just scratching the surface with my knowledge."

“My name is May and I'm a registered dietician and nutritionist.”

“So, I used my specialized knowledge gained from being a lifter for 30 years, a personal trainer for over 25 years, a certified strength and conditioning coach with a Ph.D. in sports science and biomechanics and what I did find...”

“In our experience coaching over 10000 clients, we've seen that it can lead to amazing results.”

Validity of Judgement

When compared with SMIs, SMEs had a high usage of validity of judgment under the ethos appeal. Validity of judgment provides credibility to what is being shared and by whom it is shared. The tactic employed by SMEs includes the use of citations of existing studies on particular topics. For example, SMEs often attached the PubMed IDentifier (PUMID) for studies or existing literature to support the information that they were disseminating. Examples include:

“This study was published in 2010 by Pasiakos et al. (PMID=20164371) and was the first study to demonstrate that lowering your calories results in lowered rates of muscle protein synthesis.” (SME1)

“Evidence from this statement comes from PMID=33467377”

“New meta-analysis of the current literature shows that resistance training appreciably enhances joint range-of-motion...” (SME5 provides screenshots of the key points of the study cited).

“If we look at the data on energy expenditure and metabolic rate we see that obese & insulin resistant people have the same or HIGHER energy expenditure and metabolic rate than lean or non-insulin resistant individuals (PMIDs: 15451910, 31114702, & 8641251).”

Consistency of Content Creation

Similar to SMIs, 5 of the 10 SMIs created content consistently (5-7 days a week); 3 of 5 leading organizations posted 4-5 times a week. However, significant gaps were seen in content creation for 5 of the SMEs and 2 of the organizations, posting a maximum of 1-4 times a month. In the case of one of the leading organizations, there was a period of three weeks in which no content had been published. This correlates with the limitation regarding the lack of SMEs who have an active social media presence.

Comparison of SMI and SME Use of the Pathos Appeal

A clear contrast was observed in the use of the pathos appeal between SMIs and SMEs. In the analysis of SMIs' content, it was evident that they frequently employed the strategy of openly sharing personal stories, videos, and photographs to elicit an emotional connection with their audience. In contrast, the data indicated that SMEs seldom engaged in such open sharing. Only three out of the ten SMEs employed tactics aimed at establishing a psychological connection with their followers. However, the use of first-person pronouns was prevalent within this group. Additionally, SMEs used questions and trending topics as a means to stimulate engagement with online users.

Psychological Connectedness

First-person pronouns. Upon analysis of the SME content, findings show extensive use of the first-person pronouns. While SMIs were also found to rely on first-person language, how it was used in comparison to SMEs was significantly different. For example, SMIs use first-person to project their subjective experience whereas SMEs use first-person to project an objective experience. For example, in comparing the use of first-person, SMI statements included:

“I actually like really going out and spending time doing things like this” (SMI2)

“Surprised myself with this one.” (SMI5)

“I apologize in advance, but I promise the pump is worth it” (SMI6)

“One thing about me. I’m the same person I was years ago.” (SMI7)

Conversely, SMEs are more objective in their use of the first-person pronoun. For example, SME statements include:

“My statement that 1% loss of body fat % per month is good is based on estimates from re-search conducted in my lab.” (SME1)

“I know the difference between lactic acid and lactate. I’m choosing the use the word that most people associate with.” (SME1)

“I use them (weight loss drugs) regularly in my practice.” (SME6)

“When it comes to supplements, I’m typically focusing on three things: performance, brain health, and gut health.” (SME7)

Parasocial Relationships

Unlike SMIs who actively spoke in a manner that delineated a sense of relationship with their followers, there was no observation of this tactic being employed by SMEs. However, two of the leading organizations, as well as 2 of the SMEs, often encouraged interaction by stating, “let me know in the comments.” While interaction via comments between SMIs and their followers was extensive (100+), comments from SME followers varied from zero to less than 10 in most cases.

Engagement

Questions. Similar to SMIs, the use of incorporating questions to the audience was a re-occurring tactic used by SMEs so as to incite engagement. However, questions were used as an introduction to the purpose of the post. To illustrate, SME1 led a discussion about consuming carbohydrates while dieting and started the post with the following question,

“Scared to eat carbs when dieting?”

Additionally, SME7 opened her post with the following question,

“What does a “healthy diet” really mean?” She proceeds to discuss the core components of a healthy diet.

SME9 also regularly used questions to lead into a particular discussion on nutrition. For example, before discussing the research on casein protein, she asked,

“Have you been slamming casein shakes before bed hoping you’ll wake up with bigger, stronger muscles and better recovery?”

In another post about the nutritional value of protein bars, she started her post with the following question,

“Need a good source of protein while you’re on the go?”

Hot Topics. Findings showed that a pattern existed amongst all SMEs regarding “hot topics” or trending news stories regarding studies in fitness and nutrition. For instance, when a news article was published stating that the Food Pyramid guidance suggested that the cereal Lucky Charms was a healthy option in comparison to steak, SME8* and SME9 both posted lengthy commentary on the study and discussed their thoughts on the topic. SME8* disputed the mainstream media’s take on the story and clarified the study stating,

“These scores were meant to be compared within groups of foods, NOT across groups. It would be like ranking WBNA players and NBA players then comparing them to each other based on their rankings.”

SME9 employed a similar stance on the issue, stating,

“There some shortcomings as mentioned in the review article. However, foods are not meant to be compared with food in their categories not across categories. The Food Compass isn’t saying you should choose Lucky Charms over beef as this article implies. It is saying baked oysters scored higher than feta cheese.”

Comparison of SMI and SME Use of the Logos Appeal

The most significant difference between the social media content of SMIs and SMEs was found in the use of the logos appeal. Analysis of the SME data showed that 37% of their content reflected logos whereas 10% of SMI content was created using the logos appeal. The SME content was found to consist of a high amount of deductive reasoning and scientific vocabulary, a strong focus on the visual arrangement of their content, and the frequent use of memes, infographics, and textual slides as visuals.

Deductive Reasoning

As SMEs in the health and wellness industry, findings showed extensive use of deductive reasoning in their posts. Deductive reasoning is used to reach “a logical and true conclusion” (Weisberger & Bradford, 2023). The SMEs were found to regularly incorporate explicit details about past and current studies in their daily posts. For example, SME8* stated,

“A recent report by the World Obesity Federation warns that more than half of the global population will be overweight or obese by 2035” (SME8)*

Another example includes:

“Based on the data, it can be inferred that resistance training alone would like be sufficient to achieve adequate flexibility to carry out the necessary functional tasks of daily living in most people. If individual goals require a greater ROM, stretching exercises can be employed for the specific joint(s) to optimize results.” (SME5)

Vocabulary

The lexicon of the SME varied greatly from the SMI. As found in the analysis of the SMI, SMIs used words that relate to their audience, keeping sentences clear concise, and easy to interpret. However, SMEs were found to use language that is technical, and scientific, and that may be difficult for the average online user to understand. For example, SME3, who appeared to be more personable in comparison to other SMEs, provides commentary in his instructional videos that contain a highly educated vocabulary. For example, in a video discussing training shoulders, he states,

“The teres minor is an alley-oop for the lat...You have these inner valence relationships that magnify out to the outer valence.”

Other examples include,

“Interset training variables are intensifiers. By partial to drops-set and supersets and it is very much contextualized based on the exercise you’re doing.”

“If I’m in a dead hang, the teres minor is going to stabilize my shoulder, my humerus into my scapular. But as it does that it actually creates a lever for the lat to extend my shoulder.”

Visual Arrangement

Social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, allow creators to develop multi-modal content, using various visual and aural strategies to enhance the quality of their content. Unlike SMIs who used an abundance of personal and professional pictures for their social media content, findings showed that SMEs focused heavily on the visual arrangement of their posts, often consisting of screenshots of current research and studies, and textual slides of their views and expert guidance on particular health-related matters (see Figure 14 and Figure 15).

Figure 14

Screenshot of an SME Instagram Page

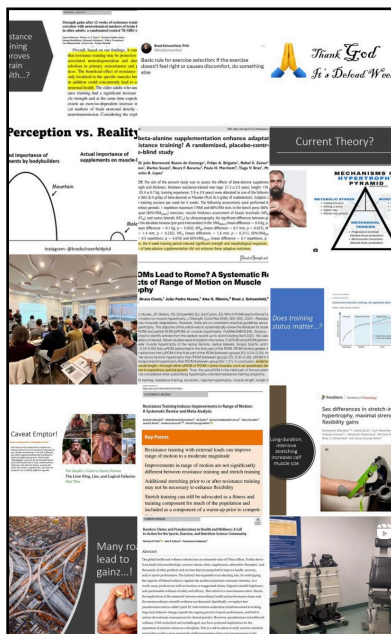
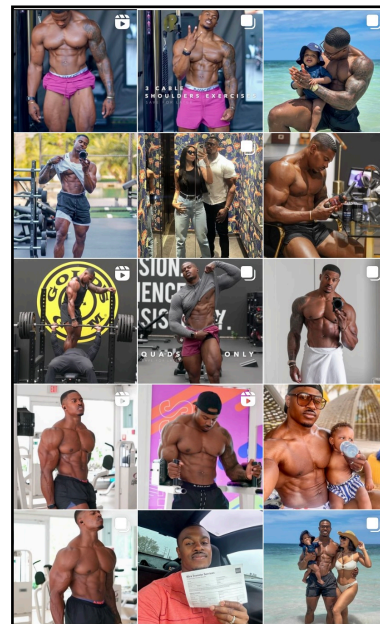


Figure 15

Screenshot of an SME Instagram Page



Memes. The use of memes was found to be a large part of the structured content created by SMEs. SMEs often used existing memes or edited a meme to reflect the area of discussion for their post (Figure 22). Memes were also used as a branding technique for both SMEs and indus-

try organizations. For example, SME1 used memes to post weekly content topics (i.e. True or False?; Multiple Question quiz) (see Figure 16). The leading organizations also regularly employed this tactic, incorporating their company logo and color scheme into each post (Figure 17).

Figure 15

Example of a Branded Meme by an SME



Figure 16

Example of a branded meme by an SME



Comparison of SMI and SME Use of the Mythos Appeal

The findings of this study show that SMEs rarely used narration in the creation of their social media content; only three (3) out of the 10 SMEs incorporated the mythos appeal in their posts. SME8*(hybrid) used this tactic to discuss a variety of topics, including recovery from an injury, his journey as an athlete, and how he became an industry expert in fitness and nutrition. For instance, SME8* stated in one post,

“2 weeks ago I felt a ‘pop’ in my adductor on my 2nd rep on deadlifts with 665lbs. At 19 weeks out from Powerlifting America I knew I had time to get right but I need to get aggressive with my treatment.”

He then uses this post to describe his recovery protocol and the healing process. In an additional post, SME8* provides a clip of him speaking at a conference and narrates a difficult period in his life:

“In 2017 my life collapsed, I was going through divorce that because pretty public & I had not handled it well. I also got kicked out of a company that I co-founded.”

He continues to discuss the struggles that occurred during this period in his life and how he was able to come back and be successful.

Summary

To gain insights into effectively reaching a broad social media audience, it's essential to comprehend the successful persuasive tactics employed by SMIs. Through their effective methods of persuasive communication, SMIs, despite limited expertise and formal education, have managed to establish themselves as trustworthy sources of information across various industries. In the field of health communication, this has been a subject of debate, particularly among SMEs

who struggle to achieve the same level of widespread following and engagement with online users. The purpose of this study was to obtain a comprehensive understanding of what makes SMIs' voices so influential compared to those of SMEs. To achieve this, a qualitative content analysis, coupled with a comparative analysis, was conducted.

Over a three-month period, 830 social media posts were gathered from the chosen 30 participants (comprising 15 SMIs and 15 SMEs), transcribed, and subjected to analysis. The key findings revealed that SMIs incorporated all rhetorical appeals into their social media content. Notably, they heavily relied on the pathos appeal in the majority of their posts. SMIs regularly shared personal anecdotes, images, and videos, integrating humor, detailed testimonials, and other elements to establish a strong emotional connection with their audience. Furthermore, they employed persuasive techniques like posing questions, using music or audio clips, utilizing common language, and making repeated calls to action. Their posts were typically concise, positive, and motivational in tone.

In contrast, SMEs leaned heavily on their expertise and the use of the logos appeal in crafting their content. Unlike SMIs, who utilized various tactics to establish credibility (e.g., attractiveness, homophily), SMEs consistently acknowledged their professional and academic qualifications. They substantiated their claims by citing sources and referencing established studies. Moreover, through the logos appeal, they produced content that was typically extensive, rich in deductive reasoning, technical and scientific terminology, and included a strong focus on visual presentation, often using infographics, screenshots of prior studies, and textual slides. SMEs also integrated relevant memes into their content, either for discussion or as part of their branding.

Chapter 5 will provide a comprehensive summary of the study, offering a discussion of the findings for each research question supported by existing literature and previous research to substantiate the initial assumptions made in this study. Additionally, the researcher will discuss the methodological and practical implications of this research. Finally, limitations and boundaries of the study will be outlined, along with recommendations for potential areas of future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Overview

In an era marked by the proliferation of social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, individuals from all walks of life now have the ability to create and share information on a wide range of topics. This expansion of social media has opened doors for ordinary people with

little to no prior experience to become influencers within their respective online communities. These influencers have the power to persuade online users to accept information as truth, incite action on specific issues, and endorse products or services they promote. Thanks to their substantial followings and persuasive communication techniques, companies and organizations, both in the private and public sectors, have harnessed their influence for global product, service, and initiative promotion and marketing.

In industries such as health and wellness, these SMIs have effectively positioned themselves as reliable sources of information among their extensive online followers. However, their ascendancy in the industry has raised concerns and sparked debates among industry experts, especially concerning the accuracy of the information they disseminate. While industry leaders and experts continue to combat the surge of misinformation propagated by SMIs, they grapple with capturing the attention of the larger social media audience. While some SMEs have succeeded in building a significant online presence, many still lack the essential persuasive communication skills necessary to counter the allure of SMIs. Hence, SMEs must craft content that not only educates but also captivates and persuades online users, effectively reducing the "noise" of misinformation on social media.

The primary objective of this qualitative content analysis study was to identify the key persuasive tactics employed by SMIs in crafting their social media content. Additionally, to comprehend how SMEs can enhance their persuasiveness in their messaging, it is imperative to understand their current utilization of social media for information dissemination. Therefore, this study involved a comparative analysis of the persuasive communication strategies used by SMIs

and SMEs. The results of this study, coupled with existing literature and previous research, allowed the researcher to address the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How are the rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, logos, and mythos used by SMIs in disseminating health information on Instagram and TikTok?

Research Question 2: What are the differences in persuasive communication tactics between SMIs and SMEs in the sharing of health information on social media?

This chapter includes a summary of the findings as it relates to the rhetorical appeals and narration used by SMIs in the dissemination of health and wellness information. Also included is a discussion on the rhetorical differences between the persuasive communication methods of SMIs and SMEs, as well as key tactics that can be employed by SMEs to expand their reach on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. This chapter concludes with a discussion on the methodological and practical implications, limitations and delimitations of the study, and additional areas for future research.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to attain an understanding of the persuasive communication tactics employed by SMIs in the dissemination of health and wellness information on social media. Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle and Fisher's (1984) Narrative Paradigm were used as the theoretical framework for this study to discover the "art of persuasion" of the influencer. Aristotle's rhetorical triangle includes the core persuasive components of rhetoric which include ethos, pathos, and logos; Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm includes the appeal of narration (mythos).

To discover how SMIs can persuade online users to adopt health information (RQ1), content analysis of the social media content of 15 SMIs was conducted over three months.

In the examination of SMI content, the findings revealed that SMIs effectively utilized all rhetorical appeals, encompassing narration (mythos) and advertisement in their content creation. Notably, a majority of their content (52%) incorporated the pathos appeal, with 25% ethos, 10% logos, 7% mythos, and 5% advertisement. Through the ethos appeal, SMIs employed tactics related to expertise, character, attractiveness, and homophily, all of which emerged as key themes across all SMIs. In the context of the pathos appeal, SMIs employed strategies identified in emerging themes such as psychological connectedness, parasocial relationships, and active engagement with their followers. This included practices like openly sharing personal stories and participating in interactions with their followers. Within engagement, various tactics were observed, such as posing questions, integrating current events or viral trends into their content, using music and audio clips, employing common terminology and hashtags, and encouraging collective action among their followers. For the logos appeal, SMIs created content that was clear, concise, and used easily understandable language. Lastly, through narration, they established narrative fidelity and correlation by employing tactics that depicted their daily routines and highlighted significant life events.

In response to the second research question regarding the disparities in persuasive communication tactics between SMIs and SMEs, the comparative analysis, which included observations of both SMI and SME content, was conducted. In addition to assessing SMI content, the study also examined 10 health and wellness SMEs and five prominent industry organizations. The comparative analysis revealed that, similar to SMIs, SMEs incorporated all rhetorical ap-

peals into their content creation. However, a notable variation in the use of each appeal was observed between the two groups. For instance, concerning the ethos appeal, SMEs predominantly relied on citing their professional and educational credentials and providing reliable sources (e.g., PMIDs) for a majority of their posts. In contrast, SMIs leaned on their credibility as athletes, their physical attractiveness and character, and their ability to establish a sense of similarity with their audience (homophily) to build their ethos.

Concerning the pathos appeal, the analysis indicated that while themes related to pathos were present in 35% of SME content, these themes differed significantly from those found in SMI content. For instance, SMEs made limited to no use of personal stories, opting instead for a notable reliance on first-person pronouns. One of the most notable distinctions in persuasive tactics between SMIs and SMEs was observed in the logos appeal. In contrast to SMIs, a majority of SME content incorporated the logos appeal (37%). The examination of SME content revealed that they created lengthy content (often exceeding 10 paragraphs), featuring text-based visuals, extensive employment of deductive reasoning, technical and scientific terminology, and a strong emphasis on educational visuals such as infographics, study screenshots, and self-generated memes. Lastly, the use of narration was almost non-existent among SMEs, with only one participant (SME8*) employing narration as a persuasive tactic in their online content.

Discussion

Through this study, the findings were able to provide valuable insight into the persuasive tactics employed by SMIs in the health and wellness industry. In addition, the findings of this study illustrate the key differences between the persuasive communication methods of SMIs and SMEs on social media. This study sought to attain an understanding of the key persuasive tactics

that SMIs employ to reach and maintain a large following of online users, thus providing SMEs with the necessary tools needed to ensure success in their messaging. Through the theoretical framework of Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle and Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, this study was able to capture the various persuasive tactics employed by SMIs through ethos, pathos, logos, and mythos appeals.

Persuasion through the Ethos Appeal

Aristotle stated that ethos pertains to the character of the speaker, and establishing credibility necessitates three qualities: practical wisdom, virtue, and goodwill. Previous research has indicated that, in addition to expertise, communication strategies that bolster the trustworthiness, character, attractiveness, and similarity of the speaker contribute to establishing their credibility. The findings of this study shed light on the diverse persuasive tactics employed by SMIs to establish credibility with their online audience through the utilization of the ethos appeal.

Through digital media, SMIs frequently showcased their expertise by sharing images or videos that demonstrated their physical fitness, strength, and their proficiency in the field of health and wellness. Furthermore, SMIs who were athletes created content that emphasized their accomplishments as elite athletes in their respective domains. In the context of the ethos appeal, it has been established through research (Durau et al., 2022) that the perception of expertise plays a crucial role in fostering trust in influencer-provided information. Additionally, SMIs generated content that often appeared transparent, utilizing personal experiences such as childbirth and illness to foster a perception of trustworthiness. As corroborated by research from Lou and Yuan (2019) and Oxman et al. (2022), tactics like transparent content creation and consistent content delivery contribute to enhancing the trustworthiness of the information source. Character,

in line with Aristotle's Rhetoric, is considered one of the most effective means of persuasion for a speaker. SMIs used expressions of gratitude and sincerity in their content, which conveyed a perception of good character.

Multiple SMIs used their platform to thank followers for their support with statements such as “Love you guys, grateful for your support every damn day.” The content created by SMIs was found to reflect the character of the creator and could be perceived as likable and relatable to the follower, therefore making them appear credible. This is in congruence with Aristotle’s Rhetoric, as well as the existing research by Ohanian (1990), Jorgensen (1998), Durau et al. (2022), Pickering (2021), Abidin and Ots (2016) and Yilmaxdogan et al (2021) which posits that persuasion is achievable when the audience finds the speaker to be of good character, relatable, and honest.

Additionally, the use of attractiveness was found to be used extensively amongst all SMIs and one hybrid participant (SME8*) to establish credibility. The posting of pictures and videos that highlighted their physicality and overall attractiveness made them appear that they were credible sources of health and wellness information. Dion et al. (1972), Kim and Kim (2021), and Ohanian (1990) support the premise that the positive perceptions of the source’s attractiveness increases the credibility of the source as well as the message. However, in addition to attractiveness, SMIs often posted content that made them appear as the average individual. For example, while a majority of the content of SMI6 showed her toned physique, she also would regularly post videos of her in sweat bottoms and minimal to no make-up, appearing like the average person. Findings showed that the likes on her content were significantly higher than SMI7 who consistently posted content in revealing attire (i.e. bathing suits) and had a much larger following

than SMI6 (14 million vs. 1.5 million). As supported by the research of Kim and Kim (2021), part of the success of influencers is their ability to appear like ordinary individuals, therefore appearing as similar to the audience, which is significant in building trust.

Lastly, findings support the existing literature of McPherson et al. (2001), Osie-Frimpong et al., (2022), Ladhari et al. (2020), Norwalk (2013), and Gupta et al. (2021) that the source's appearance of similarity to the audience greatly contributes to their credibility with their audience. The SMIs in this study were able to project a persona that they were of similar mindset, backgrounds, interests, and circumstances to their followers. The examples from the SMIs who were new mothers demonstrated that they were more than SMIs, but also new mothers who struggle with the same issues that other mothers encounter. The research of Nowak (2013) and Osei-Frimpong et al. (2022) supports the premise that homophily and one's social influence are directly related and, therefore can be an effective tactic in establishing credibility.

Persuasion through the Pathos Appeal

In Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle, while Aristotle considered ethos the most crucial of the three appeals, he also recognized the importance of establishing a connection with the audience. Utilizing persuasive tactics that appeal to the emotions of the audience (pathos) offers an opportunity for the speaker to forge a connection with their audience. The findings of this study revealed that SMIs heavily relied on the pathos appeal, employing various strategies aimed at establishing psychological connectedness, cultivating parasocial relationships, and engaging with their respective audiences.

To establish psychological connectedness, SMIs crafted content that enabled them to openly share personal stories, images, and videos with their followers. They often disclosed per-

sonal, sensitive information, including their own vulnerabilities. For instance, one SMI shared her experience with anxiety and a recent panic attack she had experienced, while another shared her struggles with body dysmorphia during her participation in bodybuilding. All SMIs shared personal images that depicted various facets of their lives, such as their families, faith, and hobbies beyond the realm of health and wellness. The tactic of openly sharing, often using the first-person pronoun, as noted in existing literature from De Duplaga (2020) and Leo and Thoekary (2021), allows the source to establish a sense of psychological connectedness with their followers. Additionally, as found in the research of Saaty (2020), the creation of content designed to evoke emotions is shown to directly influence the emotional response of the audience. In the case of SMIs, humor emerged as a common tactic, employed by 14 of the 15 SMIs. In many instances, this humor was self-deprecating in nature. For example, one SMI stated, *“I’m a little bit country, but a little bit hood rat too.”*

Additionally, the findings of this study support the research from Hendry et al. (2021) and Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) that SMIs can establish a connection with their followers through tactics used to enable the forming of parasocial relationships. Whether it was the use of statements of gratitude for their followers, the interaction with followers in the comments section, or statements such as “Love you all” or “Let’s go, family”, SMIs created content that was perceived to establish what Sokolova and Perez (2021) coined as “illusory relationships” with their followers.

In addition, SMIs used various persuasive tactics through the pathos appeal to actively engage and interact with their followers. As found in the study conducted by Ngai et al. (2020), the focus on collective action (i.e. the use of questions, hashtags, emerging trends, and current

events) encouraged open and active participation between the SMIS and their followers. Lastly, the use of music and audio clips to the content was consistently used amongst all SMIS. According to the studies conducted by Hamzah et al. (2019), Kiholm and Gardemyr (2017), and Fillmore (2022), the use of music not only captures the attention of the audience but positively affects the emotions, therefore making it an effective tactic through the pathos appeal.

Persuasion through the Logos Appeal

The findings of this study directly support the research of Viki Rahrada, Apridita, and Nofandrilla (2021) and Averbeck and Miller (2014) that SMIs develop content that is diverse, consistent, with clear and concise structure and wording, and easily comprehensible. The written captions and microblogs of the SMIs were relatively simplistic, quickly captured the attention of the scrolling online user, and the captions were short and “to the point”. Through the logos appeal, SMIs focused more on “how it is said” by using terminology that is easily understood and relatable to their audience. This corresponds with the existing literature of Leo and Theokary (2021) and Averbeck and Miller (2014) who found that word choice, intonation, persona, and sentence structure are contributing factors to drawing attention to current and new followers on social media.

Persuasion through Narration

Fisher (1984) believed that humans are, by nature, storytellers and while each rhetorical appeal serves its purpose in persuasion, so too does narration. The rise of digital media as a medium has provided the opportunity for individuals to actively engage in narration, detailing their daily lives, routines, and in-depth testimonials of significant life events. Through narrative cohesion and narrative fidelity, the “storyteller” can establish credibility and establish a sense of

authenticity and relatedness with their respective audience, thereby making it a persuasive tactic in communications.

The results of this study demonstrate that SMIs employed narration (mythos) as a communication tactic in the creation of their social media content. One common example of the use of narration was through the use of vlogs. Through video content, SMIs were able to document a "day in their life," capturing various aspects of their daily routine throughout the day. Moreover, several SMIs used their content to narrate significant life events, often sharing very personal experiences. For instance, one SMI posted multiple videos detailing her recent childbirth experience and her recovery afterward. The consistency of details presented through these SMI vlogs and the perceived authenticity of the stories contributed to establishing narrative coherence.

In addition to vlogs, all SMIs used Instagram Stories to provide snapshots of their daily lives. For example, SMI1 used Instagram Stories daily to share family activities, her body care routine, and narrate her recent experiences with anxiety. Tactics like these contribute to narrative fidelity by establishing a sense of relatability and alignment with the experiences of the audience. Using narration to discuss daily activities and significant life events can be an effective persuasive tactic, allowing individuals to project an image of authenticity and genuineness, as observed in studies conducted by Kuhn and Risemeyer (2021) and Balaban and Szambolics (2022). In the context of health communication, as suggested by research from Kreuter et al. (2010) and Ting et al. (2020), the use of narration may enhance the effectiveness of interventions and foster a sense of community and support, particularly when it comes to health-related topics.

Differences in the use of Rhetorical Appeals between SMIs and SMEs

This study sought to understand the differences in the use of each rhetorical appeal between SMIs and SMEs to help bridge the gap in the use of persuasion on social media. The findings of this study revealed that both SMIs and SMEs employed various tactics through ethos, pathos, logos, and mythos, however, the tactics employed by each group were considerably different. Through the ethos appeal, SMEs relied heavily on the use of their educational and professional backgrounds, often citing their credentials on their profiles and in their posts. Additionally, the use of cited sources from existing literature and research was commonly used by the SMEs to support their argument or topic of discussion. Unlike SMIs, aside from SME8* (hybrid), there were no findings of the use of attractiveness or homophily.

When compared with SMIs, the use of the pathos appeal by SMEs was notably different. With the exception of SME8*, there was minimal to no content that delved into the personal lives of the SMEs. SMEs heavily relied on the use of first-person pronouns, but their use was more from an objective standpoint rather than the subjective approach commonly employed by SMIs. Furthermore, while both SMIs and SMEs used questions in their posts, SMEs used questions primarily as precursors to initiate discussions on their topics. Similarly, like SMIs who incorporated current events and emerging trends into their content, SMEs produced content centered around contemporary and contentious health and wellness issues, including responses to current research or claims made by other fitness and nutrition professionals and influencers.

Regarding engagement, the findings revealed that industry organizations (SME13 and SME15) frequently requested comments from their followers, although the response was generally minimal, often garnering fewer than 10 responses. Beyond the use of questions, SMEs employed limited persuasive tactics to actively engage with their followers, including infrequent use

of music or audio. Through the logos appeal, it was apparent that SMEs predominantly used deductive reasoning to present factual data. Their content, unlike that of SMIs, appeared to be more educational and aimed at health and wellness professionals, featuring technical and scientific language. Through logos, SMEs provided an extensive amount of information in their posts, utilizing multiple textual slides, infographics, and screenshots from existing research to substantiate their discussions. In stark contrast to SMIs, SMEs heavily relied on the use of memes in their content creation. Specifically, industry organizations and several SMEs used branded memes as a weekly content feature.

Lastly, the use of narration was rare among SMEs. Only one participant, SME8*, incorporated narration into their content creation. Similar to SMIs, SME8* employed video and Instagram Stories to narrate significant life events, including his recent divorce and struggles with injuries. Additionally, SME8* used transformation pictures to document his experiences with weight loss and weight gain. In the realm of health communications, as indicated by the research of Djafarova and Rushworth (2016), tactics such as using transformation pictures and narrating personal experiences can contribute to the perceived trustworthiness and credibility of a particular product or program.

Implications

Methodological Implications

Rhetoric, as defined by Aristotle, is the “art of persuasion”. Being a persuasive speaker is more than orating from a podium or platform, but having an understanding of the audience and creating a message that is adopted as truth. With the evolution of digital media, social media has provided a platform that allows for a wide array of voices, personas, views, and opinions to be

heard, thus remaining an area of extensive past and future research in the area of communications. With the expansion of social media platforms and the rise of SMIs over the last two decades, research in this particular area will continue to grow. This study can be added to the growing list of research on social media influencers as it provides evidence of the persuasive communication methods employed by SMIs, through the theoretical framework of rhetorical appeals and the narrative paradigm. It also provides insight into the evolution of the rhetoric tradition in today's digital society. As this study demonstrates, new mediums and new audiences require new methods of messaging, particularly as it relates to health communications.

This study also provides information on the manner in which SMEs are using social media to communicate. As discussed in Chapter 1, a gap in the literature pertaining to SMEs and their communication methods has been identified. This study has successfully illuminated key distinctions between the persuasive tactics employed by SMIs and SMEs, contributing to a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the current persuasive approaches adopted by SMEs. In the field of health communication, this research serves to bridge the existing gap in our knowledge regarding the utilization of persuasive strategies by SMEs.

Furthermore, this study makes a valuable addition to the ongoing research in the realm of health communication. In the post-COVID era, research efforts persist not only to comprehend the impact of the epidemic but also to examine the communication practices of medical professionals, prominent health organizations, and governmental agencies. This study aids in bolstering the existing literature on contemporary persuasive strategies deployed online to promote changes in health-related behaviors and attitudes. While there exists a wealth of research on the rhetoric of health communications, there is a dearth of studies focusing on the involvement of influencers

in disseminating health information. This study not only expands upon the existing body of knowledge on persuasion within health communication but also contributes novel insights into the rhetorical strategies that can be harnessed to persuade individuals to adopt health-related information on social media.

Practical Implications

In the realm of health and wellness, the online landscape is teeming with information, originating from both reliable and unverified sources. As demonstrated in this study, SMIs have excelled in amassing substantial followings, encouraging the adoption of specific health information, and often being perceived as trustworthy and credible sources, even when the information they disseminate is occasionally misleading or incorrect. In the domain of health communications, experts must possess the knowledge of effectively communicating on social media. While it is crucial for SMEs to educate the public, they must also find means of doing so persuasively and influentially.

As the prevalence of social media as a communication platform continues to rise, both SMEs and leading health organizations must comprehend the array of tactics at their disposal for reaching broader audiences. Furthermore, from a persuasive communication standpoint, it is imperative to recognize the significance of each rhetorical appeal, alongside narration. This understanding equips SMEs and leading health organizations to create content that not only informs the public but also encourages them to embrace health-related information.

Although it may seem that the intended audience for SMEs consists mainly of fitness and nutrition professionals, the information they disseminate can also benefit the average online user from a health perspective. Hence, they must employ strategies that have a broad appeal. This

study, coupled with existing literature and prior research, has identified crucial persuasive tactics employed by SMIs, who continue to achieve success in their social media messaging. Drawing from the insights of this study, a set of best practices has been developed for SMEs to offer practical guidance on how to enhance the persuasiveness of their social media messages.

1. Incorporate the use of personal stories and testimonials to sell the story.
2. Establish a connection with the audience.
3. Less is more- Keep it simple and comprehensible.
4. Produce content that is diverse, creative, and engaging.
5. Maintain an active social media presence.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

Through this study, there were several delimitations including the selection and size of the sample, the social media platforms examined, and the time frame chosen to collect data.

Determining the Selection and Size of the Sample

The selection of the 15 SMIs and 15 SMEs proved sufficient in the data collection process. The variety of expertise, ethnic background, and personalities allowed for multiple themes to emerge about persuasive tactics. It also allowed for strong content creators to stand out amongst others who may have lacked in the creativity of their social media content.

Selection of Instagram as an Observed Social Media Platform

The selection of Instagram as the primary social media platform was appropriate for this specific study. Instagram remains a popular platform for individuals seeking health and wellness-related information and appeals to a global audience. All participants in Group A and Group B used Instagram to actively share information related to the health and wellness industry through posts, stories, and reels. The accounts of the participants were public and easily accessible and included no security concerns.

Time Frame for Data Collection

A period of three months was determined to be sufficient for this content analysis. The daily and consistent content creation by SMIs and the repetition of the content created and shared by SMEs allowed for all themes to emerge by the second month of data collection. The researcher found no new emerging themes after the third month of data collection, reinforcing that the selected time period was adequate for this study.

Limitations

Through the process of conducting this study, the researcher identified three limitations that affected the study, including the lack of SMEs who actively use social media, the curated nature of social media, the selection of TikTok as an observed social media platform, and the lack of using other social media platforms, such as YouTube, as an observed setting for this area of study.

Lack of SMEs Actively Using Social Media

This research encountered the biggest limitation in identifying SMEs who actively utilize social media for educating the public or creating content. Prior to selecting the participant

sample, the researcher received recommendations for SMEs from former colleagues in the health and wellness industry. However, it was observed that nearly 75% of the recommended individuals either did not maintain a presence on social media or had private accounts. Furthermore, the infrequent generation of content by SMEs became apparent when examining multiple SME participants. While seven out of the 10 SMEs consistently posted content, three of them only posted 1-2 times a week.

Curated Nature of Social Media

On social media, individuals have the opportunity to craft online personas that reflect how they wish to be perceived. Because social media is curated, it doesn't provide a complete understanding of the true nature or character of individuals. While SMIs may create content that showcases qualities such as gratitude, sincerity, authenticity, and genuineness, it can be challenging to determine whether these displayed traits are innate or cultivated to appeal to the online community.

TikTok

TikTok was chosen as an additional platform for this study due to its popularity among influencers and online users. However, in March 2023, mounting security concerns related to the platform and potential Chinese influence garnered significant attention in the U.S., leading to Congressional hearings highlighting these apprehensions. Owing to the researcher's uncertainty about the privacy and security of this platform, it was decided that, after two months of data collection, sufficient data had been obtained, allowing the researcher to deactivate the account established at the start of the research. Furthermore, while a majority of the participants had Tik-

Tok accounts, the frequency of content sharing on this platform was not as consistent as observed on Instagram.

Additional Social Media Platforms

While Instagram and TikTok were widely used by SMI participants, the research found that SMEs use other platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and podcasts to share health and wellness information. Due to only observing content on Instagram and TikTok, while able to capture sufficient SMI content, the researcher was unable to capture a wider array of persuasive tactics used by SMEs through the other communication channels.

Future Research

While this qualitative content analysis effectively addressed the research questions pertaining to the persuasive communication methods of SMIs and provided a comparative analysis between the social media content of SMIs and SMEs, there are numerous opportunities for exploring different avenues in the field of communication and other areas of study. Social media continues to serve as a vital tool for global communication and information dissemination. With the rapid proliferation of social media, SMIs have become influential sources of information across various industries. Given their effectiveness in reaching large audiences, the use of influencers is on the rise. This underscores the significant potential for expanding research on this topic in multiple sectors, both within and beyond the realm of communication.

This study exclusively examined the content created by SMIs and SMEs. While understanding the persuasive tactics employed by SMIs is essential, it is also crucial to comprehend why users follow SMIs. Research should be conducted to gain insight into the follower perspective, delving into what attracts online users to specific influencers and why they choose to follow

particular influencers. This understanding is key to determining the most effective methods of communication with a broad social media audience. While certain assumptions can be made based on key data points, such as the number of likes and followers for each participant or post, these metrics do not provide a complete representation of the reasons online users follow specific influencers.

Another avenue for future research could fall under the sociocultural communication tradition. Social media offers a platform for individuals to share and interact with other online users, leading to the establishment of online communities. Investigating the dynamics of parasocial relationships formed between influencers and their followers would offer valuable insights into how online interactions contribute to building relationships.

Additionally, further research could explore the field of semiotics and its relationship with SMI content. Upon examination, it was evident that SMIs heavily rely on signs and symbols to resonate with their target audience. The use of emojis, words or phrases, and vivid imagery were identified as additional tactics in the content created by SMIs. However, more research could be conducted to investigate how influencers employ specific signs and symbols in their messaging and assess their overall effectiveness in conveying their content. Reflecting on the initial problem statement, further research could delve into the extent of misinformation shared by SMIs. While this study did not reveal a significant amount of misinformation being disseminated by SMIs, SMEs still frequently cite influencers as sources of misinformation. As outlined in Chapter 1, there is a gap in the literature regarding the misinformation spread by SMIs, making it an area that warrants further investigation.

Lastly, future research should expand to evaluate the use of influencers and persuasive messaging on social media in other industries, particularly in faith-based organizations, including ministries. In an era characterized by an abundance of information sources, where individuals can access information from multiple channels, it is crucial to understand not only how to effectively communicate and engage with a broad audience but also how to maintain and expand that audience. While secular organizations and corporations are increasingly utilizing influencers to disseminate information and promote products and services, research should explore the efficacy of SMIs in non-secular organizations. Given the declining church membership nationwide, it is imperative to identify the communication methods currently employed by church leaders and discern which persuasive tactics can be employed to reach a larger audience.

Reflexivity

When I initially started this dissertation journey, my original intention was to investigate the issue of misinformation spread by influencers. Having previously worked as a SME in the health and wellness industry, I was frustrated by the overwhelming volume of misinformation online, and I attributed it to unqualified and inexperienced influencers. My belief was that SMIs primarily relied on their physical attractiveness and fit physiques to gain credibility with their followers and should not be regarded as credible sources of information. However, as I engaged in the research, observation, and analysis process, I came to realize that my initial perception of SMIs was not accurate, and I regretfully had misconceptions.

Moreover, while I entered this study with no predefined knowledge of the precise persuasive tactics employed by SMIs, my background as an SME allowed me to be aware of the challenges faced by SMEs in terms of their appeal on social media due to the nature of the content

they created and shared. As I collected and analyzed data, my perception of SMIs and SMEs underwent a transformation. I found SMIs' content to be positive and engaging, while I perceived SMEs' content as excessive and occasionally negative. Initially, this affected my ability to avoid confirmation bias. However, upon reflection, I have eliminated all subjective observations, relying exclusively on the data gathered in this study to support all the findings.

Summary

This study delved into the persuasive strategies employed by Social Media Influencers (SMIs) in the health and wellness industry, using rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, and logos) and narration (mythos). As evidenced by existing literature and the findings of this research, each appeal serves a unique role in the "art of persuasion." SMIs utilize these appeals to craft a self-presentation that encourages their followers to view them as credible, relatable, authentic, and similar sources of information, thereby establishing an influencer effect on their audience. Furthermore, this study sheds light on the tactics used by Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) in the field, bridging the gap in current literature regarding the digital communication practices of SMEs. The results of this study highlight how SMEs offer comprehensive information from an educator's perspective, drawing heavily on their professional credibility and subject-matter expertise.

The ever-evolving landscape of communication technologies demands corresponding changes in rhetorical strategies. This is evident in the contemporary use of social media and SMIs as new channels for messaging. Through the effective deployment of rhetorical appeals and narration, this study has revealed how the persuasive tactics of SMIs can and should be adopted by SMEs and prominent organizations in the health and wellness sector. As both this

study and existing literature emphasize, persuasive tactics that establish source credibility, tap into the emotional appeal of the audience, provide sound reasoning, and narrate a coherent and relatable story all contribute to the influencer effect and the adoption of health information on social media.

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