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Review Article

The influence of social media on dietary supplement use: a rapid review

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ABSTRACT

Dietary supplements are widely consumed to address perceived nutritional inadequacies and promote health. In recent years, social media platforms have emerged as influential channels for the marketing of dietary supplements. These promotions often disseminate unsubstantiated health claims and may contribute to inappropriate or excessive supplement use, raising concerns about population-level health risks, particularly among young adults. A rapid review was conducted in accordance with updated Cochrane guidance for rapid reviews of effectiveness. Systematic searches were performed in PubMed, Google Scholar, and CINAHL to identify peer-reviewed studies published in English within the past 10 years. Studies examining social media exposure, dietary supplement use, and health-related behaviours among U.S. adults aged 18–50 years were eligible for inclusion. Data were extracted and synthesized narratively due to heterogeneity in study designs and outcome measures. Across included studies, exposure to dietary supplement content on social media was consistently associated with increased body image dissatisfaction, heightened susceptibility to persuasive marketing and greater likelihood of unsupervised or non-evidence-based supplement use. Young adults frequently reported modifying dietary practices or health behaviours in response to online content rather than professional medical advice. This review highlights the growing public health implications of social media–driven dietary supplement promotion. The findings support the need for enhanced regulatory oversight of online supplement marketing, improved health literacy interventions, and more proactive patient–provider communication regarding supplement use. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term health outcomes associated with socially mediated supplement consumption and to inform evidence-based policy development.

Keywords: Adults, Dietary supplements, Health literacy, Risk perception, Social media influence

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, dietary supplement use has increased markedly in the United States, with particularly high uptake among adults. These products are frequently marketed as convenient solutions for enhancing physical appearance, improving energy levels, or optimizing overall health and are often perceived as low-risk additions to daily routines. When used appropriately, dietary supplements may help address nutrient inadequacies in individuals whose dietary intake does not consistently meet recommended guidelines.[1] However, supplements are intended to complement, not replace, a balanced and nutrient-dense diet. Public health concerns emerge when supplements are used excessively, inappropriately, or as substitutes for whole foods or evidence-based medical care raising concerns about misuse and overconsumption Recent national data indicate that more than half of U.S. adults regularly use at least one dietary supplement, reflecting both heightened health awareness and the growing influence of digital media on health behaviours.[2] Social media platforms have become prominent sources of health information, especially for adults, due to their accessibility, personalization, and visual appeal. Content promoting dietary supplements is widespread across social media

platforms and is frequently presented through aspirational or appearance-focused narratives. However, these messages often lack scientific validation and rarely address potential risks, appropriate dosing, or interactions with medications.[3] From a public health perspective, the normalization of supplement promotion on social media raises significant concerns regarding misinformation and consumer vulnerability. Unlike clinical care, which accounts for individual health status and comorbidities, social media marketing typically omits discussion of adverse effects or contraindications.[4] This gap is particularly consequential for individuals managing chronic conditions or polypharmacy, for whom unsupervised supplement use may pose avoidable health risks. The existing literature examining social media and health behaviours has notable limitations. Many studies rely on cross-sectional designs, self-reported data, or small samples, constraining the ability to draw causal inferences. Moreover, while prior research has explored general dietary behaviours and body image outcomes, fewer studies have focused specifically on how social media exposure influences dietary supplement use, disclosure of supplement consumption to healthcare providers, and patient–physician communication. These gaps limit the capacity of public health professionals to develop targeted interventions and evidence-based policy responses. This rapid review synthesizes current evidence on the relationship between social media exposure and dietary supplement behaviours among adults in the United States. The review examines how aspirational health messaging and appearance-based content shape supplement use practices, influence engagement with healthcare providers, and contribute to broader public health implications. Understanding these dynamics is critical for informing regulatory strategies, health communication efforts, and future research aimed at promoting safe and informed supplement use.

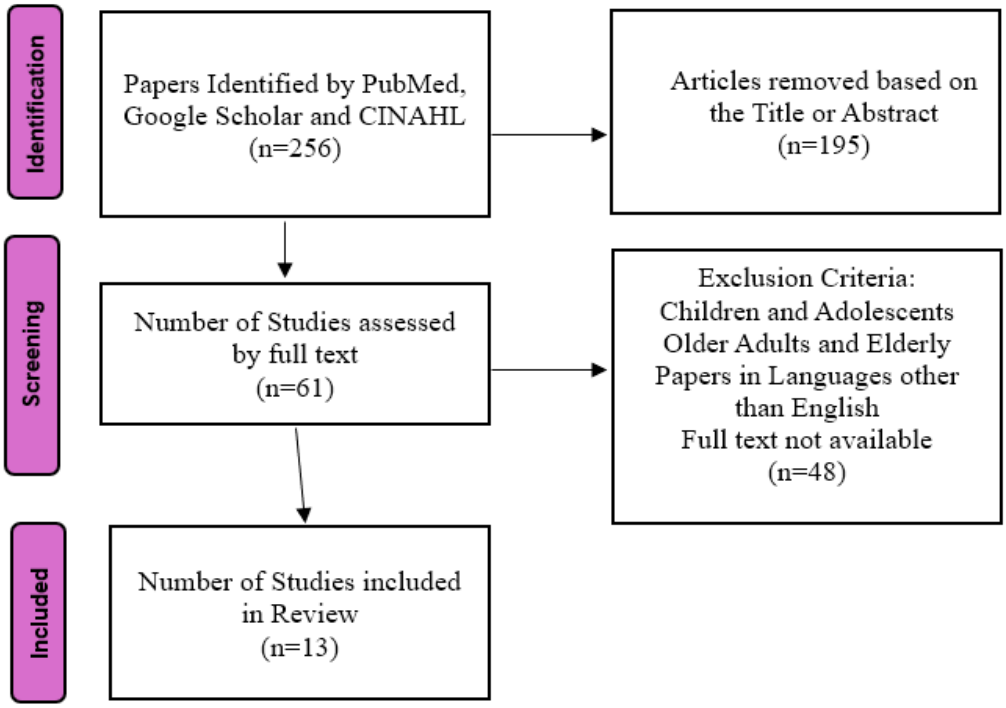

Figure 1: PRISMA of screening process.

METHODS

Study selection

A systematic literature search was undertaken to identify studies relevant to dietary supplement use and social media influence among young adults. The databases PubMed, Google Scholar, and CINAHL were searched to capture a broad range of health, behavioural, and public health research. Studies were eligible for inclusion if they examined individuals aged 18–50 years living in the United States, were published in English within the past decade, and were accessible in full text. Articles were excluded if they focused on children, adolescents, or populations outside the United States. This targeted approach ensured that the included studies were both current and directly applicable to the population of interest.

PICO framework

The research question was developed using the PICO framework to guide the review process. The population of interest consisted of adults between 18 and 50 years of age residing in the United States. The exposure examined was engagement with social media content related to

dietary supplements. When applicable, comparisons included individuals with minimal or no exposure to such content. Outcomes of interest encompassed patterns of dietary supplement use, perceptions of health-related benefits and risks, supplement misuse or overuse, and related health behaviours. Utilizing this framework supported consistency and clarity throughout study selection and analysis.

Search terms and boolean logic

A structured search strategy was applied across all databases using predefined keywords. The terms "dietary supplements," "social media," and "United States" were combined using Boolean operators to refine the search results. Specifically, the search string "dietary supplements" AND "social media" AND "United States" was used to identify studies that aligned closely with the review objectives. This method helped ensure that retrieved articles were relevant while limiting unrelated findings.

Study identification and screening

All identified records were initially reviewed based on titles and abstracts to determine relevance and eligibility. Articles that met the preliminary criteria were subsequently evaluated through full-text review. In addition to studies that met the primary inclusion criteria, three supplementary articles were incorporated to broaden the discussion on dietary supplement misuse and the general impact of social media on health behaviours. Following this multi-step screening process, a total of 13 studies were deemed suitable for inclusion in the final review. The overall selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

Data extraction and synthesis

Relevant data were systematically extracted from each included study using a standardized approach. Extracted information included study design, participant characteristics, social media platforms assessed, types of dietary supplements examined, and key findings related to health outcomes, benefits, and risks. Due to variability in study designs and outcome measures, a narrative synthesis was conducted rather than a quantitative meta-analysis. Both positive and negative effects of dietary supplement use were considered to provide a comprehensive and balanced overview of the existing evidence.

Rationale for single-reviewer screening

The screening and data extraction processes were conducted by a single reviewer due to limited time and resources. To reduce the risk of bias, clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied consistently throughout the review process. The use of established methodological guidelines, including the PICO framework and PRISMA reporting standards, further enhanced transparency and methodological rigor. While multi-reviewer screening is preferred, single-reviewer screening is acceptable for narrative reviews when conducted systematically.

Risk of bias

The studies included in this review exhibited varying levels of potential bias, primarily influenced by study design, data collection methods, and population sampling. Cross-sectional surveys and qualitative studies were generally rated as moderate risk of bias due to reliance on self-reported measures, convenience sampling, and limited control for confounding factors.[5-7] Large-scale, nationally representative datasets such as NHANES and emergency department records were considered low risk for selection and measurement bias but still limited in establishing causality.[2,8] Observational analyses of supplement-related adverse events or social media content varied from moderate to high risk, reflecting incomplete contextual data and challenges in inferring individual behaviours.[3,9,10] Narrative reviews carried minimal bias in data extraction but were limited by potential publication bias.[11] Overall, the heterogeneity in study designs and reliance on self-reported or indirect measures underscores the need for cautious interpretation of findings and highlights gaps for future longitudinal and experimental research to more accurately assess causal relationships.

Ethical considerations

This review did not involve the collection of primary data or the use of identifiable personal information; therefore, ethical approval was not required.

RESULTS

PREVALENCE AND PATTERNS OF DIETARY SUPPLEMENT USE

Across the included studies, dietary supplement use was highly prevalent among U.S. adults, with particularly widespread use observed among young adults. National survey data indicated that more than half of U.S. adults reported routine consumption of at least one dietary supplement, reflecting the normalization of supplement use within daily health practices.[2] Supplements were commonly used for general wellness, energy enhancement, weight management, and aesthetic purposes, including muscle building and skin, hair, and nail health. While some individuals reported using supplements to address perceived nutrient gaps, many studies suggested that motivations extended beyond clinical need and were shaped by broader social and cultural influences. Table 1 summarizes study characteristics, populations, and primary outcomes related to supplement use.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A PRIMARY SOURCE OF SUPPLEMENT INFORMATION

Several studies identified social media as a dominant source of information shaping dietary supplement awareness and use. Social media Platforms were frequently cited as spaces where users encountered supplement-related contents where supplements were often promoted through visually compelling, emotionally charged, and aspirational narratives. These messages emphasized rapid physical transformation, improved appearance, or enhanced performance, while rarely addressing scientific evidence, appropriate dosing, or potential adverse effects. Qualitative and survey-based findings indicated that many users perceived this content as relatable and trustworthy, particularly when delivered by influencers or peers. Table 2 categorizes the content focus and observed effects on user behaviour.

BODY IMAGE, VULNERABILITY AND MOTIVATIONS FOR USE

A consistent theme across the literature was the relationship between social media exposure, body image concerns, and supplement use behaviours. Studies examining eating concerns, muscularity ideals, and appearance-related dissatisfaction found that frequent engagement with appearance-focused social media content was associated with increased pressure to conform to idealized body standards. This pressure appeared to heighten vulnerability to supplement marketing, particularly products targeting weight loss, muscle gain, or aesthetic enhancement. Young adults reported turning to supplements impulsively in response to these messages, frequently in the absence of medical supervision.

MISINFORMATION AND MARKETING STRATEGIES

Content analyses and consumer behaviour studies highlighted the pervasive use of misleading or incomplete information in supplement promotion. Marketing strategies commonly included exaggerated claims, before-and-after imagery, and anecdotal testimonials that implied efficacy without substantiation. Some studies noted that supplement advertisements leveraged themes of self-optimization, empowerment, and urgency, framing products as essential to health or success. The lack of regulatory oversight on social media advertising allowed such claims to circulate widely, contributing to confusion regarding the safety and effectiveness of dietary supplements.

HEALTH RISKS AND ADVERSE OUTCOMES

Evidence from surveillance data and clinical reports demonstrated that inappropriate supplement use is associated with measurable health risks. Emergency department data revealed thousands of annual visits related to adverse events from dietary supplements, including cardiovascular symptoms, gastrointestinal distress, and allergic reactions. More severe outcomes were documented in association with weight-loss and sports supplements, including cases of acute liver injury and hepatotoxicity.[8,9] These findings underscore the potential consequences of unsupervised supplement consumption, particularly when products are used at high doses or combined with other substances. Table 3 provides an overview of supplement types, data sources, and reported health outcomes.

DISCLOSURE AND HEALTHCARE ENGAGEMENT

Multiple studies identified low rates of disclosure of dietary supplement use to healthcare providers. Factors contributing to nondisclosure included perceptions that supplements are “natural” or harmless, limited time during clinical encounters, and concerns about provider disapproval. This lack of communication poses challenges for patient safety, as undisclosed supplement use may increase the risk of drug–supplement interactions or interfere with medical treatment.[12,13] The findings suggest a disconnect between consumer behaviour influenced by social media and clinical oversight within healthcare settings. Table 4 summarizes findings related to communication and public health implications.

Table 1: Characteristics of included studies and primary outcomes.

Study (Author, Year)	Study design	Population/data source	Focus area	Primary outcomes
Stephens et al, 2016	Case series & surveillance analysis	U.S. patients with supplement-related liver injury	Supplement safety	Identified severe hepatotoxicity linked to weight-loss and sports supplements, particularly OxyELITE Pro™, highlighting risks of unregulated products
Ertekin et al, 2024	Cross-sectional survey	Adult female acne patients	Social media & treatment decisions	Found widespread reliance on social media for acne management, with a significant proportion modifying medical treatment based on online advice
Ganson et al, 2025	Cross-sectional study	Boys and men	Social media & body image	Demonstrated associations between exposure to muscularity-focused content and muscle dysmorphia symptoms

Continued.

Study (Author, Year)	Study design	Population/data source	Focus area	Primary outcomes
Geller et al, 2015	National surveillance study	U.S. emergency department visits	Adverse events	Estimated substantial emergency visits related to dietary supplements, particularly weight-loss and energy products
Jennifer et al, 2019	Survey study	Patients in primary, integrative, and naturopathic care	Patient–provider communication	Identified factors influencing disclosure and nondisclosure of supplement use, including perceived safety and relevance
Mishra et al, 2023	Cross-sectional (NHANES)	U.S. general population	Supplement prevalence	Reported high prevalence of dietary supplement use across age groups, varying by demographic characteristics
Nathan et al, 2019	Cross-sectional survey	Adult consumers	Health information-seeking behaviours	Found physicians viewed as most credible sources, yet consumers frequently used online and social media platforms
Council for responsible nutrition	Industry report	U.S. population data	Nutrient intake	Highlighted common nutrient shortfalls and positioned supplements as tools to address dietary gaps
Raffoul et al, 2024	Content analysis	TikTok supplement videos	Influencer marketing	Identified misleading marketing practices emphasizing aesthetics while omitting risk and nutritional details
Rustad et al, 2021	Narrative review	Published literature	Beauty supplements	Found limited scientific evidence supporting claims of oral collagen for skin, hair, and nails
Saad et al, 2024	Qualitative study	College students	Social media & diet	Reported strong influence of social media on eating behaviors and body perception, driven by comparison and trends
Sidani et al, 2016	Cross-sectional study	U.S. young adults	Social media & eating concerns	Linked higher social media use with increased eating-related worries and body dissatisfaction
Vaterlaus et al, 2015	Qualitative study	Young adults	Health behaviours	Found social media could both motivate healthy behaviors and reinforce unrealistic standards
Wang et al, 2018	Data mining study	Twitter posts	Mental health & supplements	Detected associations between supplement-related discussions and mental health conditions
Yang et al, 2024	Conceptual & empirical analysis	Consumers	Purchasing behaviour	Demonstrated social media's strong role in shaping consumer purchasing decisions
Zamil et al, 2022	Content analysis	Instagram supplement advertisements	Marketing transparency	Found frequent omission of risks and overemphasis on benefits in skin, hair, and nail supplement promotions

Table 2: Social media content, body image, and supplement-related behaviours.

Study (Author, Year)	Social media/media influence	Key body image or behavioural outcome
Stephens et al, 2016	Popularized weight-loss and performance products	Serious liver injury linked to supplement use
Ertekin et al, 2024	Online and social media treatment advice	Changes to prescribed acne therapy
Ganson et al, 2025	Muscularity-focused content	Increased muscle dysmorphia and risky behaviours
Geller et al, 2015	Widespread supplement promotion	Emergency visits due to adverse supplement effects
Jennifer et al, 2019	Online health information exposure	Nondisclosure of supplement use to clinicians
Mishra et al, 2023	Not media-focused	High prevalence of supplement consumption
Nathan et al, 2019	Social media and internet sources	Reliance on digital platforms over clinicians
CRN (n.d.)	Industry messaging	Normalization of routine supplement use
Raffoul et al, 2024	TikTok influencer marketing	Misleading promotion of weight-loss and muscle products

Continued.

Study (Author, Year)	Social media/media influence	Key body image or behavioural outcome
Rustad et al, 2021	Beauty-oriented media claims	Use of collagen despite limited evidence
Saad et al, 2024	Social networking platforms	Body dissatisfaction and dieting trends
Sidani et al, 2016	High social media engagement	Eating concerns and appearance anxiety
Vaterlaus et al, 2015	Health-focused social content	Mixed healthy and harmful behaviours
Wang et al, 2018	Twitter discussions	Links between supplement use and mental distress
Yang (2024)	Social media advertising	Increased health product purchasing
Zamil et al, 2022	Instagram beauty marketing	Supplement use with limited risk disclosure

Table 3: Health risks and adverse outcomes associated with supplement use.

Study (Author, Year)	Type of risk identified	Reported adverse outcome
Stephens et al, 2016	Hepatic toxicity	Acute liver injury associated with weight-loss and sports supplements
Geller et al, 2015	Acute medical harm	Emergency department visits due to cardiovascular, neurological, and gastrointestinal effects
Jennifer et al, 2019	Clinical communication risk	Increased likelihood of adverse interactions due to nondisclosure of supplement use
Mishra et al, 2023	Population-level exposure	Elevated cumulative risk from widespread and long-term supplement consumption
Rustad et al, 2021	Misinformation-related risk	Use of ineffective beauty supplements with unsubstantiated claims
Wang et al, 2018	Mental health associations	Signals linking supplement use to anxiety, depression, and mood disorders
Zamil et al, 2022	Regulatory and safety gaps	Consumer exposure to products with inadequate labelling and risk disclosure
Raffoul et al, 2024	Misleading marketing	Increased risk of unsafe use due to omission of side effects and contraindications

Table 4: Communication and public health implications.

Study (Author, Year)	Communication issue identified	Public health implication
Ertekin et al, 2024	Online advice influences patients more than clinical guidance	Increased risk of inappropriate self-management and reduced treatment effectiveness
Nathan et al, 2019	Preference for digital information despite high trust in clinicians	Need for credible health messaging within online environments
Jennifer et al, 2019	Limited patient disclosure of supplement use	Higher potential for preventable adverse events and drug–supplement interactions
Geller et al, 2015	Underreporting of supplement-related harms	Incomplete surveillance and underestimated public health burden
Stephens et al, 2016	Delayed recognition of supplement toxicity	Necessity for earlier warning systems and clinician awareness
Raffoul et al, 2024	Inadequate risk disclosure in influencer content	Justifies stronger regulation of digital supplement marketing
Zamil et al, 2022	Promotional emphasis over safety information	Highlights need for standardized advertising disclosures
Sidani et al, 2016	High exposure to appearance-focused content	Supports integration of media literacy into public health strategies
Saad et al, 2024	Social comparison driven by online platforms	Indicates need for targeted mental health and nutrition education
Vaterlaus et al, 2015	Mixed health messaging on social media	Opportunity to leverage platforms for evidence-based interventions
Wang et al, 2018	Mental health signals visible in social media data	Potential for digital surveillance to inform early public health responses
Yang et al, 2024	Strong influence of social media on purchasing behaviour	Importance of consumer protection policies in digital spaces
Mishra et al, 2023	High prevalence of supplement use	Necessitates population-level education on safe and informed use

GAPS IN THE EVIDENCE BASE

The reviewed literature revealed important methodological limitations. Many studies relied on cross-sectional designs, self-reported behaviours, or non-representative samples, limiting causal inference. While associations between social media exposure, body image, and supplement use were consistently observed, longitudinal evidence examining long-term health outcomes remains limited. Additionally, few studies directly assessed the impact of social media exposure on patient–provider communication or evaluated the effectiveness of public health interventions addressing supplement misinformation.

DISCUSSION

This review highlights the complex interplay between social media exposure, body image, dietary supplement use, and patient–provider communication among young adults. Despite acknowledging physicians as the most credible sources of health information, many individuals rely heavily on social media and online platforms for guidance.[13] For instance, it was reported that nearly all participants in their study of acne patients used at least one social media platform for treatment advice, with 21% willing to alter prescribed regimens based on online recommendations.[5] This illustrates the potential for online content to supersede professional medical advice, raising concerns about patient safety.[16] A recurring theme across the literature is the influence of social media on body image and health-related behaviours. Exposure to appearance-focused content is associated with increased body dissatisfaction, eating concerns, and the adoption of dietary supplements to achieve aesthetic or performance goals.[6,7] College students, in particular, reported being highly motivated by images and testimonials from influencers, although the effects were not limited to women, men were also affected, especially by muscle-building content, which was linked to body dysmorphia and compulsive behaviours such as restrictive dieting, excessive exercise, and unsupervised supplement use.[14] Social media thus functions as both an educational and a risk-enhancing environment. While some content promotes healthy behaviours, the same platforms simultaneously foster negative self-comparisons and impulsive, unregulated supplement adoption.

The visual and aspirational aspects of influencer marketing are especially potent. Supplements are often presented alongside lifestyle ideals, which amplify users desire to emulate promoted images. A study demonstrated that weight-loss and detox products were frequently marketed using thin, feminine figures, while muscle-building supplements highlighted hyper-muscular male physiques.[10] Similarly another study found that influencer testimonials rarely disclosed nutritional facts, emphasizing benefits while minimizing risks, thus encouraging widespread but potentially unsafe supplement use.[4] These findings underscore the need for users to critically evaluate online health content and for public health efforts to improve media literacy.

Another critical issue is the lack of disclosure to healthcare providers. Many individuals do not report supplement use because they perceive it as harmless, routine, or unrelated to their medical care.[12] This gap has tangible consequences. studies show that adverse events from supplements, including hepatotoxicity and emergency department visits, are often preventable but occur due to nondisclosure.[8,9] The combination of social media-driven self-prescription and poor communication with providers creates a high-risk environment for young adults, highlighting an urgent need for improved patient education and provider inquiry regarding supplement use.

The dual role of social media as both motivator and barrier to healthy behaviours is another important finding. While platforms can encourage physical activity and balanced eating, the prevalence of misleading content, coupled with emotional vulnerability, can reinforce unhealthy comparisons and impulsive behaviours.[15] The intensity and frequency of social media engagement further exacerbate these risks, particularly in young adults, who are more susceptible to social pressures and lifestyle trends promoted online.[6,7] Over time, these influences may contribute to mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and obsessive behaviours related to body image and self-esteem.[3] Finally, several methodological limitations temper these findings. Many studies relied on self-reported data and cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inference and introducing recall bias. Despite these limitations, the evidence collectively underscores the need for stronger regulation of dietary supplement marketing, improved patient–provider communication and enhanced public education to encourage safe and evidence-based supplement use.

CONCLUSION

The reviewed evidence demonstrates that adults' health decisions are strongly shaped by digital media, where persuasive visual content and influencer messaging often outweigh professional guidance. This dynamic contributes to distorted body ideals, unsupervised supplement consumption, and limited transparency with healthcare providers, collectively increasing potential health risks. Although social platforms can support positive lifestyle choices, their unregulated and appearance-driven nature frequently reinforces harmful comparisons and behaviours. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts to strengthen media literacy, encourage open clinical dialogue, and implement clearer oversight of online supplement promotion to support safer, informed health practices.

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