

Role of Influencers in Propagating Abnormal Trends

Pallavi Dubey

Associate Professor, Sigma University, Vadodara, Gujarat, India

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ABSTRACT

The advent of social media platforms has significantly empowered individuals to attain influencer status, wherein their reach and persuasive power shape public behavior, beliefs, and trends. While influencers often propagate benign or beneficial content—ranging from lifestyle choices to health-related advice—there is a growing concern regarding their role in disseminating and normalizing “abnormal trends,” defined here as behaviors or practices that deviate from societal norms and may pose psychological, social, or physical risks. This study examines how influencers contribute to the propagation of such abnormal trends, exploring theoretical underpinnings from social learning theory and social comparison theory, delineating the mechanisms through which abnormal content spreads, and analyzing case studies of documented phenomena (e.g., self-harm challenges and dangerous pranks). Additionally, this paper discusses the psychological impact on vulnerable populations, ethical considerations for platform governance, and potential interventions. Through a synthesis of the extant literature, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of influencers’ roles in abnormal trend proliferation and offers recommendations for researchers, policymakers, and platform administrators.

Keywords : Influencers, Abnormal Trends, Social Media, Social Learning Theory, Psychological Impact

1. Introduction

Social media have revolutionized the production, dissemination, and consumption of information. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter (now X) have given rise to a new class of content creators—commonly referred to as influencers—who command substantial followings and wield considerable persuasive power over their audience. Influencers often monetize their reach by

engaging in brand partnerships, sponsored posts, and affiliate marketing, thereby shaping consumer behavior and cultural norms [1]. Though much research has focused on positive or neutral content (e.g., fashion, lifestyle, travel), a critical emerging concern pertains to influencers who inadvertently or deliberately promote “abnormal trends.” These are defined as practices, behaviors, or challenges that diverge markedly from societal or developmental

norms and may entail negative psychological, physical, or social consequences for participants and onlookers [2].

While the term “abnormal” in psychology typically refers to patterns of behavior that are statistically rare, maladaptive, or deviate from cultural expectations [3], popular usage in this context extends to viral challenges or practices that pose risks, such as self-harm challenges, dangerous stunts, eating disorder glorification, or misinformation-laden wellness fads. The rapid virality of such trends is frequently attributed to the mimetic nature of social media: one user films or documents a behavior, uploads it, and countless others imitate it to gain social validation, notoriety, or simply to belong to an in-group [4].

This paper aims to:

1. Define “abnormal trends” in the context of social media.
2. Review the theoretical frameworks (social learning theory, social comparison theory) explaining why individuals imitate influencers.
3. Identify the mechanisms through which influencers propagate abnormal trends.
4. Present illustrative case studies of prominent, abnormal trends.
5. The psychological impact on vulnerable populations, particularly adolescents, should be discussed.
6. Ethical and regulatory considerations were evaluated.
7. Recommendations for mitigating negative consequences are proposed.

By synthesizing research from psychology, communication studies, and cyberpsychology, this study offers a comprehensive overview of influencers’ roles in abnormal trend propagation, emphasizing the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration to address these phenomena.

2. Defining “Abnormal Trends” in the Social Media Era

2.1 Conceptualization

“Abnormal trends” are defined as socially shared practices, challenges, or behaviors that starkly deviate from established cultural, developmental, or normative standards and bear potential harm or maladaptive consequences for individuals or communities [2]. Such trends may involve self-harm, disordered eating, risky stunts, substance misuse, or the proliferation of pathological beliefs (e.g., extremist ideology and pseudoscientific wellness fads). They stand in contrast to benign viral trends (e.g., dance challenges, harmless pranks) and are characterized by the following:

- i. Risk of harm: physical injury (e.g., the choking game), psychological trauma (e.g., self-harm ideation), or social isolation (e.g., pro-eating disorder communities).
- ii. Deviation from developmental norms: Actions that contravene typical behavior expected at certain ages (e.g., adolescents imitating self-harm).
- iii. Reinforcement of maladaptive beliefs: such as glorifying disordered eating or providing misinformation about health (e.g., anti-vaccination conspiracies).

2.2 Classification

Abnormal trends may be categorized as follows:

- i. Self-harm and suicide-related challenges: Trends like the “Blue Whale Challenge,” which reportedly directed participants toward self-harm tasks culminating in suicidal ideation or attempts [5].
- ii. Physical risk stunts: Dangerous behaviors such as the “Tide Pod Challenge” (ingesting toxic laundry pods) or “Fire Challenge” (setting one’s body ablaze).
- iii. Eating disorder glorification: Trends that normalize ultra-thin ideals, often presented through “thinspiration” posts on Instagram or pro-ana Tumblr blogs [6].

- iv. Misinformation-based wellness trends: Influencers promoting unverified weight-loss supplements or extreme fasting practices lacking evidence and the potential to cause nutritional deficiencies [7].
- v. Psychologically manipulative ideologies: Extremist recruitment or radical content appealing to vulnerable identities, as seen in the spread of conspiracy theories [8].

2.3 Prevalence and Significance

A meta-analysis of viral trends between 2015 and 2020 across platforms revealed that approximately 12% of viral challenges contain elements of high-risk behavior [9]. Data from the CyberPsychology Journal indicate a 25% increase in self-harm-related content searches among adolescents in 2019 compared to 2017, often linked to influencer-promoted content [10]. These statistics underscore the importance of understanding how influencers operate as vectors of abnormal trend diffusion.

3. Theoretical Frameworks: Why Audiences Imitate Influencers

3.1 Social Learning Theory

Bandura's Social Learning Theory posits that individuals learn behaviors through observation, imitation, and modeling [4]. The key components include attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Influencers attract attention owing to their high visibility, perceived success, and aspirational lifestyles, making their actions salient models for their followers. When an influencer demonstrates an abnormal trend and either survives the associated risk or receives positive reinforcement (e.g., "likes," "shares," and monetary gain), followers may retain and reproduce that behavior, especially if motivated by social approval or self-efficacy beliefs [11].

3.2 Social Comparison Theory

Festinger's Social Comparison Theory suggests that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing themselves to others, especially when lacking

objective criteria [12]. On social media, influencers often present curated and idealized images of themselves, fostering upward social comparisons. When influencers portray abnormal behaviors as normative or admirable, followers—even those at risk of low self-esteem or social anxiety—may engage in these behaviors to align themselves with perceived group standards or enhance their social status [13].

3.3 Uses and Gratifications Theory

This theory posits that audiences actively select media content that fulfills specific needs—information, personal identity, integration, social interaction, and entertainment [14]. Influencers who satisfy these needs (e.g., by providing a sense of belonging through shared challenges) can embed abnormal trends within gratifications, thus reinforcing adoption. For instance, adolescents seeking identity affirmation may partake in a dangerous trend flaunted by an admired influencer to feel "seen" and validated [15].

3.4 Social Identity and Group Norms

Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory argues that individuals derive part of their self-concept from perceived membership in social groups [16]. Online communities—whether fandoms or niche challenge groups—foster strong in-group identity. When influencers shape group norms by endorsing abnormal behaviors, followers may adopt these norms to maintain group cohesion and personal identity congruence, even if they are malignant [17].

4. Mechanisms of Propagation by Influencers

4.1 Content Creation and Presentation

Influencers leverage multimedia capabilities—videos, images, and text—to present abnormal behaviors in compelling narratives or tutorials. The affordances of platforms such as TikTok (short-form vertical videos) and Instagram (reels and stories) enable rapid content production. For example, a "how-to" video demonstrating a risky stunt provides step-by-step guidance, reducing the psychological barriers to imitation [18]. Moreover, editing techniques (fast

cuts, dramatic music) enhance emotional arousal, making the content more memorable and sharable [19].

4.2 Algorithmic Amplification

Social media algorithms prioritize content based on engagement metrics (likes, shares, and comments). Abnormal trend content often elicits strong emotional reactions—shock, disgust, admiration—which translate into high levels of engagement. Algorithms interpret this as a “high value” and promote it further in user feeds and “Explore” pages [20]. Consequently, even a single influencer post can cascade into widespread visibility, reaching audiences far beyond the original follower base.

4.3 Network Effects and Peer Endorsement

The viral spread of abnormal trends is bolstered by network effects: when multiple micro-influencers or peer nodes repost or challenge each other, they create a network of endorsement that legitimizes the behavior [21]. Peer endorsement reduces perceived risk and normalizes abnormal practices (“if so many people are doing it, it must be safe or acceptable”) [22].

4.4 Monetization Incentives

Monetary incentives can motivate influencers to post sensational or risky content. Sponsored posts for energy drinks, weight loss aids, and adrenaline-fueled experiences often blur the line between marketing and abnormal trend promotion [23]. Some influencers create “challenge” videos designed to go viral, knowing that higher view counts translate to ad revenue or brand deals, thereby intentionally or unconsciously propagating harmful trends [24].

4.5 Message Framing and Social Proof

Influencers frequently employ message-framing techniques—such as presenting the trend as a “funny prank,” a “harmless challenge,” or a means to achieve social recognition—to downplay risks [25]. Social proof [26] is invoked when influencers showcase peers or other popular figures participating, reinforcing the notion that “everyone else is doing it.” This double-pronged framing (“no risk; all fun” +

“everyone is doing it”) powerfully reduces followers’ critical scrutiny.

5. Case Studies of Abnormal Trends Propagated by Influencers

5.1 The “Blue Whale Challenge”

First reported in Russia (2016), the “Blue Whale Challenge” allegedly consists of a series of tasks over 50 days, culminating in instructions to commit suicide [5]. While some controversy surrounds its actual prevalence, the game’s mythos spread via influencers reporting on it or posting “edgy” content referencing self-harm [27]. Adolescent viewers, already vulnerable to depressive ideation, encountered influencer videos describing the challenge or posting “gruesome” proofs of completion, which served as both attention-grabbing content and implicit endorsements. Social media platforms such as VKontakte (VK) and later Instagram became hubs for these posts, algorithmically amplifying them as they garnered engagement from curious and distressed users [28].

5.1.1. Psychological Impact

Studies in Russia and India [29] reported that increases in self-harm ideation hotline calls correlated with spikes in “Blue Whale”-themed posts. Adolescents who identified with influencers recounting personal struggles reported greater normalization of self-harm. Social learning mechanisms facilitated imitation, with some reporting that they viewed the completion of earlier tasks (e.g., listening to sad music, self-inflicted bruising) as “proof” of group belonging [5].

5.1.2. Platform Response

In 2017, Instagram began deploying AI-based filters to detect self-harm imagery and direct users to mental health resources [30]. However, limitations in computer vision accuracy and the challenge of distinguishing stylized self-harm depictions from genuinely harmful content meant that many posts persisted. Critiques note that platform actions were reactive and lacked comprehensive monitoring,

allowing influencers to continue propagating related content under coded language (e.g., hashtags such as #F57) that evaded detection [31].

5.2 The “Tide Pod Challenge”

Around late 2017 and early 2018, videos surfaced of individuals—primarily adolescents—ingesting laundry detergent pods for “fun” or social media clout [32]. Influencers and micro-influencers posted videos daring peers to consume or bite into the pods, often framing them as risk-free pranks. This short-lived but highly publicized trend garnered widespread media attention, inadvertently amplifying its reach [33].

5.2.1. Health Consequences

Poison control centers in the United States reported a 98% increase in calls related to laundry detergent exposure among teenagers during the peak of the challenge [34]. Many hospitalizations were required for caustic burns of the mouth and esophagus. Surveys have indicated that adolescents are often unaware of the chemical dangers and regard influencer videos as implicit assurances of safety [32].

5.2.2. Social Media and Corporate Interventions

TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube issued content removal directives for “Tide Pod Challenge” videos; however, the challenge mutated into “hand soap” or “two-bite rule” variations [35]. Procter & Gamble, Tide’s parent company, launched a “#NotAChallenge” campaign to discourage ingestion and partnered with public health authorities to disseminate factual risk information [36].

5.3 Eating Disorder “Thinspiration” and Pro-ANA Communities

Long predating modern social media, “thinspiration” content—images and text glorizing extreme thinness—found new life on Instagram and Tumblr [6]. Influencers with large followings in the “fitness” or “wellness” niches often post content that simultaneously markets diet pills, detox teas, and extreme calorie restriction tips [7]. Although they did not always explicitly label themselves as pro-ana (pro-anorexia), these influencers reinforced harmful norms around body image.

5.3.1. Psychological Consequences

Comparisons with idealized influencer bodies heightened dissatisfaction among young women, correlating with escalations in disordered eating behaviors [37]. A longitudinal study [38] found that adolescents who engaged with influencer “fitspo” accounts had a 25% greater risk of developing restrictive eating patterns over 12 months than peers exposed only to non-thinspiration content.

5.3.2. Platform Mitigation Efforts

Instagram introduced warnings on “self-harm” and “eating disorder”-related searches and began removing hashtags associated with pro-ana communities [39]. Nevertheless, influencers adapted by using leetspeak (e.g., “th1nsp1rati0n”) to circumvent these filters [40]. The persistence of such content underscores influencers’ roles in sustaining abnormal trends despite platform policy violations.

6. Psychological Impact on Vulnerable Populations

6.1 Adolescents and Identity Formation

Adolescence is a critical period for identity formation, marked by heightened sensitivity to peer and social influences [41]. Social media influencers create parasocial relationships [42], wherein followers feel an intimate connection with influencers despite unidirectionality. Abnormal trend promotion exploits this bond: adolescents internalize influencer norms, perceiving them as attainable or desirable [15]. The need for belonging and validation may drive them toward abnormal behaviors, especially if influencers showcase these trends as pathways to social recognition.

6.2 Cognitive Vulnerabilities

Cognitive biases, such as the availability heuristic and optimism bias, play a role in abnormal trend adoption. When followers repeatedly see influencer content showing positive or neutral outcomes of risky behaviors (e.g., “I tried this challenge and nothing bad happened”), they overestimate the safety of these behaviors [43]. Optimism bias leads them to believe

that they are less susceptible to harm than others participating in the trend [44].

6.3 Emotional Contagion and Peer Pressure

Emotional content, whether laughter in prank videos or dramatic self-harm confessions, can induce emotional contagion—automatic mimicry and synchronization of expressions, vocalizations, and postures—leading to shared emotional states [45]. When influencers display excitement or camaraderie around abnormal trends, followers may experience vicarious arousal that lowers their inhibitions about participation. Additionally, perceived peer pressure, especially in group challenge settings, exacerbates susceptibility [46].

6.4 Mental Health Implications

Participation in abnormal trends is linked to increased rates of self-harm ideation, depressive symptoms, and anxiety. A cross-sectional survey [10] of 1,200 adolescents revealed that those engaging with self-harm or disordered-eating content reported higher scores on the Beck Depression Inventory and Beck Anxiety Inventory [47, 48]. Healthcare providers have increasingly noted that exposure to influencer-promoted abnormal trends is a risk factor for psychiatric hospitalization [49].

7. Ethical and Regulatory Considerations

7.1 Influencer Responsibility and Authenticity

Influencers occupy a position of authority, yet many lack formal training in the psychological or medical domains. Ethical norms require influencers who present health-related or risky content to exercise caution and provide disclaimers [50]. However, “influencer authenticity” often conflicts with caution: to maintain relatability, influencers avoid overt disclaimers, which may reduce skepticism among followers [51].

7.2 Platform Governance and Content Moderation

Social media platforms face the challenge of balancing free expression with user safety. Automated content moderation relies on keywords and image recognition but often fails to detect coded

language or new variants of abnormal trends [52]. Human moderation, although more nuanced, is resource-intensive and slow. Consequently, harmful content may remain accessible for extended periods of time. Platforms must invest in dynamic moderation practices, such as collaborating with mental health experts to identify emerging trends and employing machine learning models trained on evolving data [53].

7.3 Legal and Policy Frameworks

Several jurisdictions have enacted policies to curb online harm. In the United Kingdom, the Online Safety Bill (2021) mandates that platforms take reasonable steps to remove content that could harm children [54]. In India, the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules (2021) require platforms to remove harmful content within specified timeframes [55]. However, enforcement remains uneven, and legal ambiguity surrounding “abnormal trends” complicates implementation. Clear definitions, accountability mechanisms, and cross-border cooperation are essential for enhancing efficacy.

7.4 Ethical Guidelines for Researchers and Practitioners

Academic and clinical practitioners studying abnormal trends must abide by ethical guidelines concerning participant privacy, informed consent (especially when minors are involved), and nonmaleficence. [56]. Researchers collecting social media data should follow institutional review board (IRB) protocols to ensure anonymization and safeguard sensitive information. Clinicians treating adolescents influenced by abnormal trends should be trained to recognize online risk factors and employ evidence-based interventions [57].

8. Intervention Strategies and Recommendations

8.1 Digital Literacy and Media Education

Promoting digital literacy among adolescents and parents can foster a critical evaluation of influencer

content. Educational curricula should encompass the following:

- i. Understanding Algorithmic Bias: Teaching users how algorithms select and promote content and sensitizing them to potential manipulations [58].
- ii. Identifying Risky Content: Workshops on recognizing signs of self-harm, disordered eating, or hazardous stunts in social media posts [59].
- iii. Encouraging Skepticism and Fact-Checking: Training to verify claims, discern sponsored content, and challenge “normalization” narratives [60].

Preliminary studies [61] indicate that structured media literacy programs reduce adolescents’ likelihood of engaging in dangerous challenges by 30% over six months.

8.2 Influencer Accountability and Ethical Guidelines

Brands and platforms require influencers to adhere to ethical codes of conduct [62]. Such guidelines might include the following:

- i. Mandatory disclaimers for any content involving potential risks.
- ii. Collaboration with mental health professionals is essential when producing sensitive content.
- iii. Transparency regarding sponsorships to differentiate commercial promotions from personal endorsements.
- iv. Periodic training on the impact of abnormal trend promotions.

Influencer networks (e.g., multi-channel networks and talent agencies) can audit content for compliance; non-compliant influencers risk losing brand deals or network support [63].

8.3 Platform Interventions and Algorithmic Adjustments

Platforms should refine content moderation pipelines by:

- i. Adaptive machine learning models: Continuous retraining on new data to detect evolving abnormal trend indicators [64].
- ii. Human-in-the-Loop Systems: Human moderators are integrated for cases flagged with

lower confidence to ensure nuanced decisions [65].

- iii. Tiered Warning Labels: Displaying context-specific warnings (“This content features risky behavior”) and links to support resources (e.g., suicide helplines, counseling services) when self-harm or disordered eating content is detected [39].
- iv. Rate Limiting and Shadowbanning: Temporarily reducing the visibility of accounts repeatedly promoting harmful trends while notifying them of breaches [53].

8.4 Mental Health Support and Crisis Intervention

Clinicians and school counselors should incorporate social media usage assessments into adolescent mental health screenings [66]. The interventions may include:

- i. Cognitive-Behavioral Strategies: Addressing maladaptive cognitions arising from social comparisons and fear of missing out (FoMO) [67].
- ii. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT): Effective for self-harm behaviors often fueled by online challenges; teaches distress tolerance and emotion regulation [68].
- iii. Family based Interventions: Engaging parents in monitoring and discussing social media content and promoting open dialogue rather than punitive restrictions [69].

8.5 Research and Monitoring

Longitudinal multidisciplinary research is needed to track the lifecycle of abnormal trends, map influencer impact trajectories, and evaluate intervention efficacy [9]. Collaboration among psychologists, data scientists, and communication scholars can yield predictive models for emerging trends, enabling preemptive interventions [8].

9. Discussion

9.1 Balancing Expression and Safety

The tension between freedom of expression and user safety is at the core of regulating abnormal trends propagated by influencers. While platforms and

policymakers must mitigate harm, overzealous censorship risks infringing on artistic creativity and open discourses [52]. A nuanced approach emphasizes context, distinguishing between the depiction and endorsement of abnormal behaviors, and prioritizes educational measures over punitive ones.

9.2 Cultural and Societal Variations

The definitions and perceptions of abnormal trends vary across cultures. For instance, certain risk-taking behaviors might be considered rites of passage in one context but deviant in another context [70]. Researchers and policymakers should tailor interventions to local norms and values by engaging community stakeholders to co-construct guidelines.

9.3 Future Directions in Influencer Dynamics

Emerging technologies, such as augmented reality (AR), virtual influencers (computer-generated avatars), and live streaming, amplify these complexities. Virtual influencers might propagate abnormal trends algorithmically without human self-regulation, necessitating novel safeguards [71]. Additionally, micro-influencers on private or ephemeral platforms (e.g., closed Snapchat stories) evade standard moderation, underscoring the need for innovative detection methods.

9.4 Limitations of Current Research

Existing studies often rely on cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inferences about the impact of influencers [72]. Self-report measures introduce biases, and the dynamic nature of social media means that findings quickly become outdated. There is also a paucity of research focusing on non-English-language platforms and influencers, necessitating broader linguistic and cultural inclusion.

10. Conclusion

Influencers significantly shape social norms on digital platforms through their vast reach and perceived authenticity. While their influence can yield positive outcomes—raising awareness about mental health and promoting prosocial causes—there is a darker side wherein abnormal trends propagate rapidly,

posing risks to physical and mental well-being. Drawing from social learning and social comparison theories, this study elucidates how influencers serve as powerful models, how algorithmic and network dynamics amplify abnormal content, and the psychological ramifications for vulnerable populations, particularly adolescents.

Through case studies such as the Blue Whale Challenge, Tide Pod Challenge, and pro-ana content, it becomes evident that abnormal trend propagation is multifaceted, rooted in individual cognitive vulnerabilities, social identity processes, and platform affordances. Ethical considerations demand that influencers, platforms, and policymakers collaborate to balance freedom of expression and user safety. Intervention strategies, ranging from digital literacy education and algorithmic moderation to mental health support, offer promising pathways but require iterative refinement and cross-sectoral coordination. Future research should adopt longitudinal and interdisciplinary frameworks to track evolving influencer dynamics, extend analyses to non-Western contexts, and develop proactive detection systems. Ultimately, mitigating the propagation of abnormal trends calls for a collective response: informed users capable of critical media consumption, accountable influencers who prioritize audience well-being, and platforms that enforce transparent and adaptive policies. Only through such integrated efforts can the power of influence be harnessed for beneficial rather than harmful ends.

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