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Dimensions of Sports Influencers' Role in Shaping Nutritional Culture: A Descriptive-Analytical Approach

Allague Moufida [1*]
[1] Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret, moufida.allague@univ-tiaret.dz

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Abstract:
This paper examines, from a descriptive-analytical perspective, the growing role of sports influencers in shaping nutritional culture on social media platforms, particularly through the promotion of dietary practices that may have either positive or negative effects. It addresses the increasing reliance on "digital opinion leaders" as sources of health-related information, as well as the overlap this creates between athletic motivation, lifestyle modelling, and commercial promotion. Methodologically, the study is based on a critical review of recent scholarly literature and an analysis of the communicative practices used by sports influencers. The findings suggest that influencers' nutritional discourse is often shaped by the "commodification of the body" and by advice rooted in personal experience rather than scientific evidence. The paper therefore stresses the need to strengthen media literacy and health awareness in order to critically engage with "trend-driven" dietary patterns.

Keywords: sports influencers; nutritional culture; social media platforms; health education.

*** Corresponding author**

1. INTRODUCTION

Nutritional culture is a fundamental component of public health. Yet the sources through which this culture is acquired have undergone a significant transformation. Nutritional knowledge, which was once primarily mediated by health and academic institutions, has now moved to digital platforms. In this context, sports influencers have become influential actors in shaping the dietary behaviors of millions of followers by relying on visual appeal, bodily performance, and immediate interaction.

Nutritional culture may be understood as the set of concepts, habits, and practices related to food and nutrition that individuals acquire and that contribute to shaping their health status throughout life. This definition highlights the importance of developing nutritional culture across all segments of society (Majdy, 2014).

Local official reports point to a noticeable increase in young people's adoption of unconventional dietary patterns influenced by content circulating in the digital sphere. This trend has raised concerns about the safety of such practices and their compatibility with national health standards.

In this regard, the Algerian Ministry of Health, in an awareness statement published on its official Facebook Meta page, urged people with chronic diseases, including diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, kidney disease, and digestive disorders, as well as pregnant women, children, and patients receiving regular treatment, to avoid following restrictive diets, discontinuing medication, or changing prescribed doses without consulting their physician or a qualified nutrition specialist. The Ministry also emphasized that healthy nutrition should be balanced, safe, and adapted to each individual's health condition. It further called on citizens to obtain health information from reliable sources (Jawhara FM, 2026).

Accordingly, this paper examines the nature of the nutritional messages disseminated by sports influencers, where athletic motivation frequently intersects with commercial promotion and produces a hybrid form of nutritional awareness. The risk of this influence lies in the capacity of influencers to reduce complex scientific knowledge to simplified advice or "trend diets." This raises important questions about the credibility of such information and its psychological and health-related effects on recipients.

On this basis, the study seeks to analyze the content of this digital discourse and identify its ethical and scientific indicators. It adopts a deductive analytical approach with the aim of developing a conceptual framework for regulating this rapidly evolving communicative space.

1.1. Research Problem

Nutrition has come to the forefront as a major determinant of disease. As scientific evidence continues to support the view that dietary modifications exert powerful lifelong effects on health,

whether positive or negative, it becomes clear that diet does not only affect present health. It may also determine an individual's likelihood of developing diseases such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes at a much later stage in life (Chabi, 2023,P112).

Within what has been termed the "democratization of digital knowledge," sports influencers have emerged as new opinion leaders whose role extends beyond the presentation of exercise routines to the provision of complex nutritional advice. The central issue is that the nutritional culture promoted by these influencers often oscillates between "health motivation," "perfectionist obsession," and "misinformation." This leads to the following main research question: How does the content presented by sports influencers contribute to reshaping nutritional awareness within the nutritional culture of their followers?

2. First Section: Conceptual Framework

This section moves beyond basic definitions to analyze the "authority of influence" through the key terms underpinning the study.

2.1. The Sports Influencer as a Digital Opinion Leader

The label "influencer" has been attributed to opinion leaders in order to distinguish them from other actors whose role is limited to transmitting information without expressing personal views, whether through endorsement, rejection, or interpretation (KAZ.L, 2020,P237).

The sports influencer moves beyond the traditional concept of the "star" to assume the role of a "virtual friend" who shares the details of everyday life. This perceived proximity creates a form of "parasocial interaction," in which followers develop a strong sense of attachment that leads them to receive the influencer's nutritional advice as though it came from a trusted close person, rather than from an advertisement or passing digital content.

This creates a clear influence on loyal followers of this type of digital content. The process of digital influence exercised by the sports influencer does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it is grounded in complex communication channels that secure the flow of information from opinion leaders to the public. This confirms the importance of classical theoretical approaches in understanding new media, including the Two-Step Flow Theory, the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, and Cultivation Theory.

This derives from the importance of this new type of opinion leader across various social media platforms in distributing information and influencing decisions. Several previous studies have shown that opinion leaders exert significant influence on social platforms. They are also influential on these platforms because of their ability to appear as trustworthy figures on social media and to shape awareness, whether in relation to brands and purchasing decisions or in other fields such as health, education, and culture (Jia Chen, 2023,P02).

The foregoing demonstrates that continuous interaction between the public and opinion leaders strengthens the latter's capacity to influence, especially when there is alignment between the views of opinion leaders and those of their audiences. This makes shifts toward desired attitudes easier to achieve through active interaction, such as participation in discussions. As a

result, the public becomes more open to adopting new ideas, which reinforces influence and creates a strong dynamic between opinion leaders and their audiences (Belhadef M, 2025,P407).

This influence may be positive when it contributes to spreading nutritional awareness. Love's study (2020), conducted at Illinois State University, found that college athletes considered educational Instagram posts on nutrition useful, although the quantitative improvement in knowledge was not statistically significant (Love, 2020).

It may also encourage healthy behavior. This was confirmed by the study of Li et al. (2023), published on PubMed Central under the title "The Impact of Fitness Influencers on a Social Media Platform," which showed that followers of sports influencers tend to engage in physical activity and adopt healthier eating habits (Wenjia Li & Huangyi Ding, 2023).

As for negative effects, particularly body image distortion, Reggatt et al. (2018) found that 59.3% of participants followed content produced by coaches and athletes, while 17.4% reported high levels of psychological distress after viewing fitness-related content, and 10.3% were at risk of addictive exercise behavior (Collin & Briançon, 2019).

Unregulated marketing is another negative effect. Sports influencers are used as marketers and promoters of food products and dietary supplements about which they may not have sufficient information. They may also lack the scientific background required to provide reliable nutritional advice, unless they are recognized specialists in nutrition and health, such as nutrition physicians practicing in major hospitals or paramedical professionals such as nurses. Lauricella and Koster (2016) showed that the use of professional athletes in marketing via Twitter was highly effective in influencing consumer behavior (Koster, 2016).

2.2. Reconceptualising "Nutritional Culture"

Nutritional culture has shifted from "medical knowledge" to a "visual lifestyle." On digital platforms, healthy food is no longer defined solely by its effect on internal health indicators, but also by its perceived ability to enhance external appearance, such as six-pack abs and a lean body. This conceptual shift may be described as "food visuality," whereby a meal is perceived as "healthy" because it appears so in an Instagram image, for example.

Nutritional culture offers a broad field for acquiring health-oriented forms of learning, particularly when it draws on sources connected to the health sector, including physicians and nutrition specialists. To clarify this concept, it is necessary to examine its two constitutive terms: culture and nutrition.

Culture is one of the central concepts of the social sciences. It is, to some extent, necessary for thinking about the unity of humankind through diversity in a way that differs from biologically grounded explanations. The concept appears to provide some of the most convincing answers to the question of difference between peoples, especially as the racial dimension has gradually lost much of its explanatory value with the development of human genetics (Cuche, 2002,P07).

When culture is understood in its broad sense as referring to ways of life and modes of thought, it becomes a widely accepted concept, even if this understanding still involves a degree of ambiguity. This was not always the case. Since the emergence of the modern idea of culture in the eighteenth century, the concept has generated intense debate. Whatever precise meaning has been assigned to the term, disagreements have persisted over its application to particular realities, since the use of the concept of culture immediately places analysis within the symbolic order and within questions of meaning (Chabi, 2023, pp. 110–111).

According to Ali Al-Makawi, culture contains a set of elements that clearly influence health and disease and regulate human behavior through the practices embedded within it. It permeates most forms of human conduct, including social customs, child-rearing practices, hygiene habits, beliefs, proverbs, perceptions, and other elements that encourage health preservation and disease treatment (Al-Makawi, 1984,P323).

2.3. Health Education and Health Awareness

Health education refers to preparing people to preserve their health. It involves introducing positive change into general behavior in order to prevent disease, while equipping individuals with new concepts, values, and skills. This is achieved by addressing people in ways that stimulate motivation and advance health awareness as part of a broader effort to safeguard individual well-being. Such behavioral and conceptual change begins in schools and universities and extends to factories, farms, and public spaces, so that it reaches society across its different age, occupational, and social groups.

Health culture is defined as the set of knowledge, beliefs, values, and practices related to health and disease that are shared by members of a society or a particular group. It includes:

• understanding basic information related to health and disease, methods of prevention, and ways of dealing with them;

• health beliefs, including prevailing views and concepts concerning health and disease, their causes, and methods of treatment;

• actions undertaken by individuals to preserve their health, such as following a balanced diet, engaging in physical activity, and preventing disease (Maamri, 2025,P552).

Health awareness refers to the perception of health-related knowledge, facts, and objectives. It is the process through which individuals become aware of themselves and of the surrounding health conditions, while developing a mental attitude toward the public health of society.

It also denotes the set of perceptions, beliefs, and views that guide human life and determine behavior. In this sense, it refers to people's familiarity with health information and facts, as well as their sense of responsibility toward their own health and the health of others (Al-Arabi, 2007,P641).

It further refers to an aspect of public health concerned with the active and effective participation of individuals in solving their health problems.

3. Section Two: Semiology and the Biopolitics of Digital Nutritional Culture



This section examines the issue from a deeper sociological perspective through the following points:

3.1. The Concept of Semiology

The term *semiology* derives from the Greek *sémion* or *sémaino*, which in turn derives from *séma*, meaning the sign or indication. It is also associated with *sens*, meaning sense or meaning. The suffix *-logy* denotes science. Linguistically, therefore, semiology or semiotics refers to the science of signs, or the field concerned with analyzing meaning through signs (Bakhouch, 2009,P14).

3.2. The Authority of "the Body as Credential"

In the digital age, "credibility" has shifted from the university certificate displayed on the wall to the muscular body displayed on the screen. This is what may be called "physical capital," whereby the influencer's body becomes both the laboratory and the result. As a consequence, the follower may no longer feel the need to verify the scientific basis of the advice being offered.

The influencer thus uses and relies on the body as a credential to influence recipients' behaviors on the one hand, and to attract followers and reach one million followers or more on the other. This suggests that, in some cases, the content is governed by a profit-oriented economic and marketing logic.

It may therefore be argued that the nutritional discourse of the sports influencer relies primarily on what may be termed the "semiology of the body." Within this framework, the muscular or well-proportioned body becomes a communicative message in itself, granting the influencer legitimacy to speak on nutritional matters without the need for academic qualifications. The influencer, in this sense, invests in the body as "symbolic capital" in order to persuade followers of the effectiveness of the dietary regimes being promoted.

This is reflected in Najwa Salah's study on the impact of social media influencers on mental health and health behavior. The study states that sports influencers promote the idea that control over food is linked to control over the self. It also notes that dietary supplements are presented as quick solutions without reference to dosage or potential side effects. Accordingly, nutritional discourse affects followers by generating psychological pressure, especially when they compare themselves with influencers' content. This reveals a clear causal relationship between content shared on social media and unhealthy dietary behaviors among followers (Najwa, 2018,P56).

In the semiology of the body, the body is not viewed as a machine, but as a symbolic system that sends and receives messages within a specific culture. The body is therefore understood as an instrument of experience, not merely as a biological entity.

3.3. Upward Social Comparison

Influencers rely on creating a gap between the follower's lived reality and the displayed "nutritional ideal." The follower does not simply buy "protein" or follow a "diet," but rather

attempts to purchase the "identity" represented by the influencer. In this context, food ceases to function merely as biological fuel and becomes a "social sign" associated with discipline and success (Fardouly & Diedrichs, 2023).

4. Section Three: Mechanisms of Nutritional Discourse Construction (Deconstructing the Content)

This section examines the mechanisms through which audiences are persuaded.

4.1. The Strategy of "Bodily Proof"

Influencers rely on what may be termed "visible social proof." Instead of citing scientific studies, the influencer uses "before and after" images. This type of discourse reduces complex biological processes to mere "willpower" and a specific type of food. It thereby creates the impression that results are inevitable and rapid if followers adopt the same diet (Fardouly & Diedrichs, 2023).

4.2. The "Free-From" Discourse

Influencers often promote a culture of deprivation or the "demonization" of certain ingredients, such as gluten, sugar, and carbohydrates, without comprehensive medical support. This produces a form of nutritional awareness based on "fear" of food rather than dietary "balance."

4.3. Covert Marketing: Influencer Marketing

This mechanism operates through the promotion of dietary supplements, such as proteins and fat burners, not as commercial products, but as key secrets behind the sports influencer's success. This type of discourse tends to blur the boundaries between sincere advice and what is dictated by the commercial contracts that bind the influencer to the companies operating in this field.

5. Section Four: The Psychology of Persuasion and the Engineering of Nutritional Content: Deconstructing the Mechanisms

This section examines the mechanisms through which nutritional awareness is manipulated.

5.1. The Fabrication of Scientific Precision: Pseudo-Science

Sports influencers often use complex medical terminology, such as metabolism, hormones, and thermogenesis, in technically imprecise contexts in order to give arbitrary advice the appearance of scientific legitimacy. This may be described as the "scientific packaging of commercial content," one of the most dangerous forms of misinformation because it addresses the audience through the language of science while relying on pseudo-scientific reasoning.

According to a study published in *Scientific Reports*, a considerable amount of health information circulating online is not directly false. Rather, it is often presented selectively or incompletely, which makes it misleading and potentially dangerous, particularly for groups that are more vulnerable to influence. For example, a dietary supplement may be promoted in high doses without any reference to its risks, or restrictive dietary regimes may be presented as safe despite their association with possible health complications (Net, 2026).

5.2. Visual Algorithms of "Food Addiction"

An algorithm is a set of defined steps designed to achieve a specific objective. This may involve a simple procedure, such as a recipe for baking a cake, or a complex sequence of operations used in machine learning to analyze large datasets and generate predictions. In the context of machine learning, algorithms are essential because they facilitate machine learning, help identify patterns, and support data-based decision-making, as noted by DataCamp in September 2023 (Sanajleh, 2024).

The addictive potential of social media derives from its ease of access. It enables individuals to reach a vast amount of information through a small device held in the palm of the hand. As a result, the addicted user may come to rely compulsively on such devices to satisfy a particular need and regain a sense of balance.

Social media may also exacerbate health problems by producing feelings of loneliness and isolation, disrupting sleep patterns, and contributing to memory loss and cognitive decline, as reported by the Mayo Clinic platform (Sanajleh, 2024).

In this context, food addiction is visually constructed through the design of meal images, often referred to as "food porn," using saturated colors and expressive, seductive camera angles that make healthy food, according to each influencer's dietary system, appear unrealistically impressive. This visual and cognitive saturation stimulates the reward centers of the human brain, pushing the follower to try the "dietary regime" that attracted them. The motivation is not necessarily a desire for health, but rather a desire to imitate the "aesthetic experience" presented by the influencer and sports leader.

5.3. Emotional Appeals and Fear-Mongering

This mechanism is based on constructing discourse through the "demonization" of certain types of food, such as claims that sugar is "white poison" or that bread destroys the gut. Such fear-based appeals place followers in a state of constant anxiety, which may lead them to become fully dependent on what the influencer presents as a form of health "salvation." A relevant example is the case that occurred in Egypt following the assassination of the Egyptian physician Diaa Al-Awadi, who warned of the dangers of certain foods, including eggs and their risks for people with allergies, histamine-related reactions, and runny nose, as well as the effects of consuming chicken, watermelon, milk, and other foods.

6. Section Five: Behavioral and Social Repercussions (Impact Analysis)

This section addresses one of the central concerns of the study, namely the effects of obsessive adherence to supposedly healthy dietary regimes. These repercussions include the following:

6.1. The Alienation of Nutritional Awareness

The literal adoption of influencers' advice may detach individuals from the actual needs of

their own bodies. The follower may apply the "influencer's diet," which may be suitable for a professional athlete, although the follower is an ordinary individual. This may lead to adverse outcomes or psychological frustration when the experience fails.

6.2. Psychosomatic Risks

The consolidation of "nutritional idealism" contributes to the spread of orthorexia, a disorder in which individuals become excessively preoccupied with the purity and quality of food to the point that they experience social isolation and constant anxiety when consuming any meal that does not conform to the influencer's standards (Fardouly & Diedrichs, 2023).

6.3. The Normalization of "Supplement Culture" as a Substitute for Food

This refers to the transformation of supplements into a cultural norm within society. It represents one of the most dangerous social effects, as younger generations increasingly come to believe that "health, especially physical health," can be purchased in plastic containers in the form of dietary supplements. This marginalizes the role of balanced natural food and creates a generation chemically dependent on different types of supplements in order to achieve athletic goals, whether these involve a fuller body, a slimmer body, or the pursuit of muscularity.

7. Section Six: Socio-Health Repercussions

This section examines the long-term effects of this phenomenon on society. These include the following:

a. **The Emergence of an Anxious "Biological Citizenship"**

The concept of citizenship changed at the beginning of the twenty-first century and became increasingly biological. The biological citizen has made it necessary for systems that produce truth and knowledge to take into account new concepts, such as Rose's neurochemical perspective, Sartre Murray's biotechnologies of the self, and Paul Rabinow's life politics. Rose argues that a new type of citizenship is rapidly taking shape in the age of biomedicine, biotechnology, and genomics, which he terms biological citizenship, or informational citizenship (Rahma, 2021, P40-41).

In this context, biological citizenship refers to a form of citizenship that relies on information obtained from sports influencers in the fields of nutrition and health through the content they provide across most social media platforms. Examples include the content of many Algerian sports coaches, as well as the content of nutrition specialists, such as the nutritionist Aida and "Pharmacie Fi Darek."

As a result, the individual shifts from a citizen who trusts the official health system to a person obsessed with "repairing the body" individually on the basis of digital guidance. This leads to the erosion of trust in physicians in favor of "screen coaches."

b. **Body Dysmorphia**

The conditional association between a "specific food" and the "extraordinary body" creates a state of chronic dissatisfaction among young people with their natural bodies. Eating is thereby transformed from an instinctive pleasure into a "technical battle" and a struggle with calories and



scales (Fardouly & Diedrichs, 2023).

c. **Social Dietary Isolation**

The "trend diets" promoted by influencers, such as strict intermittent fasting or rigid keto diets, impose dietary patterns that make it difficult for individuals to participate in traditional social occasions. This leads to a form of "dietary alienation" within the family and society.

It should also be noted that the phenomenon of digital nutritional influence cannot be understood in isolation from Social Learning Theory. The influencer becomes a model to be imitated, encouraging followers to emulate their consumption patterns in pursuit of "physical capital." This practice also intersects with the social comparison imposed by Instagram and TikTok environments, transforming eating from a biological need into a semiological, or symbolic, act that expresses identity and class belonging (Fardouly et al., 2023).

Accordingly, the study draws on major sociological and media theories that explain why and how these influencers shape nutritional awareness.

a. Social Learning Theory: Albert Bandura

This theory explains how individuals acquire dietary behaviors through observation and modelling.

• **The digital role model:** The follower does not merely learn "information," but imitates "behavior." When the follower sees the sports influencer achieve visual success, represented by the ideal body, and links this success to a particular type of food, "vicarious reinforcement" occurs. In other words, the follower feels that the influencer's reward can also become their own if the same dietary regime is imitated.

• **Self-efficacy:** Influencers persuade followers that "reaching the goal is easy," which increases followers' confidence in their ability to change their diet. The danger, however, lies in the fact that this confidence is built on an "exceptional" model rather than on medical foundations (Fardouly & Diedrichs, 2023).

b. Social Comparison Theory: Leon Festinger

This theory is a cornerstone for understanding disturbances in nutritional culture.

• **Upward comparison:** The influencer positions the self as a "standard of perfection." The follower compares their simple meal with the influencer's colorful and visually curated meals, which creates a sense of "nutritional inferiority."

• **The reconstruction of identity:** Food is no longer merely "eating." It becomes an "instrument of social status." The follower adopts keto as a "lifestyle of the wealthy and successful," which may be described in sociology as the "conspicuous consumption of food."

c. Symbolic Interactionism

This theory makes it possible to analyze the meanings that influencers assign to objects.

• **Nutritional symbolism:** The influencer transforms an "avocado" or a "protein container"

from a mere raw material into a "symbol of awareness, intelligence, and beauty." The follower consumes the symbol before consuming the substance.

• **The construction of social reality:** Through the repeated posting of daily stories, the influencer constructs a "parallel reality" in which strict diets appear to be the "new normal," while traditional balanced eating comes to appear as a form of health-related backwardness.

These repercussions point to the emergence of Michel Foucault's concept of "biopower." An examination of the visible and implicit behaviors of influencers shows that they exercise a form of "soft power" over the bodies of their followers. They do not force anyone, yet they "regulate" people's lives by shaping when they eat, what they drink, and how they monitor their calories. Historically, this authority belonged to physicians and the state. It has now shifted to platform algorithms and influencers' bodies.

As a qualitative addition, the study may be supported by a critical legal approach, particularly in relation to the Algerian context.

This is especially relevant at a time when Algeria continues to face a "digital legislative vacuum." In the absence of explicit legal provisions regulating the activity of "health and nutrition influencers" in Algeria, including in the 2023 Media Law, which focused on political and news-related aspects, the field remains open to individual interpretations that may harm public health. This calls for legislative intervention to regulate digital health content.

Research Proposals and Recommendations

Based on the foregoing, the study proposes the following:

- **At the academic level:** The issue of "digital influence on health behavior" should be included among the research priorities of faculties of media and communication sciences in Algeria.
- **At the institutional level:** The Ministry of Health and university institutions, such as the University of Tiaret, should produce attractive digital content that can compete with the spontaneous discourse of influencers and provide a reliable scientific alternative.
- **At the legislative level:** Laws should be enacted requiring sports influencers to include a clear disclaimer when providing nutritional advice, clarifying that such advice does not replace medical consultation.
- **At the educational level:** The role of "media and nutritional education" should be activated within universities in order to protect students from being led by unsafe nutrition trends.

8. Conclusion

In the digital age, nutritional culture has become a "semiological text" written by influencers through their bodies before their words. If the aim of sport is health, the current communicative medium has diverted this aim toward consumption and visual perfection. Restoring "nutritional rationality" therefore requires cooperation between media professionals and nutrition specialists in

order to reclaim the digital space from spontaneity and commercialization.

The sports influencer today is the new "cultural mediator" between science and the public. Despite the influencer's considerable ability to motivate people toward an active lifestyle, their nutritional discourse remains governed by the logic of the market and visual spectacle. This requires academic intervention to rationalize such content and transform it from "visual commerce" into a genuine "health culture."

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