

Promoting digestive health brands on social media:

The true impact of advertising on consumers.

APRD Undergraduate Honors Thesis

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Abstract

Digestive health advertising has a substantial societal impact. The market for digestive health supplements has seen remarkable growth, with revenues reaching billions of dollars. The increase in market value is paralleled by an increase in digestive issues among consumers, leading to a heightened demand for digestive health supplements aimed at managing these conditions. However, the marketing tactics that digestive health brands use for these products, especially through social media, provide context on a much larger concern about the influence of advertising on consumer perceptions and the ethical implications of these practices. My thesis aims to explore the impact of advertising strategies on consumer behavior and highlight the need for more ethical marketing approaches. Drawing from a content analysis of digestive health brands' social media pages and online strategic communication tactics, this research aims to identify how advertising can shape consumer bias and preferences in the digestive health supplement market. I hope to contribute to the discourse on transparency within advertising practices and the promotion of consumer responsibility and safety.

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Introduction

For years, I have searched for a revolutionary product that would cure my chronic digestive health issues. Although it may seem obvious that no one product could prevent the ongoing digestive issues I have been experiencing, advertising campaigns can be very impactful. Every time I open social media apps, I see advertisements and marketing campaigns for products that claim to ease all my symptoms and fix my ‘gut health.’ When people are in a vulnerable state, and continuously searching for something that can improve their health, these campaigns can become incredibly influential. I found myself purchasing product after product based on the loosely-backed health claims and buzzwords on the packaging. With nearly every product I purchased, I experienced little to no relief from my symptoms. Similar to my experience, those who have dealt with digestive health conditions frequently rely on online sources of information and advice; this makes it crucial for researchers to determine how we can aid in the prevention of harmful and irresponsible messaging being spread online (Jafri, Ancha, Roy, et al., 2023).

Literature Review

Background: Digestive Health Market

Although digestive health advertising has personally affected me in more ways than one, there is also significant evidence that implicates digestive health advertising in a more social and widespread context. The digestive health supplements market generated \$10.51 billion in revenue in 2022 and should reach an estimated value of \$23.26 billion by the end of 2023 (Plus Company, 2023). The prevalence of digestive health disorders is driving the demand for digestive health and wellness products. In the last decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of individuals worldwide with digestive disorders, such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), and

colorectal cancer (Watters, 2023). Gastrointestinal or digestive issues have grown from 25% in 2020 to 32% in 2023 (Watters, 2023). Evidence suggests this percentage will only continue to increase. This has led to a significant impact on the growth of the digestive health supplement market. Watters (2023) found that millennials and parents held the highest stake in the market due to their increased likelihood of reporting digestive issues.

These digestive health conditions are often chronic and require management over a long period of time, if not permanently. With the significant impact these diseases have on an individual's quality of life and the increasing prevalence of these diseases in our society, the demand for effective products is at an all-time high. This means that consumers are more frequently turning to health aids, such as dietary supplements, that have a focus on promoting digestive health or gut health. However, the problem is that these supplements and digestive health products are marketed through problematic branding tactics, predominantly through online social media campaigns. With a lack of understanding of the current state of the digestive health market and the regulations behind marketing these types of products, strategic communication campaigns can be very influential to consumers.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to research how digestive health brands influence consumers through social media marketing. I will be studying how digestive health supplement brands target consumers through strategic communication practices and how these strategies shape consumer biases and preferences. By bringing this information to the forefront of the conversation about digestive health and wellness, I can further educate consumers on the influence and biases that these brands create as well as provide insights into ways these products can be more ethical and responsible.

What is Health Branding?

It is evident that there is a significant need for products to ease digestive symptoms and provide relief for those suffering from digestive health conditions. However, in recent years, with the influx of digestive health products hitting the market, numerous large-scale health claims have been made about the capabilities of these products. To better understand the impact of these campaigns, it is important to understand health branding. Health branding is a strategic branding tool used in marketing and advertising that demonstrates how businesses communicate health and lifestyle practices through their product (Quaye & Ameyibor, 2022). Its primary function for the brand is to create a relationship with the consumer that convinces them that they are in need of the product. According to Pralea's (2021) research on branding in health marketing, she states "the difference between branded and not branded health marketing campaigns often lies in the lack of ambiguity in defining the benefits" (Pralea, 2021, p. 2). Anker, Sandøe, Kamin, and Kappel (2011) explain that functional health branding claims promise to improve a consumer's well-being, promote overall health, and prevent disease. Health claims include identifying the health benefit of the product but fail to specify how the health benefit will occur while using the product (Talati, Pettigrew, Neal, et al., 2017). Another common practice is to link ingredients or specific nutrients in the product to prevention of serious disease, such as claiming that the product has calcium which reduces the risk of osteoporosis (Talati et al., 2017). While health claims are predominantly expressed by text, the use of health-related symbolism and logos is also used to persuade consumers.

How Health Branding Impacts Consumers

Health branding can impact behaviors among consumers (Pralea, 2021). Anker et al. (2011) explains, “A brand promising to promote health can only deliver on its promise if it motivates the consumer to engage in health behaviors that significantly exceed that of consuming the health brand’s product. This means that if health brands are to promote consumers’ health—as evidence suggests they can —health brands should not be viewed as brand entities but as social processes that facilitate consumer–brand interaction conducive to healthy living” (p. 34). This means that both the consumer and the brand have to be part of the brand’s promise and work toward improving the consumer’s overall health. Without consumers changing their overall lifestyle and health behaviors, the brand will not have the capability to fulfill its promises. Consumers of health branding should understand that brands act as agents of change to overall health and wellness, rather than a one-time solution for all of their health issues. However, these brands do not market their products as such. Health branding can be deceptive as it convinces consumers that the brand’s products will promote health and wellness, even if these claims are unjustified and not completely factual (Anker et al., 2011). Anker et al. argues that health branding can undermine the consumer’s ability to exercise autonomy and make informed purchase decisions. This is one of the most problematic parts of health branding. It convinces consumers that products will fulfill the consumer’s responsibility to maintain an overall healthy lifestyle. These brands have such a strong focus on gaining positive responses and creating purchase intention from the consumer that they create large-scale claims about how the product will fulfill all consumer health and wellness needs, without an understanding of the consumer’s individualized problems. Health branding can be ethically dubious as it can provide a space to share unjustified, misleading, and broad information (Anker et al., 2011). It is crucial for

consumers to have some knowledge of health literacy to be able to identify which health branding and advertising strategies are more focused on the monetary promotion of their products rather than the actual benefits of the product itself.

Health branding can also be incredibly influential in increasing consumers' use of a product or supplement who do not necessarily need the product or supplement that is being marketed. Research has found a dramatic increase in the use of dietary supplements in the past decade, with a study showing that 50% of respondents reported consuming a dietary supplement in the last month (Dodge & Kaufamn, 2007). Another study found that 79% of dietary supplement users in the United States have taken a dietary supplement every day, within the last 30 days (Bailey, Gahche, Lentino, et al., 2011). With the increase of individuals using supplements to improve health, it is clear to see how consumers are becoming more susceptible to advertising campaigns for wellness supplements.

Understanding the Regulations of Dietary Supplements, Including Digestive Health Supplements

An additional aspect of supplement branding is that misconceptions about how dietary supplements are regulated and approved are widespread. As dietary supplements have grown in popularity over the years, regulations have significantly increased. However, a lack of understanding about what the regulations entail is causing confusion among consumers. Many consumers believe that dietary supplements, including digestive health aids, are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) (Dodge & Kaufamn, 2007). One study that sampled females who consume dietary supplements found that only one-third of the respondents were aware that the supplements they were taking were not approved by the FDA (Miller & Russell,

2004). Another study found that 50% of dietary supplement users believed that dietary supplements were approved for their safety before they were allowed to be put on the market, while two-thirds of the surveyed population believed that dietary supplement manufacturers were required to include the side effects of the supplement on packaging (Pillitteri, Shiffman, & Rohay, 2008). However, under the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA), dietary supplements do not require FDA approval prior to being marketed to consumers unless the supplement contains a new dietary ingredient (Dodge & Kaufmann, 2007). Before the DSHEA Act was enacted, dietary supplements were required to pass premarket safety evaluations by the FDA (Dodge & Kaufman, 2007), but this changed in 1994. While the jurisdiction of the safety and labeling of dietary supplements is held by the FDA, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has jurisdiction over the advertising of dietary supplements (Wallace, 2015). According to the Health Products Compliance Guidance by the FTC, marketers have to make sure the information provided by the brand about the product's benefits is accurate, substantial, and reliable through scientific evidence (Federal Trade Commission, 2022). Dietary supplements that are produced for health goals such as weight loss, muscle building, sexual function, energy, and many more have received numerous warnings from the FDA due to toxic and harmful ingredients found in the supplements (Or, Kim, Simms, & Austin, 2019). The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated that there are around 23,000 emergency room visits each year as a consequence of harmful dietary supplement use (Or et al., 2019).

Brands that produce dietary supplements can market and articulate the health benefits of the products, but only if they do not specifically link the health benefits to a disease or disorder (Young, 2013). Loose terms such as “support,” “maintain,” and “enhance” run rampant in dietary supplement advertisements. Certain disclaimers and regulation requirements are required

on dietary supplement product packaging but lack significance when considered in light of the marketing and advertising of the products comprehensively. While the DSHEA states that the brand's claims must be substantial and not misleading, the DSHEA does not define what a substantial claim requires. As outlined by DSHEA, manufacturers and the FDA do not have to ensure that the dietary supplement or product actually will provide the benefits or claims that it says it will (Nichter & Thompson, 2006). This is a challenging aspect of the conversation because, without a basic understanding of regulations and policies regarding dietary supplements, consumers may believe that the supplements they are purchasing have gone through higher standards of verification than actuality. This also gives advertisers and marketers the opportunity to make larger and loosely-backed claims on packaging that can be extremely misleading to the consumer.

Another problem with the regulation of supplements is due to DSHEA's strict regulations on statements on supplement packaging. As explained by Nichter and Thompson (2006), DSHEA requires only truthful statements to be placed on the packaging. However, this can lead consumers to reinterpret labels and perceive what the supplement is actually useful for (Nichter & Thompson, 2006). For example, if a supplement's "truth statement" is that it "maintains healthy immune functions," consumers may interpret this as the supplement is helpful to get over a common cold or virus (Nichter & Thompson, 2006). With little information on what the product is beneficial for, since DSHEA does not allow untrue statements on the packaging and these supplements haven't been tested, consumers are left to experiment with different supplements and dosages (Nichter & Thompson, 2006). This experimentation can be dangerous in regard to consumer safety.

With so much misinformation and a lack of education on the dietary supplement market, it is clear to see how influential these products and their promotional materials can be. A book by George Wallace explains the power behind dietary supplements and how they can be a great tool in health promotion. Wallace (2015) explained that research collected by the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) found that 53% of Americans took at least one dietary supplement between 2003 and 2006. It is widely known that dietary supplements are frequently used by consumers, especially those with an interest in health and wellness. Wallace explains that dietary supplements can be a good way to promote health and prevent disease, but the demand for quality dietary supplements manufactured and researched in a regulated environment is extremely high (Wallace, 2015). From a consumer perspective, if high-quality supplements are not always available and the marketing and advertising tactics of these supplements are lenient in their guidelines, it is easy to see how deception can be possible. Not to mention, consumers with little understanding of the regulations behind producing and marketing these supplements are even more likely to feel influenced by a supplement as they may believe they have higher levels of federal regulations than they actually do. And in addition to that, if a consumer is in a vulnerable state in regard to their health, they are more likely to turn to supplements to aid in their wellness journey. Studies have shown that the most popular way to gain insight into dietary supplements is through word-of-mouth, or information from others who have used the dietary supplement (Smith, Chang, Brownhill, & Barr, 2016). Consumers frequently share information about supplements which can lead others to try them who may not fully understand the product and its regulations.

Studies on the Impact of Health Branding

It is important to understand the impact that branded health claims have on consumers. A study by Nutrition Reviews evaluated if the nutritional facts panel (NFP) on packaging can reduce bias and allow consumers to make more educated decisions when it comes to purchasing dietary supplements for improved health and wellness. They found that several studies researched how consumers react to health claims by studying the product, the claims that were made, the demographics of the participants, and their reactions: trust in the product, understanding, etc. Overall, all the studies concluded that health claims induce biases in a product and lead the consumer to believe that the product is healthier than other alternative products with no health claims (Talati, et al., 2017). However, no one had researched whether actual nutritional information such as NFPs played a role in the consumer's reaction to the product. So this study gathered a sample of adults and children from the general population and presented them with both mock-ups and real examples of health claims in combination with NFPs and/or front-of-package labels on food packaging (Talati et al., 2017). They evaluated if the respondent would be drawn to or would purchase the food item as well as their attention levels to the nutrition information. They found that the presence of health claims on NFPs created a positive evaluation of the product. They also identified that the NFP can reduce bias, but only if consumers are aware and able to distinguish between health claims on the packaging and nutritional facts on the NFP (Talati et al., 2017). This means that even if people are reading NFPs on digestive health products, this will help only if they have a high enough health literacy to decipher and understand the health claims on packaging versus nutritional facts on NFPs. This research is helpful in understanding how consumers react to packaging and claims on digestive health products. Interestingly, they also found that NFPs and other nutritional information on

packaging can aid in consumers' perception of the product if they choose to look at it and are able to interpret the information correctly (Talati et al., 2017). Unfortunately, they also found in their research that many consumers are not able to interpret the information correctly. This research helps us to better understand the need for health literacy among consumers who are buying products related to health and wellness. A study completed by Charoencheewaku and colleagues studied health literacy and alternative medicine use in patients in the northeast of Thailand and found that patients with a high level of health literacy were more likely to use dietary supplements properly than those with a lower level of health literacy (Charoencheewakul, Laohasiriwong, Suwannaphant, & Sophon, 2019). A study by Yang, Hsu, and Chiang that researched dietary supplement use among college students found that students' awareness of dietary supplement advertisements plays a large role in their decision to purchase and use a dietary supplement (Yang, Hsu, & Chiang, 2020). This shows that while awareness of dietary supplements, including understanding the health information on the packaging and marketing materials, is beneficial to purchasing decisions, many people do not have a high enough level of health literacy to be able to identify and purchase supplements properly.

The Connection Between Digestive Health and Overall Wellness

There has also been a significant amount of research on the importance of maintaining gut health and how a lack of digestive health can lead to dangerous and chronic health conditions. This has been used by marketers to think about branding in this context. Cummings, Antoine, and Azpiroz (2004) stated there is a large amount of consumer appeal for supplements that support a healthy digestive system and immunity which has led to accelerated market development. The authors state, "The appeal of products with gut health-associated claims is that the product formulation can be targeted to an entire population, a sub-group, or an at-risk group.

Survey data show that gut health is well recognized by consumers and that they can identify the associated health claims and have some understanding of the benefits” (Cummings et al., 2004, p 119). Science has been able to solidify holistic health claims with regard to digestive health, furthering the ideology that we will continue to see a shift in consumers’ choosing to buy more wellness-based products. “Poor digestive health can lead to various health issues, including nutrient deficiencies, impaired immune function, and chronic diseases. As a result, individuals are increasingly seeking digestive health supplements as a preventive measure to support their digestive system and maintain optimal health” (Plus Company, 2023). Mintel Report’s 2023 U.S. digestive health analysis reported that consumers will start to understand the importance of other health-related implications of maintaining good digestive habits, such as maintenance of stress, relaxation, movement, and mental health issues (Watters, 2023). In order to strengthen engagement among core consumers, certain advertising techniques are used to entice consumers. Brands often market with a focus on digestive products as multifunctional health aids, suggesting that the product will not only relieve digestive health symptoms but also improve other areas of health such as mental health, skin, weight loss, anti-aging, and more (Watters, 2023). In addition to this, brands choose to market products as preventative instead of reactive; this means that the consumers perceive that the product will not only ease their symptoms but prevent future flare-ups. Mintel Reports explains that successful brands will, “Blur the lines between digestive health and adjacent categories through partnerships and incorporating emerging multifunctional ingredients to enhance value, meet holistic ideals, and motivate consumers to move beyond typical reactive use of digestive health products” (Watters, 2023, p. 3). Since Mintel Reports provides an overview of the current market and relays business advice for digestive health brands, it is suggested that brands incorporate information regarding multifunctional health

benefits as well as digestive health as they know that consumers are looking for products that will help them maintain their overall health and wellness when shopping for digestive health supplements. With digestive issues on the rise, there has been an increase in digestive health products on the market. In upcoming years, we will continue to see a high increase in demand for products that optimize both digestive health and overall health and wellness (Watters, 2023). This has and will continue to result in numerous advertising campaigns for products that claim to improve consumers' digestive health or "gut health." This topic and the idea that individuals must maintain a healthy gut and improve their digestive health have become 'viral' in the media in recent years (Macdonald, 2022).

How social media has played a role in the virality of digestive health advertising

With the rise of technology and online communication, social media has become a prominent platform for health communication (Jafri, Ancha, Roy et al, 2023). Researchers Parker and Brennan (2002) explain, "On social media people receive and respond to information, form, promote, and discuss their opinions, and perform other intensely social activities through self-generated content" (p. 26). Digestive health issues have become a niche topic on all kinds of social media platforms, but this topic has a large presence on the popular social media platform, TikTok. Researchers studied the quality of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)-related information spread on social media platforms and found that the hashtag "IBS" collected over 1.2 billion views on TikTok (Jafri, et al., 2023). On TikTok, users share content regarding their health and wellness journey to build community, gain support, share diagnoses, raise awareness, and offer advice (Jafri et al, 2023). The research conducted by Jafri et al. found a plethora of digestive health-related content on TikTok but identified that the large majority of the content was neither educational nor factual. Social media has also become a space for misinformation as the

limitations of social media for health communication include the spread of false information, unauthorized medical advice, rampant health concerns, and more (Jafri et al, 2023).

Researchers Lin, Zhang, and Song (2016) studied health information seeking in the Web 2.0 age in order to examine trust in social media health communication, uncertainty reduction, and self-disclosure. The researchers describe how online users often share and disclose medical information about themselves or their conditions on social media platforms (Lin, Zhang, & Song, 2016). This action creates a network of health-related information as one user's self-disclosure on social media often creates a reciprocal tendency for other users to share other health-related information on social media (Afful-Dadzie, Afful-Dadzie, & Egala, 2021). While this is often comforting for those who are sharing their medical experiences, advice, or other medically-related information, it can be extremely harmful as it creates a cycle of misinformation with potentially fake or misconstrued information (Afful-Dadzie et al., 2021). This can be especially harmful to those who are novices seeking online health information as the content spread on social media is unregulated, authored by non-health professionals, and is of questionable quality (Afful-Dadzie et al., 2021). Studies have also shown that individuals who experience health anxiety tend to have negative responses to trusted health communication sources, such as governmentally-mandated sources (Baumgartner & Hartmann, 2011). Individuals who experience these negative responses may do so because the information presented is so heavily factual which can be anxiety-provoking for someone who struggles with health conditions (Afful-Dadzie et al., 2021). This also means these individuals may turn to more communicative, sharing-based, and community-style information-sharing platforms such as social media. Researchers explain that when consumers are exposed to a large amount of health communication, especially that which has been augmented for the financial gain of a product or

brand, they often do not have the health literacy or media literacy skills to identify what claims are true or untrue (Yang, Hsu, & Chiang, 2022). Yang et al. states that adolescents commonly do not have the ability to analyze health information on online platforms, such as social media, and that this may lead to adolescents turning to dietary supplements due to information that they have found online.

Social Media Marketing

Along with the discussion of digestive health on social media, the promotion of digestive health products occurs through social media marketing. Funk (2013) describes social media marketing as a social network that allows brands to pursue word-of-mouth marketing, increase their reputation as a brand, and strengthen brand relationships with consumers. Parker and Brennan (2020) found that emotional appeals are rampant in social media marketing campaigns. Studies showed that fear appeals are commonly used on online social media campaigns to motivate individuals to implement the recommendations of the campaign, impact consumer perceptions of the product, and even impact consumer buying behaviors (Parker & Brennan, 2020). “An audience who has been exposed to threatening messages with an efficacy element will be more prone to follow the advertisement’s recommendations compared to audiences exposed to advertisements without the efficacy component” (Parker & Brennan, 2020, p. 90). This is important to note because, with the prevalence of harmful digestive health messaging online, audiences are more likely to respond and follow the health branding and health advertising tactics. An individual is more likely to succumb to the recommendations of a health branding tactic out of fear if they have seen a significant amount of content spread online about a specific digestive health issue, even if the content spread online is false or inaccurate.

Studies have also found that consumers are more likely to access information about dietary supplements from the media (Yang et al., 2022). Research has found that the media heavily influences a consumer's choice to use a dietary supplement (Conner, Kirk, Cade, & Barrett, 2001). Researchers argue that a large reason for this is that dietary supplement brands promote messaging and advertisements that highlight the need for health maintenance, nutrition optimization, and other facts that make consumers believe that the dietary supplement will be beneficial for their health. (De Jong, Ocke, Branderhorst, & Friele, 2003). Researchers explain that supplements accompanied by media messages and advertisements that promote the need to optimize health and wellness can be extremely psychologically powerful as they convince the consumer that there is a need to improve and maintain their health in a proactive and convenient manner (De Jong et al., 2003). A large part of the conversation surrounding the promotion of dietary supplements on social media includes appeals to younger populations. While research has shown that women predominantly use dietary supplements for vitamin deficiency, hair condition, and nail health, men predominantly take dietary supplements for vitamin deficiency and bodybuilding (Intarakamhang & Prasittichok, 2022). A study conducted by Frison, Vandebosch, and Eggermont measured how media exposure created intent to use anabolic-androgenic steroids, or bodybuilding supplements, among a group of Flemish adolescent boys (aged 11-18) in order to analyze how mass media influence dietary supplement use. They found that boys who had exposure to fitness media were five times more likely to consider using bodybuilding supplements than those who did not have exposure to the media (Frison, Vandebosch, & Eggermont, 2013). This study found that mass media had a significant impact on consumers' intent to use dietary supplements, especially in younger populations (Frison et al., 2013). Another study found that college students are more likely to take dietary supplements

than other populations, with 60% taking supplements weekly (Lieberman, Marriot, Williams, et al., 2015). Most importantly, studies have shown that advertising, specifically for dietary supplements, is able to increase an adolescent's intent to use dietary supplements (Li, 2016). The problem with younger generations using dietary supplements is that there are a lot of risk factors to consider. As previously discussed, the consumer may be choosing a supplement due to online media promotions but they may not understand the product fully or its ingredients. Also, the consumer may not understand the regulations of the dietary supplement and may believe it has gone through higher levels of testing than in actuality. Another issue is that the dietary supplement could be unhelpful and harmful to the consumer in a number of ways. Researchers who studied dietary supplements' harmful effects on children, adolescents, and young adults found that teenagers who use dietary supplements are three times more likely to have serious health complications that can even be fatal (Or, Kim, Simms, & Austin, 2019). With minimal regulation behind dietary supplements, a plethora of promotional materials and advertisements for dietary supplements in the media, and a large and growing population of people using dietary supplements, it is clear to see the importance of practicing both health and media literacy before being influenced to purchase or use a dietary supplement.

There is also a significant amount of research on the influence that social media campaigns have on human perceptions and consumer buying behaviors. It is clear that strategic communication campaigns that contain vague or misleading information about the product's capabilities can be harmful to consumers, but are social media campaigns powerful enough to influence consumers to make purchasing decisions? Budree, Driver, Pandle, & Tanaka (2021) studied the impact of social media marketing on impulse buying. The authors describe consumer purchasing behavior (CPB) as the manner in which individuals, groups, and organizations choose

to select products, services, ideals, or experiences in order to satisfy their wants and needs (Budree, Driver, Pandle, & Tanaka, 2021). They found that social media marketing can be incredibly influential on consumers and their purchasing decisions. This is the ease of accessibility and short-lining the purchasing process by having these products marketed predominantly on social media platforms. Budree et al. explains that a lack of consumer planning allows consumers to justify purchasing impulsively.

User-Generated Content and Consumer-Generated Content

Another important topic is the role of user-generated content (UGC) and consumer-generated content (CGC) in strategic communication for digestive health products. Both CGC and UGC creators are widely referred to as “influencers.” CGC is when consumers create and/or produce content such as product reviews or experiences and then share it online, predominantly in social media spaces (Moriuchi, 2015). With CGC, the information is not created by an expert or professional and is meant to be organically sourced content from a consumer of the product or brand who has first-hand experience (Moriuchi, 2015). Research has found that CGC has attracted more than \$450 million in advertising revenue and gained 69 million CGC users/creators in the United States (Moriuchi, 2015). The market revenue of social media marketing has grown from \$60 to \$100 billion from 2019 to 2021 (Budree et al., 2021). Due to the stark increase in market growth in this industry, companies have chosen to adopt social media marketing strategies. CGC has such a strong impact on media, consumers, and creators, that brands have started to heavily invest in using CGC, influencers, and other “consumer” based reviews of products to market their brand.

A study by Budree, Driver, Pandle, and Tanaka (2021) researched the impact of influencers and the purchase intention of consumers. They found that purchase decisions and impulsivity of consumers were swayed by influencers when the consumers engaged with the products the content had promoted (Budree et al, 2021). The reason social media marketing and influencers are so influential to consumers is due to five key aspects: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customizations, and word-of-mouth. (Budree et al., 2021),

These creators commonly promote digestive health products and brands on social media. In many cases, these creators are used to depict the benefits and relief from symptoms of digestive health issues. Consumers may be unaware that the creator has a relationship with the brand, what their true experiences with the product are, or what kind of ethical intent there is behind the content they create. Deception and less ethical practices in marketing can unfortunately affect consumers. It is extremely hard to identify which advertising and marketing tactics were produced by a consumer who loved the product or if the intent behind the content was solely to promote the product for monetary or promotional compensation.

The problem with CGC is that there is a significant lack of reliability or trustworthiness when someone is promoting a product on social media. Trust is an important value for consumers to be able to evaluate the credibility of the information shared and produce opinions about the product (Moriuchi, 2015). Researchers Park, Lee, and Han (2007) categorized the different types of advertising tactics commonly witnessed within social media marketing. The two types were seller-created, a more traditional advertising approach with information shared by the brand, and consumer-created, which are reviews that are produced by prior buyers based on their evaluations, opinions, and experience of the product (Park, Lee, & Han 2007). They conducted a study on how involvement with a product impacts a consumer's relationship with

the product. They found that online consumer reviews had a positive effect on consumer purchasing intention and determined that if the reviews were logical, persuasive, and provided specific information on why the product was beneficial, then consumer purchasing intention increased. They also found that purchasing intention increases with the number of reviews the product receives (Park et al., 2007). Another study conducted by Lee and Watkins (2016) on the influence of YouTube “vloggers” (user-generated content creators who post in an online video blogging style) on consumers’ perceptions and purchasing intentions of luxury brands found that consumer opinions of brands can be influenced by a vlogger (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Factors that contributed to this decision included the consumer's relationship to the vlogger and whether they felt that the vlogger was similar to themselves or showcased traits that the consumer related to or was attracted to (Lee & Watkins, 2016). This is important to note as it demonstrates the need for brands to choose creators who represent their brand in an authentic manner.

The bottom line is that consumers are drawn to what is popular and a popular product increases the likelihood of consumers purchasing the product. Park, Lee, and Han (2007) found that online consumer reviews and CGC are commonly perceived as more reliable and trustworthy than advertisements and content produced by the brand. This is why CGC can be such a powerful and influential tool, especially when the consumer reviewing the product has a large following. Social media users who seek digestive health-related advice or support on these social media platforms are met with an overwhelming amount of information and are challenged to sift through millions of videos online, decipher the factuality of the content, and evaluate if the products being marketed are doing so in an ethical and appropriate manner before making buying decisions.

Justification of Methodology

Brands utilize their online presence to exemplify the benefits of their digestive health products. These social media campaigns' depictions of these products allow us to understand how these advertisements and marketing materials can be incredibly influential. In order to properly analyze the impact social media campaigns about digestive health products can have on consumers, I decided to perform a content analysis case study to gain insight and examine how different digestive health brands promote their products through social media. These case studies will add to my understanding of how digestive health brands use social media to influence consumer perceptions of a product. These are the research questions that I gathered before beginning my methodology.

1. How are digestive health brands using social media to promote their product and what strategies are they using on social media to market their product to consumers?
2. How do different digestive health brands utilize their branding to communicate different messages about their products to consumers?
3. Do digestive health brands promote their product in ethical ways on social media?
4. How may a consumer be influenced to use or purchase a product based on large-scale claims made by the brand on social media?

Methodology

For the purpose of this thesis, I chose to analyze three different digestive health supplement brands to compare their social media marketing tactics and overall marketing strategies. The three brands that I chose were: Bloom Nutrition, Garden of Life, and Seed. In order to analyze these brand's social media marketing properly, I chose to use a grounded theory methodology.

Grounded theory is a research methodology that helps generate theory from data from a specific subjective area (Hernandez, 2009). With grounded theory, the methodology includes identifying a core problem and uncovering the resolution, or core category. (Hernandez, 2009). One crucial step of the methodology is incorporating a theoretical coding process where you identify one theoretical framework that integrates all the categories around the core category, which helps to build a cohesive theory (Hernandez, 2009). Grounded theory allows the researcher to gather theoretical codes and frameworks from the data itself through open and selective coding methods (Hernandez, 2009). The difference between grounded theory and other methodology approaches is that grounded theory prioritizes data-driven theory development rather than the application of pre-existing theories or hypotheses to the data (Hernandez, 2009). Since I chose a content analysis case study for the purpose of this thesis, the data I gathered from the brand's social media pages, websites, user-generated content, and sponsored posts was best analyzed in a comprehensive format where I could pull my own coding process and gather insights.

Sampling:

I chose three distinct brands to allow for a close analysis and comparison of the brand's content and branding. For my analysis, I pulled content posted by each of the three brands on Instagram and TikTok during November 2023. In November 2023, Bloom Nutrition had 25 posts on Instagram and 32 posts on TikTok. However, the brand did post some of the same videos on both TikTok and Instagram quite frequently as they have a heavy video-based content presence on social media. Garden of Life had 14 posts on Instagram and 5 posts on TikTok. Seed had 13 posts on Instagram and 12 posts on TikTok. For both Instagram and TikTok, I also analyzed only 'feed' or 'grid' posts, meaning posts that had a permanent position on their social media pages (if not deleted or removed by the brand). I did not analyze 'stories' or posts that were only up for a maximum of 24 hours.

In order to gain a complete overview of each brand's media presence, I also analyzed each brand's websites, their slogans, promotional or sponsored online materials, and their branding as a whole. Since a portion of my research is on how content creation-based marketing affects consumers, I also chose to analyze user-generated content (or CGC: consumer-generated content) on TikTok. There was not a specific timeline I pulled from with this content, as I wanted to pull content that authentically came up when you searched the brand on TikTok. For each brand, I searched the brand's name on TikTok and Instagram to evaluate current perceptions of the brand, user-generated content, product reviews, and discussions occurring about the product. Similar to this, I analyzed sponsored content that came up organically on my Instagram feed after researching these brands heavily on social media.

I analyzed the brand's approach to marketing the digestive health product and how this compares to market research on digestive health advertising. I also analyzed how the brand's marketing compares to research on health branding and the ethics of health branding, including FDA approval, information on how consumers react to nutritional facts panels, and a consumer's education on the contents of a product. By understanding this, I will be able to demonstrate how powerful these social media campaigns are. It will help me educate consumers on the power of health branding and marketing and why I believe it is so important for consumers to learn and practice both media and health literacy when evaluating and researching products on social media. My limitations for my research included the fact that I was only able to access content similar to that of an average consumer of the social media page. I did not have administrative access to the brand's content or analytics.

Brand Selection and Description

The companies were selected based on their different marketing strategies. I chose Bloom Nutrition because they are one of the leading brands of green nutritional powders. With Bloom Nutrition they frequently promote a long list of health claims for digestive health but provide little evidence. They promote things such as bloating cures, help with stomach pain, weight loss, gut health, nutrition, and so much more. They have a huge amount of negative reviews but are widely popular and well-known on social media. Bloom relies heavily on influencer marketing and social media campaigns. This has been very successful for their brand and incredibly impressive with the amount of influencer marketing, brand deals, and large-scale product campaigns they have launched. I thought this would be an interesting brand to analyze for its sheer capacity on social media.

I chose to analyze Garden of Life due to its reputation in the supplement industry. Garden of Life produces probiotics, protein powders, vitamins, minerals, herbals, collagen, sports performance products, omega-3s, food, and more. They are best known for their line of probiotic supplements. Garden of Life prides itself on its non-GMO-certified, clean, clinically studied ingredients. Their tagline is “Empowering Extraordinary Health” and in the About section on their website, they explain how they believe in whole ingredients, traceability, third-party certifications, and no synthetic or artificial flavors or ingredients (Garden of Life, 2024). Their products are commonly found in grocery stores and are more of a household name than Bloom Nutrition and Seed. When choosing my brands, I wanted one to be a largely recognizable brand, such as Garden of Life.

Finally, I chose to analyze Seed. Seed is another health and wellness brand with a focus on gut health. They are well known for their probiotics and their commitment to scientifically backed formulas. I chose to analyze Seed because they are also a very large company with a lot of recognition. However, they also claim to promote your immune system, mood and well-being, the health of your skin, and other large-scale commitments. Seed has a very scientific approach to its marketing, so I thought this would be interesting in comparison to Bloom Nutrition and Garden of Life.

Findings

Using a grounded theory methodology, I found two recurring themes during the analysis of all my data. I categorized the themes below and used an online scientific research-based health information source, Illuminate Health, to compare and contrast my analysis.

Theme 1: “Scientific Claim”

A common approach I found when researching these brands' marketing and advertising strategies was the use of ‘scientific’ or ‘educational’ information on social media posts. Many brands utilize a health branding marketing approach to communicate the benefits of their product in an organic and seemingly authentic manner. Some brands also enact brand strategies such as education and influencing health behaviors among their consumers in order to ensure that the health aspect comes across as a core value of the brand and less of a marketing strategy.

Out of all three brands, the most common brand to do this was Seed. Seed has a unique marketing approach to promote its digestive health supplements. Seed believes that education is a large part of health and wellness and encourages consumers to learn along with them. This is heavily prevalent in their marketing strategy and they often provide unique learning opportunities and ways for consumers to engage with the brand on Instagram and TikTok through series such as recommended educational readings and books. They also provide educational posts where they provide cited, scientific information from scholarly sources and educate their viewers and consumers about topics that have to do with the gastrointestinal tract.

Their approach to promoting their products is to provide an educational experience for the consumer. Consumers get a chance to get to know the creators of Seed, the science behind

the products, and build trust and rapport with the brand. Seed's website and branding also exemplify this health branding approach to marketing. The website states, "We believe the science of probiotics demands a new standard. We are the consumer innovations division of Seed Health, a microbial sciences company pioneering applications of microbes to improve human and planetary health" (Seed, 2024). Their website has extremely detailed scientific descriptions of their product's microbial strains, the bio-fermentation processes used, clinical research, and so much more. They not only describe what their product's ingredients are, but how they work to provide health benefits and the scientific processes of how they will affect a consumer's gut microbiome. They provide detailed information on the testing of their products including allergen and contaminant testing, quality control, and global quality adherence information. They also showcase a lengthy description of the scientists and board of researchers, doctors, and authors who aided in the creation of Seed's products. Seed's website states that they have extensive testing on each product with 50+ quality assurance and quality control checkpoints and standardization under both the U.S. and European protocols throughout product development (Seed, 2024). Seed also conducts its own clinical trials on its products and studied its adult probiotic, DS-01, and its effects on Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) as well as the impact of DS-01 on post-antibiotic recovery, as many people suffer from gastrointestinal distress symptoms after taking antibiotics (Seed, 2024). The IBS clinical trial is being conducted at Harvard's Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and the antibiotic recovery trial began recruitment for the study in 2020; both trials are still being completed (Seed, 2024). Seed also has information on strain-specific benefit studies with multiple scientific sources listed for each claimed benefit that Seed

makes. For example, they claim that their products support gut barrier integrity, and the website listed three scientific studies that support this claim.

Benefit	Studies
Digestive Health	Del Piano et al. <i>J Clin Gastroenterol.</i> 2010 Ogata et al. <i>Biosci Microflora.</i> 1997 Laparra & Sanz. <i>J Cell Biochem.</i> 2010 Oliveres et al. <i>J Agric Food Chem.</i> 2011
Gut Barrier Integrity	Iemoli et al. <i>J Clin Gastroenterol.</i> 2012 † Magistrelli et al. <i>Front Immunol.</i> 2018 †† De Palma et al. <i>J Leukoc Biol.</i> 2012
Gut Immune Axis	Long Yan Fong et al. <i>J Funct Foods.</i> 2016 Rodes et al. <i>J Micro Biotech.</i> 2013 Oliveres et al. <i>J Agric Food Chem.</i> 2011 Iemoli et al. <i>J Clin Gastroenterol.</i> 2012 † Drago et al. <i>Allergy Asthma Immunol Res.</i> 2015 Magistrelli et al. <i>Front Immunol.</i> 2019 †† Mogna et al. <i>J Clin Gastroenterol.</i> 2012
Cardiovascular Health	Costabile et al. <i>PLoS One.</i> 2017 Bordoni et al. <i>Appl Microbiol Biotechnol.</i> 2013 Keleszade et al. <i>J Func Foods.</i> 2022
Dermatological Health	Iemoli et al. <i>J Clin Gastroenterol.</i> 2012 † Climent et al. <i>Microorganisms.</i> 2021 ††† Navarro-López et al. <i>JAMA Dermatol.</i> 2018 †††
Micronutrient Synthesis	Bron et al. <i>J Mol Sciences.</i> 2021 Strozzi & Mogna. <i>J Clin Gastroenterol.</i> 2008 Pompei et al. <i>Appl Environ Microbiol.</i> 2007 Amaretti et al. <i>Appl Microbiol Biotechnol.</i> 2013
Gut Microbial Balance*	Mogna et al. <i>J Clin Gastroenterol.</i> 2012 Drago et al. <i>Allergy Asthma Immunol Res.</i> 2015 Odamaki et al. <i>Anaerobe.</i> 2012 † Magistrelli et al. <i>Front Immunol.</i> 2019 ††

Seed is extremely thorough in making sure that consumers gain a full understanding of their products, but also that their consumers feel that Seed is a trustworthy source of scientific and educational information. By showcasing its products in such a scientific manner, Seed showcases its emphasis on science and research-based product development, innovative technology and testing for supplements, high-quality and effective products, and public educational efforts. Content from November 2023 on Seed’s TikTok and Instagram pages showcased an informational series of posts titled “Why are ferments good for your gut health”, “DS-01, Benefits in and beyond the gut,” “How time change affects the gut,” “5 ways gut

microbes influence your brain,” “Why is my digestion always disrupted when I travel,” and many more.

Garden of Life also exemplifies this approach, commonly through its branding and website, but less on its social media pages. On Garden of Life’s website, consumers have the opportunity to view the product, its description with its listed benefits, and another full description of how the product was designed and how the ingredients of the product provide the listed benefits. On the same page, the product also has its listed certifications, such as non-GMO, gluten-free, carbon neutral, etc, and a consumer review section where consumers can view what other people thought of the product. By showcasing a full overview of the product through their marketing strategies, consumers feel like they have a good understanding of the product they are purchasing and of the brand as a whole.

Dr. Formulated Women's Probiotics for pH Balance

Dr. Formulated Probiotics Women's pH is special since it not only contains 50 Billion CFU of diverse strains per serving, but also provides a prebiotic blend to promote the growth of good bacteria—super important to support a healthy microbiome.† Important to note that the clinically studied strains, *L. acidophilus* La-14 and *L. rhamnosus* HN001™ have been included to support a healthy vaginal pH and promote yeast and bacteria balance.† Dr. Formulated Probiotics Women's pH also contains an exclusive postbiotic blend to support *Bifidobacteria* growth—also the good stuff. All of this means that you get powerful triple-action daily support for women's health—all in one, easy-to-swallow capsule per day!†

Bloom Nutrition has come under scrutiny for its large-scale marketing claims about its product’s health benefits and capabilities. Unlike Garden of Life or Seed, Bloom Nutrition offers little to no nutritional or scientific information on its website or through marketing materials to ensure that its products are designed to fulfill their proposed health claims and benefits.

Bloom's commonly promotes their products "Relieves Bloat," "Supports Gut Health," and "Promotes Energy." Their branding includes phrases like, "Bloom into your best self" and "Blooming looks good on you." It is hard to find nutritional information about the ingredients of their products on the web page which is something dissimilar to that of Garden of Life and Seed's pages. The website showcases the story behind Bloom Nutrition's creation. The 'About Us page' describes how co-founder Mari Llewellyn was searching for high-quality health supplements after a 90-pound weight loss journey (Bloom Nutrition, 2024).

Predominantly, Bloom Nutrition focuses on trendy, upbeat, flashy, creative content-heavy marketing materials. However, Bloom Nutrition does come out with a few marketing strategies that promote the health benefits of the product. For example, one TikTok video that was posted on November 17, 2023, showcased "Certified Holistic Nutritionist" Shauna Faulisi who explained that Bloom Nutrition's green powders promote gut health and soothe uncomfortable bloat. She also explained that the product has enzymes for digestion, daily prebiotics, and probiotics, and contains nutrients and antioxidants. However, Bloom Nutrition has no third-party testing in place for their products and their ingredients. The largest problem that medical professionals have with Bloom Nutrition is that the actual composition of the ingredients, like digestive enzymes, is not high enough to provide any benefit to the consumer. Bloom Nutrition focuses more on promoting the brand name and the products, rather than showcasing the ingredients or science behind the formulas of the product.

It is fair to assume that consumers want to know that their supplements are ethically sourced, manufactured, and distributed. Illuminate Labs was founded as a resource to solve the growing issue of transparency and safety in the dietary supplement industry in the United States (Illuminate Labs, 2024). Illuminate Labs created Illuminate Health, a research-based health and

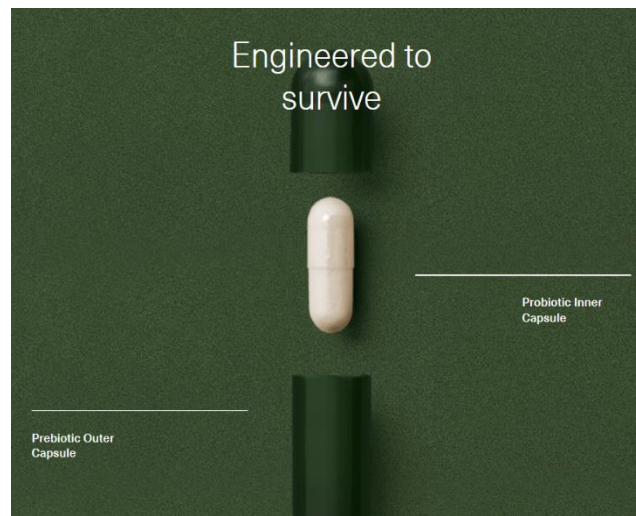
product review online resource. Calloway Cook, Illuminate Labs' founder, reviewed the trending supplement brand, Bloom Nutrition. The article was reviewed by D.J. Mazzoni, a registered dietitian who received his Master of Science in Dietetics and Clinical Nutrition Services and is now a medical reviewer for Illuminate Health. The article explained that while there are no toxic or harmful ingredients in Bloom Nutrition, the actual ingredient composition of the product is not sufficient enough to provide any nutritional or health benefits (Cook, 2022). As explained by the article, the fruit and vegetable blends by Bloom Nutrition have a total composition of 2.49 grams of fruit and vegetable ingredients (Cook, 2022). Cook explains that they have not been able to find any medical research that shows a dose this low has any health benefits (Cook, 2022).

Illuminate Health also analyzed Garden of Life's probiotics. Written by Cook and analyzed by Auren Weinberg, M.D., described Garden of Life's bacteria strains in their probiotics that have research-based benefits and effective probiotic species with a wide array of health benefits (Cook, 2023). Cook also explains how Garden of Life is free of any unhealthy additives or toxic ingredients and even states that it is one of the best probiotics Illuminate Health has reviewed due to its effective probiotic dose, lack of unhealthy additives, and how it is effective in supporting gut health and digestion (Cook, 2023). However, Cook's one complaint with Garden of Life was their claim and inclusion of "Eastern European herbs"; the product ingredient composition of herbs is at such a minute dose that there would be no health benefit and this was probably incorporated into the packaging to deem the product more diverse its health benefits (Cook, 2023). This description of Garden of Life goes to show that brands that provide a more in-depth understanding of your products and their actual scientific health benefits through their marketing strategies usually correspond with a brand that actually does provide

ethically-conscious and health-promoting products. But, as always, marketing strategies and inclusions of ingredients that have no real benefit are incorporated heavily into even ethically-conscious brands, such as Garden of Life, and consumers should practice health literacy skills when researching health supplements.

Illuminate Health also reviewed Seed. Written by Cook and reviewed by Mazzoni, Cook described Seed as one of the most popular and best-branded probiotic supplements. Seed's probiotics are designed to have both an inner and outer capsule, in order for the inner capsule containing the probiotics to reach the small intestine and colon without being damaged by stomach acid. Cook explains that a clinical trial published in the *International Journal of Molecular Sciences* found that nearly 50% of the probiotic cultures of Seed's product successfully reached the small intestine, a feat that many probiotics studied are not able to accomplish (Cook, 2023). Seed's adult probiotic supplement, DS-01, contains an impressive amount of probiotic strains and a total probiotic dose of around 50 billion active-fluorescent units, a very effective dose (Cook, 2023). Illuminate Health considers Seed to be a highly recommended probiotic supplement for its ability to improve gut health and support overall health with only safe and nontoxic ingredients (Cook, 2023). Out of all three brands, Seed makes the highest amount of scientific claims through their social media marketing and posts on Instagram and TikTok. However, Illuminate Health's analysis of Seed goes to show that they do promote their products in an ethical manner and provide a consumer-focused and responsible evaluation of their products on social media. Using a scientific or health-based marketing strategy is not a bad way to promote your product. However, using it when your products do not actually provide the benefits stated, can be ethically dubious and irresponsible marketing that can induce improper bias and influence for your consumers. Through my analysis of each brand's

social media, overall branding, and the evaluation of Illuminate Health, I would argue that Garden of Life and Seed use a scientific and health branding approach in an ethical and responsible manner. They also adopted health branding as a brand story and communicated this consistently throughout their marketing strategies. I would argue that Bloom Nutrition does not use health branding in an ethical or responsible manner. However, as I will continue to discuss, Bloom Nutrition doesn't use health branding consistently as they may have an understanding that their products do not provide the same health benefits as other competitors on the market who fully adopt and consistently use health branding as a marketing strategy.



Theme 2: User-Generated Content & Influencer Marketing

The second recurring theme I found through my research was the use of user-generated content and influencer marketing. User-generated content and influencer marketing are commonly used to communicate positive consumer-generated reviews of the brand's product. While the negotiations of the partnership usually stay between the content creator and the brand, monetary compensation and paid promotions, product compensation or discounts, and other

compensatory rewards are all common for brands to give to content creators in return for posts about the product. All three of the brands utilized this marketing strategy, yet Bloom Nutrition adopted this strategy at a much larger scale than Seed or Garden of Life.

In direct opposition to Seed, Bloom Nutrition has a different approach to marketing its products. Bloom Nutrition focuses on user and influencer-generated content, large-scale event marketing productions, and social media campaigns to promote their brand and products. This is clear to see on their various social media platforms. They commonly follow trends and popular content on their social media. Examples of this include posting their products in a Spotify Wrapped format as it was very popular on social media during November for users to post their Spotify Wrapped, a compilation of a user's most frequently streamed music and genres of the year.

Another interesting notion about Bloom Nutrition is that while they make health claims on their own social media platforms, their UGC and CGC content creation has even bolder statements about the health benefits of their products. They use their social media pages to repost or share user-generated content that consumers of their products have made. Unfortunately, a lot of this user-generated content was created from paid or compensated promotions and was not authentically created by consumers who really use the product. Oftentimes it is framed as if the consumer created it just because they love or frequently use the product, even if they were just sent the product and paid to make a video. Bloom Nutrition has an incredible amount of paid social media promotions with content creators on both Instagram and TikTok. Bloom is commonly bashed for its paid promotions where influencers, well-known creators, and even just TikTok users showcase Bloom Nutrition casually in their videos that could have nothing to do

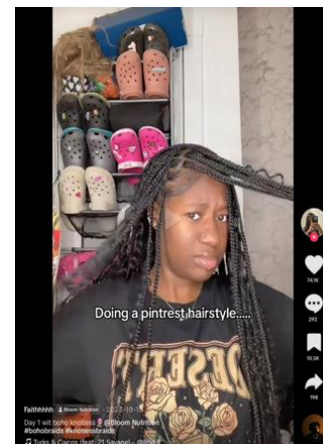
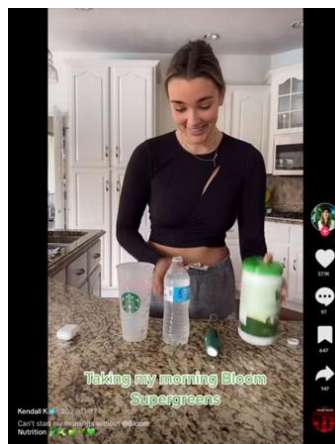
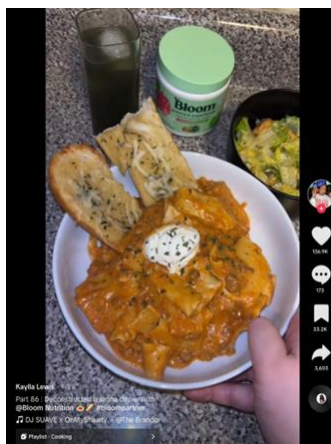
with the product. Since they are usually paid advertisements where the creator is receiving some kind of compensation, the creator is required to put #bloompartner.

On TikTok, one creator, Christopher Downs (@chrisopotamia) asked his viewers the question:

“What’s a company that has tried so hard to win your business, it’s actually worked against them?” TikTok creator @lindsaylore replied to the video with her own video. She stated,

“Bloom Nutrition. Every single time I see an influencer on here using Bloom Nutrition it’s just them putting an immersion blender into the cup and taking one sip and putting the cup down. They never finish the cup. You never see them actually reviewing it or actually talking about what it tastes like. They just sort of have it in every video. I will literally scroll away. If I’m enjoying the video, if it’s storytime, if it’s a get-ready-with-me- if you get out a glass of Bloom Nutrition and you put your immersion blender in there- I’m scrolling away from the video. I’m not liking it anymore. It’s so sneaky and then they put the little #BloomPartner right at the very end of the caption so you have to open it up to see it. I hate it. I will never ever order anything from that company because of that.”

One TikTok user, @kaylalewis with 1.8 million followers, posted a recipe video of her making lasagna. The 1.08-minute-long video showcased her sharing a recipe and cooking and the creator only showed Bloom Nutrition’s product at the very end where she blended the powder into a cup of water. Another creator, @faithalexiaaaa, made a video showcasing her trying a new hairstyle and she had a sip of her Bloom Nutrition drink mid-video.



These types of videos are not few and far between, it is nearly every video you find when you search Bloom Nutrition on TikTok. There are thousands of them showcasing creators either highly praising the product and how it promotes digestive health and relieves their bloating or just casually flashing the product while making a video about a completely different topic. All the videos are similar in one way or another and Bloom Nutrition compensated them in some way to create them as they all have the #bloompartner in their videos' captions.

Examples of Bloom Nutrition's UGC & CGC:

While Seed does not rely on user-generated content and influencer marketing in the same way that Bloom Nutrition does, it still utilizes its fair share of user-generated content and influencer marketing strategies. Seed came under scrutiny in August 2023 for a video posted on their social media pages showcasing Gwyneth Paltrow taking Seed's probiotics. The video got a lot of attention because it looked like a very low-effort paid promotion done by Paltrow. Paltrow filmed a 19-second video in which she lightly discussed the brand's probiotic benefits while her son loudly steamed milk in the background. She kept looking around in the video and stated, "It's so good for bloating and regularity" before she quickly cut the video. Seed received so much scrutiny for participating in paid promotions with someone so famous, who clearly didn't care much about creating a put-together advertisement or video about the product. However, both Seed and Paltrow herself spoke out to clear Seed's name. The video wasn't a paid promotional advertisement after all and Paltrow stated, "That was literally just me taking my probiotic." Seed decided to share the video, likely due to Paltrow's fame.

Seed does not recruit stars like Gweneth Paltrow to promote their probiotics, but they frequently utilize content creators to promote their probiotic line. Sponsored posts frequently

were used on Instagram. Nicole Bruno (@nobread), an Instagram wellness content creator with 222K followers, did a sponsored collaboration post with Seed on Instagram showcasing her taking DS-01 with the caption, “My non-negotiable. 2 @seed DS-01 Daily Synbiotic every morning on an empty stomach- this morning with my gut health juice because this week’s anxiety wrecked my gut”. Another sponsored post by lifestyle content creator and Instagram user, Viviane Audi (@vivianeaudi), posted a picture of DS-01 with the caption, “@seed synbiotic (pre + probiotics) every morning #seedpartner” and shared a link where her followers could use a code to get 25% off of the probiotic. Similar posts were shared by content creators on TikTok. Health and wellness content creator Fiona Smith (@healwithfifi), shared a video detailing the ‘biggest mistakes for gut health’. She then goes on to describe how Seed is unlike most probiotics on the market since it uses innovative technology that helps the probiotic surpass stomach acid and make it to your small intestine and colon, uses third-party testing, and has clinical trials to back up the claim. Her caption reads, “@Seed has changed my life for the better. Code FIFI saves you %25 off at checkout #seedpartner #seedprobiotics #probiotics #guthealth”. I would argue that the implications of Smith’s videos are far more important than that of Bruno or Audi’s content. The reason is that Nicole Bruno and Viviane Audi created a very advertisement-looking post. While they do share that they love their daily probiotic, the advertisement-like structure of a single picture rather than video-based content is less influential to consumers. When you have a video that is structured like someone just talking to you about mistakes people often make when shopping for a probiotic, but also promoting a brand that coincidentally helps you to not make any of these mistakes, the video really isn’t about shopping for a probiotic, it is a paid promotion for Seed. Not to mention, Fiona Smith has over a million followers on TikTok who commonly refer to her page for health and wellness advice, with the

majority being her own opinion, not paid promotions. Users who have built a parasocial relationship with Fiona Smith on TikTok most likely have built trust with this creator and are more likely to follow her advice and purchase Seed. This is the problem with user-generated content. The line between paid promotions and true consumer and user experience is voided and hard to interpret from a consumer standpoint. While I do believe that Seed is a genuine company with scientific-based research and quality supplements, it is clear that even reputable companies are using user-generated content on social media to sway consumer opinions and influence purchase intentions.

One comment on Fiona Smith's paid promotion video on TikTok was posted by TikTok user @mentalartistry who stated, "Anytime I see "paid partnership" I know I'm not getting honest information." TikTok user @mandiemorris11 replied to the comment and said, "She was promoting this probiotic way before she got paid for it." Social media sites such as TikTok and Instagram, create space for social networking and communication where ideologies like the legitimacy of influencer-generated content and paid promotions can be evaluated. Many consumers have the same views as the first commenter and do not believe any advice given in paid promotional materials, even if they are posted by a 'trusted' wellness and advice influencer.

Based on my data, Garden of Life also utilizes user-generated and influencer marketing, but not quite as frequently as Bloom Nutrition or Seed. The majority of content pulled from Garden of Life's TikTok and Instagram pages in November 2023 showcased recipes using Garden of Life supplements, product placement photography, and lifestyle content with the brand's products incorporated into a 'daily routine'. User-generated content and influencer marketing is more of a new marketing strategy and reputable, household-name brands may not have incorporated this marketing strategy as heavily as other brands yet or simply do not need to

with their current stream of revenue. The user-generated content they did have was pulled from November 2023 on TikTok primarily. They used lifestyle and fashion content creator, Zein Kurdi (@zeinkurdi), who created a video showcasing Garden of Life's Quercetin Immune supplement as her "go-to vitamin this fall". Similarly, they had a video with Krystal Nielson (@coachkrystal_) a fitness creator who shared that she has been swapping out her afternoon coffee for Garden of Life's Beets Detox supplement as an 'afternoon pick-me-up' to boost liver function and promote energy. Other user-generated content both posted by Garden of Life and content found when searching up the brand on social media was fairly similar, with users showcasing how they incorporate Garden of Life supplements into their daily routines. Their user-generated content scope is much smaller in comparison to that of Bloom Nutrition.

Discussion

My methodology and analysis showcased how powerful digestive health brands' content can be on social media to consumers. It also exemplified how a brand communicates its messaging, brand story, values, and themes can lead to whether or not people believe the brand is legitimate (RQ1). The two themes I identified through my research showcased different ways that digestive health brands utilize health branding.

As identified, a scientific approach is often used to highlight the product's benefits in a more authentic manner (RQ2). Some brands use strategic communication strategies such as consumer education and communicating positive health behaviors, which help to make the brand's scientific marketing approach feel more like a core brand value rather than just a marketing tactic. Brands like Seed lead with such strong scientific messaging, but have the research-backed evidence to make their branding feel legitimate to consumers. Brands like Bloom Nutrition, which focus so heavily on user-generated content and influencer marketing, may seem less authentic than 'scientifically branded' companies due to the fact that they rely so heavily on social media marketing rather than evidence-based communication strategies.

The other identified theme, user-generated content, and influencer marketing, provided insight into how digestive health brands are using this new form of strategic communication to promote their products (RQ2). My research found that consumers have noticed a disconnect between user-generated content or influencer marketing and genuine product use and satisfaction. Consumers also feel bombarded with promotional content and have a hard time identifying if the content is a genuine endorsement of the product or just branded promotional content. Mandated indication of sponsored or promoted content, such as #bloompartner placed in

the caption or in small print in the video/image, can contribute to viewer distrust as the subtle placement of the indication does not ensure that all viewers will understand that the opinions of the creator may not entirely be their own. These branded promotions can feel inauthentic and raise questions about the ethical responsibilities of influencer marketing, paid promotions, and sponsored user-generated content.

With the current scale of the digestive health market, the need for reliable and effective products is at an all-time high. As discussed previously, research has shown that people are turning to social media as a place to discuss, learn, and connect with others about their digestive health. While social media has become a valuable space for this kind of discussion, the online discourse surrounding health is often filled with misinformation, personal accounts of diagnoses, and unauthorized medical advice, creating a false sense of panic pertaining to one's health. When interacting with branded content and paid promotions, those with health anxiety or a lack of health literacy are especially vulnerable to health-targeted branding.

With the rise of health branding, brands are using social media networks to promote their product on their social media pages and other creator's pages through user-generated content. Social media users seeking advice, information, comfort, or anything to do with their digestive health symptoms or conditions are often met with promotional materials. When discussing how a consumer may be influenced to use or purchase a product based on health claims made by the brand on social media, it is clear that strategic communication tactics may interfere with a consumer's independent research on a product (RQ4). Users may search for a brand they have seen or heard good things about and may be met with branded content of other users sharing products for digestive health promotion. It can sometimes be difficult to know if the content being shared is the true feelings of the creator or if they are just being paid or compensated for

their content. Having to decipher nearly all of the content you see online about a brand can be overwhelming and exhausting. Even when a brand like Seed has a plethora of research-backed scientific evidence of the power of its products, strategies like user-generated content are still enacted to influence consumers to try Seed. It raises the question of the ethical implications of these kinds of online marketing strategies and whether brands have gone too far (RQ4). Since the world of social media marketing, user-generated content, influencer marketing, and other similar strategies are so new, little regulation has been made in terms of brands utilizing these types of content to promote their products. When discussing whether digestive health brands promote their product in ethical ways on social media, I would argue that some brands exemplify responsible marketing tactics, while others use ethically dubious methods, such as brands using UGC for health promotion (RQ3). I believe that health branding promotions through UGC are only ethically used when brands or creators clearly state that the video is sponsored or a paid promotion by the brand. I do not believe that it is fair for consumers to have to evaluate whether or not the opinions of the creator are based on the monetary promotion or scripted information given to them by the brand and not their own personal opinions. This is especially true for health branding as consumers are seeking health and wellness advice for their health conditions or symptoms and are met with undisclosed marketing strategies for brands or skewed advice by wellness creators who are being paid to discuss ‘positive’ experiences or benefits of a product.

As noted earlier, the use of dietary supplements is also on the rise. More people are turning to dietary supplement aids, such as digestive health supplements. As previously discussed, many people do not have an understanding of the regulations behind dietary supplements and the federal regulations of branded health claims that can be made through marketing materials and on the packaging. Not to mention, consumers are becoming increasingly

aware of the importance of maintaining a healthy digestive system and how important gut health is to your overall wellness. There is a huge amount of consumer appeal and market growth for supplements that not only improve your digestive health but support various health functions such as immune function and nutrient deficiencies. With this knowledge and an understanding of the sheer capacity of social media marketing promotional materials, people are far more likely to purchase and try digestive health supplements to aid in their digestive health or overall health and wellness. This is especially true when these products promote large-scale health claims on social media networks where people who have digestive issues commonly go for health-related information and advice, such as TikTok and Instagram.

A goal of my research was to demonstrate the impact that strategic communication can have on consumers and to emphasize the importance of media and health literacy for consumers navigating health branding on social media. In order to maintain power as consumers over branding and advertising, health literacy and media literacy skills should be enacted when viewing a product online. It is crucial for consumers to understand the regulations of the dietary supplement market and have a basic understanding of what brands are allowed to put on marketing materials and the packaging of products. Consumers should also be aware of the fact that brands are utilizing social media as a space to promote products and their health benefits, sometimes through UGC and influencer marketing. When viewing UGC on social media, consumers should look out for hashtags like #BrandName+Partner, #ad, or paid promotion in small font in the caption or on the post somewhere as the creator's view of the product may not entirely be of their own opinion. Finally, consumers should heavily research a brand's website, check third-party product review online resources, and check if the supplement has been clinically researched or reviewed before purchasing or trying the brand's products.

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