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Voices that Resonate: The Role of Social Media Influencers in Shaping Mental Health Awareness Among Urban Youth in Vietnam

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Vietnam, social media influencers, mental health awareness, youth engagement, digital health communication

ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of social media influencers in promoting mental health awareness among urban youth in Vietnam, focusing on cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Using a qualitative approach based on 20 in-depth interviews with young adults aged 18 to 30, the research explores how influencer credibility, cultural framing, and engagement patterns shape perceptions and behaviors related to mental health. Guided by the Elaboration Likelihood Model and Source Credibility Theory, the findings reveal that influencers who demonstrate authenticity, emotional transparency, and cultural sensitivity are perceived as more credible and effective. Participants identified strongly with influencers who shared relatable experiences, used familiar language, and addressed common pressures in Vietnamese youth life. While many respondents reported shifts in attitude and increased willingness to engage in mental health conversations, structural barriers such as stigma and limited access to services continued to constrain action. The study concludes that social media influencers can serve as powerful communicators of mental health messages when their content aligns with the cultural values and emotional realities of Vietnamese youth.

Introduction

In recent years, mental health has gained increased visibility in Vietnam, particularly among urban youth navigating the social, academic, and emotional pressures of a rapidly modernizing society. Cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, marked by high rates of internet penetration and digital connectivity, have become critical sites for mental health discourse, primarily through social media platforms. However, despite growing awareness, stigma surrounding mental illness remains deeply embedded in Vietnamese culture. Traditional norms that prioritize emotional restraint, family honor, and social harmony often discourage individuals from seeking professional help or speaking openly about psychological distress (Le & Bui, 2020; Pham et al., 2021). As a result, young people in Vietnam are turning to alternative sources of information and support, including social media influencers (SMIs), who are increasingly shaping public conversations around mental health. Social media influencers have become prominent figures in Vietnam's digital landscape, particularly

among young adults aged 18 to 30. These individuals are often followed not just for their entertainment value, but also for their perceived authenticity and relatability. Influencers who share personal experiences with anxiety, depression, or burnout can disrupt cultural taboos and reframe mental health in ways that resonate with their audience's lived experiences (Nguyen & Dang, 2023). Their influence is not limited to content creation, but extends to shaping emotional norms, offering informal peer support, and initiating discourse on topics traditionally considered private or shameful. As previous studies have shown, audiences often attribute trust and credibility to influencers based not on formal expertise, but on perceived sincerity, consistency, and emotional transparency (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Existing research on health communication has emphasized the role of credibility and identification in shaping message effectiveness. The Source Credibility Theory suggests that audiences are more likely to be persuaded by communicators they perceive as

trustworthy and competent (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). In the context of social media, this credibility is often rooted in lived experience rather than institutional affiliation. Similarly, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) highlights how individuals process persuasive messages through either a central or peripheral route, depending on their level of involvement, prior knowledge, and the nature of the message. Both models are highly relevant to understanding how Vietnamese youth engage with mental health content from influencers, particularly in a context where traditional forms of authority may be viewed with skepticism or remain inaccessible. While the influence of social media on public health has been widely studied in global contexts, there is limited empirical research focusing specifically on Vietnam. Much of the existing literature tends to adopt Western frameworks without accounting for the socio-cultural specificities of Southeast Asian societies. This gap is particularly significant in Vietnam, where cultural expectations regarding mental health are intertwined with family roles, spiritual beliefs, and social conformity. Influencers who speak openly about therapy or emotional vulnerability do so in a delicate social context, where public discussions of mental illness may be perceived as disruptive or inappropriate (Vu & Tran, 2022).

This study aims to examine how Vietnamese social media influencers shape mental health awareness among urban youth. It focuses on three core aspects: the credibility of influencers as perceived by their audience, the cultural framing of mental health content, and the behavioral and attitudinal responses of young viewers. Using a qualitative approach grounded in in-depth interviews, the research investigates how youth interpret and respond to mental health messaging within their digital and cultural environments. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of influencer-led health communication in Vietnam and offer insights for practitioners and policymakers seeking to address mental health challenges in culturally sensitive ways.

Literature Review

Mental health awareness among youth is a growing public health concern worldwide, and Vietnam is no exception. In recent years, the rapid digitalization of Vietnamese society, especially in urban areas such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, has shifted much of the public discourse, including health communication, to digital platforms. With a large proportion of the Vietnamese population under 30 and more than 70 percent using social media daily (Statista, 2023), social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as powerful agents of health messaging. This literature review explores the current state of research on the intersections between mental health communication, social media influence, and cultural dynamics in Vietnam. Vietnamese youth face unique psychological challenges associated with academic stress, family expectations, economic pressure, and urbanization (Nguyen et al., 2021). Despite growing mental health needs, seeking professional help remains limited due to cultural stigma. Mental illness is often perceived as a sign of personal weakness or familial dishonor, rooted in Confucian norms emphasizing emotional restraint and social harmony (Le & Bui, 2020). A study by Pham et al. (2021) on Hanoi-based students revealed that only 23% of respondents felt comfortable discussing mental health with their families, while more than half reported feeling misunderstood or dismissed.

These cultural barriers contribute to a significant treatment gap. According to the World Health Organization (2022), more than 80% of people in Vietnam with mental health disorders receive no formal care. Consequently, informal channels, such as online forums and social media, have become essential for youth to explore mental health topics. Nguyen and Dang (2023) note that digital platforms allow young people to anonymously access information and engage with mental health content outside traditional social structures. Social media influencers are defined as individuals who have built a sizable online following and can shape audience attitudes through perceived authenticity and credibility (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Health researchers have increasingly studied how influencers contribute to public health education, particularly in areas such as diet, fitness, vaccination, and mental health (Southwell & Thorson, 2015; Abidin, 2020). Unlike traditional health campaigns, influencer-led communication often relies on personal narratives and parasocial interaction, which can lower resistance to sensitive topics like mental illness (Casaló et al., 2020).

In the Vietnamese context, influencers have taken up mental health advocacy in culturally adaptive ways. Influencers such as Nguyễn Ngọc Thạch and Lê Minh

Quốc regularly share their own experiences with stress, anxiety, and therapy. These disclosures have been met with high engagement from urban youth, who see influencers as relatable figures navigating similar pressures. This aligns with findings from Charoensukmongkol (2020), who emphasized that influencers who reveal personal struggles generate more empathy and trust, leading to higher message acceptance. Credibility plays a central role in shaping the effectiveness of health messaging. According to the Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness influence how audiences interpret messages. In social media contexts, authenticity and consistency are often stronger predictors of credibility than professional credentials (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Vietnamese urban youth tend to engage more with influencers who exhibit emotional transparency and cultural sensitivity. Research by Vu and Tran (2022) shows that influencers who incorporate Vietnamese idioms, family dynamics, and spiritual references when discussing mental health receive more positive reactions compared to those who adopt Westernized clinical language. This highlights the importance of cultural adaptation in health communication, especially when addressing topics that remain taboo in public discourse. Moreover, engagement is not measured solely by likes or shares, but also by the depth of interaction. A content analysis by Nguyen et al. (2023) on Vietnamese TikTok mental health content found that videos with comment threads involving emotional disclosures and peer support had higher sustained reach over time. These findings suggest that influencer-driven content has the potential to catalyze peer-to-peer communication, which can be critical in shaping social norms around mental health.

The Vietnamese government and NGOs have recently collaborated with influencers in targeted mental health campaigns. One such initiative is the "Hiểu để yêu thương" (Understand to Love) campaign, which engaged popular Vietnamese influencers to share accurate information about depression, anxiety, and available support services. The campaign led to a 40% increase in traffic to mental health resource pages, according to data from VietHealth (2023). However, challenges remain. First, there is limited regulation of health information shared on social media. Influencers may unintentionally disseminate inaccurate or oversimplified content, potentially misleading vulnerable users (Tran & Nguyen, 2021). Second, influencer engagement is often concentrated in major cities, neglecting the needs of marginalized or rural youth. As Phan and Bui (2022) argue, digital health campaigns must incorporate inclusive strategies to bridge the digital divide and ensure equitable access to mental health education. Recent research in South Asia has also emphasized the growing significance of digital platforms in facilitating accessible and effective health communication. For example, Ferdous (2023) found that mHealth apps in Bangladesh played a vital role during the COVID-19 pandemic by enabling convenient, efficient, and user-preferred communication between doctors and patients, highlighting the broader relevance of digital tools in health engagement strategies.

The literature reviewed in this section was identified through a structured search of databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using keywords such as Vietnam, mental health, youth, influencers, digital communication, and cultural framing. Articles published between 2010 and 2023 were included. Priority was given to peer-reviewed studies, and reports focused on Southeast Asia. This process ensured that the review covered both international theories and locally relevant empirical findings.

Research Gap

While international literature offers robust models for understanding influencer effectiveness, such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001), few studies have localized these theories within Southeast Asian cultural frameworks. There is a clear need for empirical research that integrates Vietnamese cultural constructs, such as mặt mũi (face) and tình cảm (emotional connectedness), into existing theories of health communication. Moreover, existing research has often focused on influencers as individual actors. Future studies should explore the ecosystem of digital mental health communication, including platform algorithms, government policy, and audience agency. The unique socio-cultural environment of Vietnam offers a rich context for such multidisciplinary inquiry. To clarify the specific gaps, existing studies have not examined how credibility cues from influencers operate together with cultural norms such as saving face and emotional

restraint. Prior Vietnamese research has focused mainly on stigma, access barriers, or general attitudes rather than influencer-driven mental health communication. There is also limited evidence on how youth interpret emotional disclosures from influencers within the context of local cultural values. Later studies, such as Suryani (2024), confirm rising interest in digital mental health support but do not examine the mechanisms of credibility, cultural framing, and behavioral influence analyzed in our data.

Theoretical Framework

The rapid growth of social media and its integration into the everyday lives of Vietnamese urban youth have transformed how mental health messages are produced, disseminated, and interpreted. In understanding the influence of social media influencers (SMIs) on youth perceptions and engagement with mental health content, it is essential to ground the analysis in a robust theoretical framework that captures the interplay between media effects, message reception, and cultural context. This study draws upon two interrelated theories: the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the Source Credibility Theory (SCT). These frameworks are widely applied in health communication and digital persuasion research and are well-suited to analyze the mechanisms through which SMIs impact awareness and attitudes toward mental health among young adults in cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model, first proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), is a dual-process theory that explains how individuals process persuasive messages through two primary routes: the central route and the peripheral route. The central route involves careful, thoughtful consideration of message content, typically activated when the individual is motivated and able to process it. In contrast, the peripheral route relies on superficial cues such as the attractiveness, likability, or popularity of the source rather than the content itself. In the context of Vietnam, where mental health remains a sensitive topic and public understanding is still evolving, urban youth often approach mental health content through both routes, depending on their level of involvement and prior knowledge. When SMIs share personal stories or credible resources, those youth

with higher issue involvement may process the content via the central route. Others, less familiar with mental health discourse, may rely on peripheral cues such as the influencer's appearance, follower count, or emotional tone. This distinction aligns with recent findings by Hoang and Le (2022), who argue that dual-processing is particularly relevant in Southeast Asian digital cultures where image-based communication and emotional appeals are prevalent.

Importantly, the ELM highlights that message effectiveness is not solely dependent on content quality but also on how the audience interprets it. For instance, a message about seeking therapy may be processed centrally by a university student actively researching mental health. In contrast, the same message may be processed peripherally by another youth who merely admires the influencer's charisma. The implications of this model are significant for campaign designers and policymakers seeking to leverage influencers for public health communication. Tailoring message complexity and modality based on the audience's readiness to engage critically can enhance persuasive outcomes (Kitchen et al., 2014).

Source Credibility Theory (SCT)

While the ELM addresses message processing, the Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) focuses on the perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness of the message source. SCT suggests that audience acceptance of a message is highly influenced by their evaluation of the communicator. In digital spaces, credibility is often conferred not through formal qualifications but through perceived authenticity, consistency, and social capital (Freberg et al., 2011). Vietnamese youth, particularly in metropolitan areas, tend to follow influencers who share content aligned with local cultural values and social realities. For example, influencers who integrate Vietnamese language, family metaphors, or Buddhist perspectives into their mental health narratives often appear more trustworthy to local audiences. This is consistent with Nguyen and Pham (2020), who found that urban Vietnamese youth attribute greater credibility to influencers who express vulnerability and humility, as opposed to those who adopt overly clinical or Westernized tones.

SCT also helps explain why some influencers succeed in shaping attitudes while others fail.

Influencers perceived as sincere and relatable, rather than commercialized or elitist, are more likely to build parasocial relationships with their followers. These relationships, although one-sided, can foster emotional intimacy and behavioral imitation (Yuan & Lou, 2020). In the Vietnamese context, this is particularly important due to the collectivist orientation of the society, where group belonging and social approval are key motivators of behavioral change (Hofstede Insights, 2022). In addition, SCT emphasizes the dynamic and evolving nature of credibility. A previously trusted influencer can lose credibility quickly if they are seen to violate community norms or promote conflicting information. Therefore, sustained influence requires consistency, ethical messaging, and responsiveness to audience feedback. This observation is crucial for understanding the limitations of influencer-based mental health campaigns and reinforces the need for institutional partnerships and content oversight.

Integration and Cultural Adaptation

Although both ELM and SCT were initially developed in Western contexts, they are adaptable to the Vietnamese digital landscape when complemented with cultural insights. Vietnam is a society undergoing rapid modernization while retaining deep-rooted traditions. Mental health remains culturally sensitive, and youth attitudes are shaped by both global trends and local values. As Vu and Tran (2022) have emphasized, the success of mental health communication in Vietnam depends not only on message logic or source credibility but also on cultural consonance. Integrating ELM and SCT enables this study to explore how Vietnamese youth evaluate influencer content, either through systematic reasoning or affective cues, and how the perceived credibility of influencers modulates these processes. For instance, an SMI with high perceived credibility may prompt youth to engage more deeply with complex mental health topics, triggering central route processing. Conversely, youth with lower mental health literacy may still develop positive attitudes through peripheral processing if the influencer's identity and presentation align with trusted norms.

Furthermore, the influence of collectivist values such as harmony, filial piety, and saving face must be considered. These values often discourage direct confrontation of psychological issues, but influencers can strategically address them by using culturally appropriate metaphors or storytelling techniques. Therefore, the theoretical model applied here not only captures cognitive and affective mechanisms of persuasion but also acknowledges the socio-cultural filters through which mental health messages are received in Vietnamese society.

Relevance to Research Objectives

This study aims to examine how Vietnamese SMIs shape urban youth perceptions and engagement with mental health content. The combined application of the elaboration likelihood model and source credibility theory provides a comprehensive framework for addressing the study's core objectives. Specifically, the model allows for the investigation of how urban youth cognitively and emotionally respond to influencer-led mental health content. The extent to which message processing routes (central or peripheral) are influenced by personal relevance and influencer characteristics. How perceived source credibility shapes acceptance, trust, and potential behavior change regarding mental health awareness. By situating the study within these theoretical parameters, the analysis can move beyond surface-level assessments of engagement metrics and focus on the deeper psychological and cultural processes that drive youth responses to mental health messaging in Vietnam. Based on these theories, the author expects that youth will judge influencer messages more favorably when they perceive the influencer as authentic and culturally aligned with their lived experiences. The author also expects that cultural framing will influence whether messages are processed through the central or peripheral route and that higher perceived credibility will be linked with stronger attitudinal or behavioral change.

Research Questions

This study seeks to explore how social media influencers contribute to shaping mental health awareness, perceptions, and behaviors among urban youth in Vietnam. Grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), the research addresses the following core questions:

RQ 1: How do urban Vietnamese youth evaluate the credibility of social media

influencers who discuss mental health issues?

RQ 2: In what ways does cultural framing in influencer content affect the reception and interpretation of mental health messages?

RQ 3: How do Vietnamese youth engage with mental health content shared by influencers, and what forms of interaction are most common?

RQ 4: To what extent does influencer-driven mental health content contribute to changes in attitudes or behaviors among urban youth in Vietnam?

These research questions are designed to guide an in-depth analysis of how digital communication intersects with cultural norms and individual experiences. They aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which social media influencers influence mental health discourse in contemporary Vietnamese society.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design using semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore how social media influencers shape mental health awareness among urban Vietnamese youth. The qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's focus on subjective meaning-making, cultural interpretation, and the psychological and social mechanisms involved in influencer-audience interactions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The goal is not to generalize statistically but to understand the depth and complexity of youth engagement with mental health content in Vietnam's rapidly evolving digital environment. The study was conducted in two major urban centers in Vietnam: Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. These cities were selected because of their high internet penetration, strong presence of social media influencers, and concentration of youth populations (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2022). The target population included young adults aged 18 to 30 who regularly follow Vietnamese social media influencers and have encountered mental health-related content online.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit 20 participants (10 from each city) who met the inclusion criteria. Data saturation was reached when no new themes appeared in the final three interviews. The research team confirmed that additional interviews were unlikely to generate new insights, which supported the decision to stop at 20 participants. The final sample included 11 women and 9 men. Participants represented a mix of education levels, including 14 university students, 4 recent graduates, and 2 employed professionals. The most commonly used platforms were TikTok and Facebook, followed by YouTube. Nine potential participants declined due to lack of time or privacy concerns, indicating a small degree of selection bias that is common in qualitative mental health research. Participants were selected to ensure diversity in gender, education level, and platform usage (e.g., TikTok, Facebook, YouTube). Recruitment was facilitated through university bulletin boards, online forums, and social media groups. Prior to participation, all respondents received informed consent forms in accordance with ethical guidelines approved by the institutional review board at [Name of Institution]. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Vietnam National University. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, either face-to-face or via secure online video platforms, depending on the participant's location and COVID-19-related restrictions at the time of the study. Each interview lasted approximately 15 to 30 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions addressing:

1. Perceptions of mental health content on social media
2. Trust in and identification with influencers discussing mental health
3. Reactions to specific influencer posts or campaigns
4. Cultural values influencing mental health attitudes

Participants were also asked to describe any behavior changes, such as seeking help, talking to peers, or changing attitudes toward mental health after exposure to influencer content. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and coding the data. Initial codes were developed inductively and later clustered into broader themes aligned with the study's theoretical framework. To ensure credibility, two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was

reached. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study incorporated member checking, in which participants reviewed a summary of the interpreted themes to confirm their accuracy. Reflexive memos were also maintained throughout the research process to document the researchers' positionality and potential biases. Additionally, thick description was used to contextualize findings within the cultural and social realities of urban Vietnam, providing readers with a clear understanding of the phenomenon.

Findings

Thematic analysis generated five major themes: (1) Influencer credibility and trust, (2) Personal identification with influencers, (3) Cultural framing and message reception, (4) Engagement and interaction patterns, and (5) Behavioral influence and attitude change. These themes are discussed below, with illustrative quotes from participants and analytic insights grounded in the data.

Influencer Credibility and Trust

Credibility emerged as a fundamental determinant in shaping how urban Vietnamese youth engaged with mental health content disseminated by social media influencers. Across interviews, participants repeatedly emphasized that authenticity and perceived sincerity mattered more than formal qualifications or professional expertise. Rather than seeking information from credentialed mental health professionals, most participants were drawn to influencers who shared personal narratives, demonstrated emotional openness, and maintained consistent communication over time. Terms such as "genuine," "humble," and "brave" frequently surfaced in descriptions of trusted influencers. A common belief was that those who disclosed their own struggles with anxiety, depression, or burnout without dramatization were seen as more relatable and trustworthy. One participant from Hanoi shared:

> "I believe her because she always shares her struggles and never pretends to be perfect. She feels real."

Trust was closely tied to perceptions of vulnerability and emotional transparency, suggesting that authenticity is not merely a stylistic preference but a moral standard in influencer–follower relationships. Participants noted that credible influencers often engage in long-term mental health advocacy rather than posting sporadically or in response to popular trends. In contrast, commercialized content, especially sponsored posts for supplements, wellness apps, or affiliate products, provoked skepticism. Several participants expressed disillusionment with influencers who appeared to exploit mental health discourse for visibility or profit. The appearance of insincerity, whether intentional or not, was enough for some to disengage. As one participant remarked,

> "If I feel like it's just to get views or sell something, I unfollow immediately."

It is important to highlight that none of the influencers mentioned by participants were licensed mental health professionals. However, their lived experience was often described as more meaningful than institutional expertise. This aligns with previous research suggesting that emotional resonance and perceived honesty can outweigh technical authority in digital health communication (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019). These findings suggest that in Vietnam's social media landscape, relational trust, rather than professional status, underpins influencer credibility. This dynamic positions influencers as powerful but vulnerable actors in health communication, whose perceived authenticity determines their capacity to shape attitudes and behaviors regarding mental health.

Personal Identification with Influencers

Personal identification with social media influencers played a critical role in shaping participants' engagement with mental health messages. Many interviewees expressed a strong emotional connection to specific influencers who shared similar life experiences, social backgrounds, or communication styles. This identification was not superficial but was rooted in a perceived alignment of values, struggles, and everyday realities. Participants described influencers as „relatable" or „like a friend," emphasizing that the most impactful voices were those who spoke in a tone that resonated with local cultural experiences. A 23-year-old university student from Ho Chi Minh City said:

> "He talks about anxiety in a way I can relate to. It's like he's speaking directly to my life."

This sense of familiarity and resonance encouraged participants to listen more attentively and to take the

message seriously. Identification was often built on shared challenges commonly faced by urban Vietnamese youth, including academic stress, job insecurity, romantic relationships, and expectations from parents. Influencers who openly addressed these themes in a candid and culturally appropriate manner were more likely to foster trust and emotional engagement. In contrast, participants were less receptive to influencers who presented mental health content in highly technical or Westernized terms. Some felt alienated by content that seemed distant from the Vietnamese social context or was too focused on clinical diagnosis and treatment. This disconnect was particularly evident when influencers used English-language terminology or referenced therapy models unfamiliar to local audiences. As one participant noted,

> "If I don't see myself in their story, I scroll past."

Importantly, personal identification also influenced how the youth interpreted the intentions behind the message. Influencers who appeared to share stories from a place of empathy, rather than authority, were viewed as more trustworthy. This relational dynamic underlines the importance of perceived similarity in digital health communication and suggests that authenticity is not only about content, but also about the alignment between the speaker's identity and the audience's lived experience. These findings underscore the need for culturally grounded communication strategies that center the voices of influencers who understand and reflect the everyday realities of Vietnamese youth.

Cultural Framing and Message Reception

Social media influencers culturally framed the way mental health content played a crucial role in how participants received and processed the messages. While awareness about mental health has grown among Vietnamese urban youth, many participants shared that traditional values continue to shape their interpretations of emotional well-being. Influencers who acknowledged and integrated these cultural values were viewed as more effective in reducing stigma and encouraging engagement. Participants expressed appreciation for influencers who used familiar stories, idioms, and social norms to make mental health concepts more accessible. One participant shared:

> "When she used the story of her family to

explain mental health, it made sense. It's not too Western."

This quote reflects a broader preference for messages that resonate with Vietnamese cultural contexts rather than those perceived as foreign or clinical. The inclusion of family narratives, Buddhist teachings, and Vietnamese proverbs helped participants understand mental health as something shared, holistic, and emotionally rooted. For example, several mentioned that the concept of "tâm an," or peace of mind, was more relatable than the Western diagnostic labels such as depression or anxiety disorder. Participants also noted that discussions around mental illness must be handled with sensitivity to prevailing social norms. In Vietnamese society, emotional restraint and family honor are deeply valued. Open conversations about mental distress can be perceived as disruptive or shameful. Influencers who recognized this tension, and addressed it without directly challenging core cultural beliefs, were described as thoughtful and persuasive. One participant noted that when an influencer discussed emotional healing through compassion toward one's parents, it felt both respectful and empowering.

In contrast, influencers who appeared to ignore or criticize Vietnamese traditions were often seen as culturally disconnected. These messages were more likely to be dismissed, even if they were factually accurate or well-intentioned. These findings suggest that cultural framing is not just a matter of language or symbolism. It fundamentally shapes the perceived legitimacy and emotional relevance of mental health communication. Effective framing must reflect not only individual experiences but also the collective values and emotional vocabulary of Vietnamese society.

Engagement and Interaction Patterns

Participant narratives revealed diverse forms of interaction with mental health content shared by social media influencers. Engagement was not limited to passive consumption but often included active and intentional behaviors. Common activities included liking, sharing, commenting, saving posts, and tagging others in relevant content. These acts served not only as expressions of support for the influencer but also as mechanisms for opening discussions with peers and family members. A 26-year-old participant from Hanoi illustrated this dynamic clearly:

"I shared his post with my friends, and we had a long conversation about going to therapy."

Such examples show how influencer content functioned as a catalyst for deeper offline conversations. Sharing a mental health post could be a subtle and non-confrontational way to introduce sensitive topics into daily social interactions. Several participants noted that they used influencer content to signal empathy or concern for others, especially when direct discussion felt too personal or risky. Engagement also extended into more immersive experiences. Some participants described sending private messages to influencers, participating in live Q&A sessions, or joining comment threads where followers exchanged support and advice. These interactions helped foster a sense of belonging and reduced feelings of isolation. Many described these online spaces as more comfortable and accessible than formal settings like clinics or school counseling services.

Despite this openness, participants were careful about how and where they engaged. Concerns about stigma and privacy were common, particularly among those with conservative families or professional aspirations. Some avoided commenting publicly on mental health posts to prevent unwanted attention or misunderstanding. Others preferred to share posts in private group chats or use platforms that allowed anonymity.

This selective engagement underscores the complex balance Vietnamese youth navigate between public visibility and private vulnerability. Influencer content offers valuable entry points into mental health discourse, but the choice to engage remains shaped by personal risk perception, platform design, and broader societal attitudes toward mental illness. These findings suggest that while social media fosters dynamic interaction around mental health, such engagement is often strategic and deeply contextual.

Behavioral Influence and Attitude Change

The influence of social media influencers on the mental health behaviors and attitudes of Vietnamese urban youth was evident in multiple interview accounts. Although not every participant reported taking direct action such as attending therapy or contacting a mental health professional, many described a gradual but meaningful shift in how they perceived mental health, processed emotions, and supported others. One respondent explained:

> "After watching her video, I searched for mental health services in my city. It made me think differently. "

This statement reflects the capacity of influencer content to prompt reflection and motivate new behaviors, even when those behaviors are exploratory rather than definitive. Several participants reported that they had started to think more critically about their emotional well-being, including recognizing symptoms of stress, identifying unhealthy coping mechanisms, and acknowledging the value of seeking support. Empathy toward others also emerged as a key theme. Influencer stories helped participants relate to peers facing mental health challenges and encouraged them to be more attentive and supportive in their social circles. A number

Table 1: Key Themes and Illustrative Quotes

Theme	Illustrative Quote
Influencer Credibility and Trust	"I believe her because she always shares her struggles and never pretends to be perfect. She feels real."
Personal Identification with Influencers	"He talks about anxiety in a way I can relate to. It's like he's speaking directly to my life."
Cultural Framing and Message Reception	"When she used the story of her family to explain mental health, it made sense. It's not too Western."
Engagement and Interaction Patterns	"I shared his post with my friends, and we had a long conversation about going to therapy."

of interviewees reported initiating conversations with friends, siblings, or even parents, despite the discomfort associated with such discussions in Vietnamese cultural settings.

At the same time, participants were aware of the limitations of influencer content as a pathway to action. Structural barriers such as the cost of therapy, limited access to qualified professionals, and cultural stigma remained significant obstacles. As one participant from Ho Chi Minh City stated,

> "Even if I want to get help, it's hard to explain to my parents. They think mental illness means you're weak."

This tension illustrates that while influencers can inspire reflection and reduce internalized stigma, they cannot substitute for systemic reforms or institutional support. Many participants viewed influencers as an important first step in their journey toward self-awareness and emotional literacy. The content served as a low-pressure introduction to mental health topics, helping them build confidence before taking more formal steps. The findings suggest that social media influencers can play a transformative role in shaping attitudes and initiating behavioral change, even if their impact is uneven and contingent on broader social and structural factors.

The table below summarizes the five key themes along with illustrative quotes drawn from the interview data.

Discussion

This study explored the role of social media influencers (SMIs) in promoting mental health awareness among urban youth in Vietnam, focusing on how message credibility, cultural framing, and engagement patterns shape perceptions and behaviors. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 20 young adults from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the findings provide a nuanced understanding of how influencer-based communication operates within a complex socio-cultural and digital environment. Guided by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), this discussion integrates the empirical themes with theoretical and contextual implications. The first key finding of the study highlights the centrality of influencer credibility and trust. Unlike traditional mental health communication that often relies on professional authority, participants in this study evaluated credibility through perceived authenticity and emotional transparency. This observation aligns with the Source Credibility Theory, where trustworthiness and perceived expertise are crucial, although in the social media context, expertise is often interpreted through lived experience rather than institutional credentials (Freberg et al., 2011). Participants responded more positively to influencers who consistently shared personal challenges, demonstrated vulnerability, and refrained from overt commercialization of their content. This reinforces previous claims that authenticity is a core driver of digital influence (Lou & Yuan, 2019), and extends the literature by showing how Vietnamese youth, despite traditional respect for authority, now prioritize relatability and consistency in assessing credible voices.

The data also suggest that identification with influencers plays a critical mediating role in shaping message reception. Influencers who shared similar life experiences, linguistic styles, or emotional struggles were perceived as more relatable and therefore more persuasive. This reflects the central route of the Elaboration Likelihood Model, in which message processing occurs more deeply when the receiver finds the content personally relevant (Kitchen et al., 2014). However, for many participants, identification functioned more as a socio-emotional filter than a purely cognitive process. Youth responded to influencers who mirrored their own struggles with academic pressure, career uncertainty, and intergenerational tension. These experiences, rooted in the rapidly changing urban landscape of Vietnam, gave the influencers symbolic authority even without formal mental health training. Cultural framing emerged as another critical factor in enhancing message effectiveness. The way influencers embedded mental health discourse within culturally familiar narratives had a direct impact on how participants interpreted and internalized the content. Messages that referenced Buddhist values, familial obligations, or the Vietnamese concept of „tâm an" (inner peace) were considered more respectful and meaningful. In contrast, messages that adopted Western clinical language or diagnostic labels were often dismissed as irrelevant or difficult to relate to. This supports Vu and Tran's (2022) argument that culturally congruent framing increases

message acceptance and reduces perceived stigma. By incorporating traditional values while still encouraging openness, successful influencers were able to strike a delicate balance between challenging stigma and preserving social harmony, a key priority in Vietnamese society.

Another important insight relates to how participants engaged with influencer content. Their interaction was not limited to liking or following, but also included sharing content with peers, joining online discussions, and even initiating offline conversations about mental health. This pattern reflects the participatory logic of social media platforms and the growing normalization of digital health discourse in informal networks. As Nguyen and Dang (2023) note, online spaces provide Vietnamese youth with a low-risk environment to explore sensitive topics that might otherwise be silenced in public or family settings. The findings from this study confirm that SMIs are not simply content creators but also facilitators of micro-level dialogue, enabling peer support and collective reflection. Despite this, engagement was often strategic and selective. Several participants mentioned avoiding public comments or likes due to fears of judgment from family members, colleagues, or supervisors. Instead, they engaged in more private ways, such as sharing posts in group chats or bookmarking content for personal reflection. These behaviors highlight the enduring presence of stigma and the social risks associated with mental health visibility in Vietnam. They also underscore the relevance of the peripheral route in the Elaboration Likelihood Model, where individuals may be influenced by cues such as influencer relatability or tone without deeply processing the content. This dual processing route may explain the wide variance in how influencer content affects behavior, ranging from passive awareness to more active behavior change.

Behavioral influence and attitude change represented the most significant but uneven impact of influencer messaging. Several participants described changes in how they thought about emotional well-being, talked to others, or considered seeking help. Others, however, remained hesitant due to financial constraints, limited access to mental health services, or cultural taboos. This variability demonstrates that while SMIs can serve as catalysts, they are not sufficient to overcome structural and societal barriers. The idea of influencers as a "first step" toward longer-term change was a recurring theme, echoing Pham et al. (2021), who found that internal shifts in attitude often precede help-seeking behavior in Vietnamese youth. The credibility of influencers also contributed to shaping behavioral intention. Influencers who were seen as consistent and trustworthy helped participants reconsider their assumptions about mental illness and recognize early signs of emotional distress in themselves and others. This aligns with findings by Nguyen and Pham (2020), who noted that the perceived sincerity of an influencer enhances the likelihood of message acceptance. However, the presence of commercial sponsorship, particularly involving health products, was often met with skepticism. This reinforces the argument by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) that perceived authenticity is easily undermined by signs of financial motivation.

The findings also contribute to a more contextualized understanding of the digital mental health ecosystem in Vietnam. Urban youth operate within a landscape shaped by modern pressures, high social media penetration, and limited mental health infrastructure. Influencers serve as intermediaries, helping translate global mental health narratives into locally resonant forms. However, the sustainability and ethical implications of this role require careful consideration. As noted by Southwell and Thorson (2015), health communication in digital spaces must be grounded in long-term strategies rather than individual persuasion. While SMIs offer unique advantages in reach and relatability, they cannot replace formal systems of care, especially for youth who face more serious mental health challenges. The combined application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model and Source Credibility Theory has proven valuable for understanding the mechanisms behind influencer effectiveness in the Vietnamese context. ELM helps explain the dual pathways through which participants processed content, depending on their prior knowledge, emotional readiness, and platform context. SCT clarifies how trust in the message source, rather than the message alone, influences behavior. The two theories, when applied in tandem, offer a more complete picture of how Vietnamese youth engage with digital mental health communication. Finally, the cultural specificity of this study's findings offers important insights for designing more effective mental health interventions in Vietnam.

Strategies that leverage influencers should prioritize emotional transparency, cultural grounding, and ethical consistency. These principles are particularly critical in a society where mental health remains highly stigmatized, and where youth must navigate competing expectations from traditional norms and modern aspirations.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size was small and limited to two large cities, which may not reflect the experiences of youth in rural provinces. Second, self-reported data may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability. Third, the study focuses on influencers who openly discuss mental health, which may exclude perspectives from youth who follow different types of content. Finally, the findings reflect the period in which the data were collected and may not capture rapid changes in digital behavior among Vietnamese youth." Future studies should expand to rural regions and include a wider diversity of influencer types. Quantitative or mixed methods designs could examine the strength of associations between credibility cues and behavioral outcomes. More research is also needed on how algorithms, platform design, and government policies shape access to mental health content. Comparative studies across Southeast Asia could further clarify the cultural factors that influence how youth engage with influencer-driven mental health communication.

Conclusion

This study has examined how social media influencers shape mental health awareness and engagement among urban Vietnamese youth, with a particular focus on message credibility, cultural framing, and behavioral influence. The findings demonstrate that authenticity, emotional relatability, and cultural sensitivity are central to the effectiveness of mental health communication in digital environments. Influencers who are perceived as trustworthy and personally relatable foster deeper engagement and reflection, even when lacking formal clinical expertise (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019). The study confirms the relevance of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) in understanding how Vietnamese youth process influencer content through both central and peripheral routes. It also emphasises the importance of culturally grounded messaging that respects local values and emotional vocabularies (Vu & Tran, 2022). While influencers cannot replace structural interventions, they can act as meaningful catalysts for shifting attitudes and encouraging dialogue in a society where mental illness remains stigmatized. Ultimately, this research highlights the potential of leveraging influencer-driven communication as part of a broader, integrated approach to mental health promotion in Vietnam. Such efforts must be sensitive to the social and cultural dynamics that shape youth behavior and should aim to complement, rather than substitute, institutional forms of mental health support.

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