Influencing Public Health?: A Study of Social Media Affecting Public Perceptions of Unpasteurized Milk

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Abstract

Recently, the social media platform TikTok increased its user base by 12% every year, signifying the potential impact of the app and its potential to grow in the future (Gottfried). In early 2023, the health trend of consuming raw, unpasteurized milk spread quickly across the app, with over eleven thousand posts made. Influencers believe consuming raw milk contributes to an organic lifestyle, while healthcare professionals advise against it due to the pathogenic bacteria present. This ongoing discussion has proven that social media contributes immense amounts of information about public health issues compared to the information provided by government organizations. While public health organizations have all confirmed that raw milk is dangerous due to diseases and pathogenic bacteria, TikTok influencers who promote the consumption of raw milk only advocate its benefits and neglect to mention any associated health risks. This study examines popular TikTok creators' posts to investigate and identify common claims made about the benefits of raw milk consumption and compare them to scientific information in order better to understand the potential public health implications of this trend.

Introduction

In today’s digital age, social media trends have tremendous power and influence over shaping culture and audience behaviors. From the VSCO girl aesthetic to the whipped coffee craze, there can already be a pattern established linking the two; both were popular trends seen on the social media platform TikTok that defined 2019 to 2021. In addition to these various trends, a new trend emerged from the same platform around the same time that influenced a public health issue, the raw milk health trend. Much like other trends, the raw milk trend has grown rapidly nationwide, where there has been a recent surge with the number of individuals promoting raw milk consumption. In this study, we aim to uncover the power of TikTok and its influence on public health topics, which has caused the consumption of raw milk to become a popular trend on TikTok despite warnings from public health organizations.

Pasteurized Milk vs. Unpasteurized Milk

With the trend of unpasteurized milk rising rapidly in recent years, the distinction between raw and pasteurized milk must be made to uncover why this trend poses health risks. According to the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, “pasteurization is the process of heating milk to a high enough temperature for enough time to kill harmful germs in the milk” (CDC). This process is what creates the

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standard pasteurized milk. The distinction to be made is that unpasteurized milk, or raw milk, is the milk sourced directly from various livestock, including cows, buffalo, and goats, to name a few. Any bacteria that have been associated with disease upon consumption does not get killed because the milk has not been exposed to pasteurization. Also, in a study conducted by Cambridge University, they studied foodborne illnesses and unpasteurized milk and established a connection linking those illnesses to unpasteurized milk. Specifically, from the years 2013 to 2018, “75 outbreaks with 675 illnesses occurred that were linked to unpasteurized milk [...] of 74 single-state outbreaks, 58 (78%) occurred in states where the sale of unpasteurized milk was expressly allowed” (Koski et al.). This study was important to confirm that there was a link between selling raw milk to the public and illness, but the consequences were that a sizable portion of those who became sick became so due to the milk.

TikTok

Expanding upon raw and pasteurized milk in general, this research moves from the science of milk to the cultural phenomenon on the app, TikTok. TikTok has become one of the most well-known social media platforms used by about 150 million users in America alone (Woodward). As a result, America hosts the largest TikTok user base in the world as of January 2024, emphasizing the incredible reach the app has had on the country (Woodward). With this growing app, TikTok gained over one billion users since its development, marking significant growth over a brief period. Due to TikTok’s wide reach audiences, this app was the ideal social media platform for this experiment.

Also, as seen in Figure 1, the app's primary age ranges from ten to nineteen years old (Howarth). The average age of users is important because, as mentioned with the trends earlier, trends like VSCO girls were targeted towards younger audiences, meaning that videos regarding raw milk consumption would also be pushed to these young users. An assumption can be made that if the most well-known trends on TikTok were going viral on an app where most of the users fit a younger demographic, it can be assumed that trends like raw milk consumption would also reach younger people.

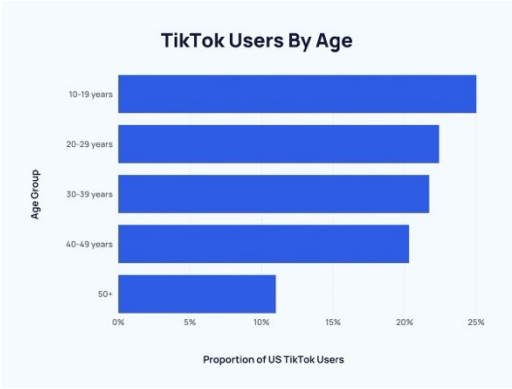

Figure 1: TikTok chart of the ages for users on the app based on age groups. Source Exploding Topics (Howarth, 2024)

The Rise of Raw Milk on TikTok

As a highly influential social media platform, TikTok has accumulated many influencers, some working full-time. Beginning by analyzing certain influencers who base their platforms on raw milk alone, Ella Henry, who has over 369.9K followers, made strong comments on the topic.

> *Raw dairy actually has active and bioavailable enzymes, probiotics, proteins, trace minerals, vitamins, and calcium, and it's also filled with healthy fats. When dairy is pasteurized, those nutrients become inactive, destroyed, altered, and inhibited. Those nutrients benefit digestion, can help restore the gut microbiome, and they can even have anti-microbial and anti-inflammatory effects [...] so raw is the way to go (Henry).*

Her main claims include that drinking raw milk increases the body's intake of certain nutrients since it is "all-natural" and "fresh" in its unpasteurized state. While Ella's claims have sparked controversy over the topic of raw milk, videos like this have led users on the app to engage in discussions regarding the validity of this information.

With each post, more users become drawn into the conversation, leading to the trend's increasing visibility and popularity despite going against established public health organizations. The rise of raw milk's prominence on TikTok has prompted both support and opposition, as users share firsthand experiences with raw milk and concerns about health risks. Despite public health organizations cautioning against raw milk consumption due to potential health risks from diseases and pathogenic bacteria, TikTok influencers work to promote raw milk and its perceived benefits, while often overlooking the association between raw milk and its health hazards.

Methodology

A comprehensive content analysis of TikTok videos related to the raw milk trend was conducted to analyze the public health implications of the raw milk trend on TikTok. In this content analysis, key indicators of video engagement, including view counts, hashtags, comments, and likes, were studied to assess the influence of TikTok videos on the promotion of raw milk consumption. Videos with high view counts were first examined, and the number of views correlated with the video's overall engagement through likes, shares, and comments. Popular hashtags like #RawMilk and #RawMilkRevolution were also analyzed to identify videos related to the raw milk trend. Engagement data for videos under these hashtags was gathered through the comments and the number of likes received. When examining comments under videos, they were categorized based on their support or opposition to raw milk consumption. By observing the audience's perspectives through the posted comments, the public opinion surrounding this health trend could also be assessed. In addition to the content analysis performed on TikTok videos, external sources, including scholarly journals and peer-reviewed articles, were used to correct misconceptions and popular claims presented by influencers.

Content Analysis Results and Clearing Misconceptions

After observing many videos off TikTok's platform made by large creators, we found that they garnered exceptionally high view counts and engagement when discussing the topic of raw milk. Creators such as @thelittleredfarm.com, @gubbahomestead, and @faithsullyshannan even went as far as reaching over 100K views on their videos discussing raw milk. Based on these videos featuring various influencers, it was shown that even though raw milk is a niche topic, not often expected to attract attention, there still has been conversation around raw milk engaging a broad audience. It is important to recognize that the number of views counted on these videos did not indicate the viewer's stance. The popularity that these videos gained could have been from controversy or support, which made it unclear if the primary audience is in support of or opposition towards raw milk consumption. To help further answer this question, we looked at comments and other direct forms of audience

participation, such as like counts and comments, to see what the overall trend was regarding viewers' opinions.

Hashtags

One key factor in the rise of raw milk's popularity on TikTok is the strategic use of hashtags. The use of hashtags by many influencers enables their content to be found by the right audience, helping enhance their views, reposts, and followers. Some hashtags that have been linked to the raw milk health trend include #RawMilk with over 12 thousand posts, #RawMilkRevolution with over 1500 posts, #RawMilkHeals with over 200 posts, etc. With the use of high-traffic hashtags like these, users can easily discover more videos on raw milk topics and become more interested in this raw milk health trend. Influencers want to boost their content by using hashtags that have already been established, which promote high view counts and show signs of high engagement, riding out the trend's popularity. The more videos that are posted with these hashtags, the more likely it is for the videos to reach people, making hashtags an instrumental factor in driving engagement on TikTok, in this case, specifically to increase the engagement of videos about raw milk.

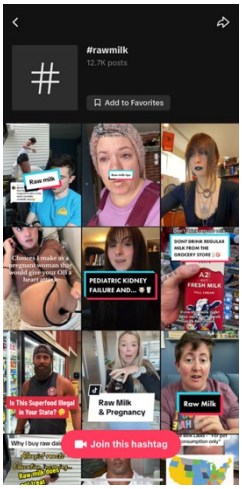

Figure 2: Trending videos page for the hashtags #rawmilk

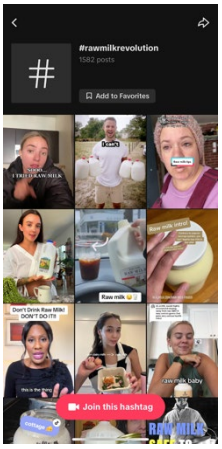

Figure 3: Trending videos page for the hashtag #rawmilkrevolution

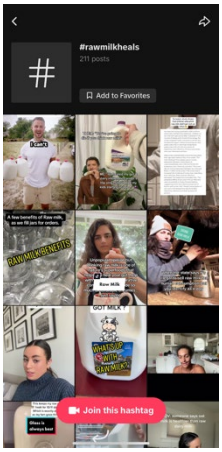

Figure 4: Trending videos page for the hashtag #rawmilkheals

To better understand the rise of raw milk on TikTok, we conducted an analysis of over 200 videos tagged with #RawMilkBenefits and tracked the videos from the months and years in which they were posted. Our findings of this analysis reveal that over the past four years (2021-2024), there has been an upward trend in the number of posts under this hashtag. In 2021, there are no videos posted with #RawMilkBenefits, which indicates that there was little to no traction on TikTok regarding the raw milk trend. However, by 2022, the number of posts began to increase, suggesting a growing interest in raw milk. In the following year, 2023, we can see that there is a significant increase in the videos posted in 2022 as the trend begins to gain momentum and popularity. There is another increase in videos posted in 2024 compared to 2023, continuing an upward trend of raw milk popularity. From this graph shown in Figure 5, we can see a sequential increase in the number of videos posted over the years, showing that raw milk is a rising trend. The upward trend can be indicative of increased awareness and shifts in consumer preferences due to claims by influencers, thus driving the popularity of raw milk.

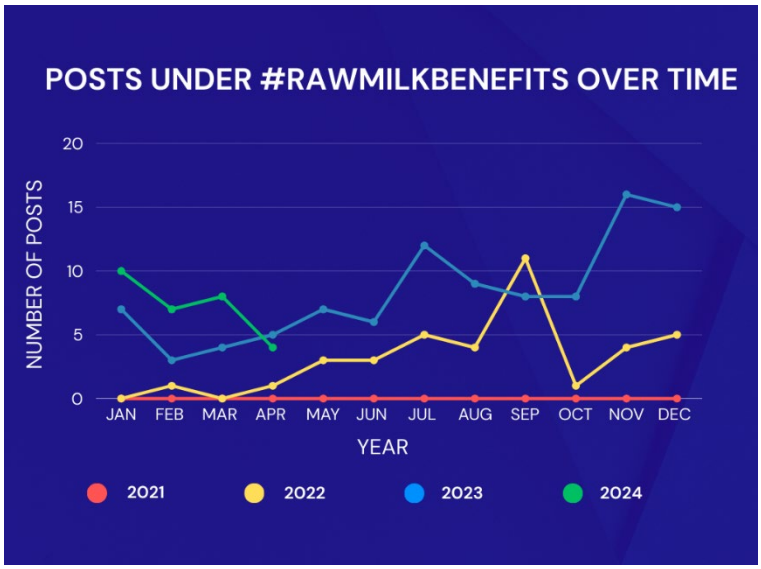

Figure 5: Graph of the number of posts with #rawmilkbenefits from 2021-2024

A similar pattern emerged when we analyzed posts under the hashtag #RawMilkHeals shown in Figure 6 as it also demonstrated an upward trend in the number of posts over the past four years. Like the previous graph that tracked #RawMilkBenefits, no videos were posted with this hashtag in

2021, but by 2022, there was a slight increase in the videos posted. It was also observed in 2023 that the number of posts with #RawMilkHeals skyrocketed from previous years, reflecting the popularity of the growing raw milk trend. By April 2024, we see a slight decline in the number of videos posted; however, we could attribute this to a rise in videos using a more popular hashtag concerning raw milk.

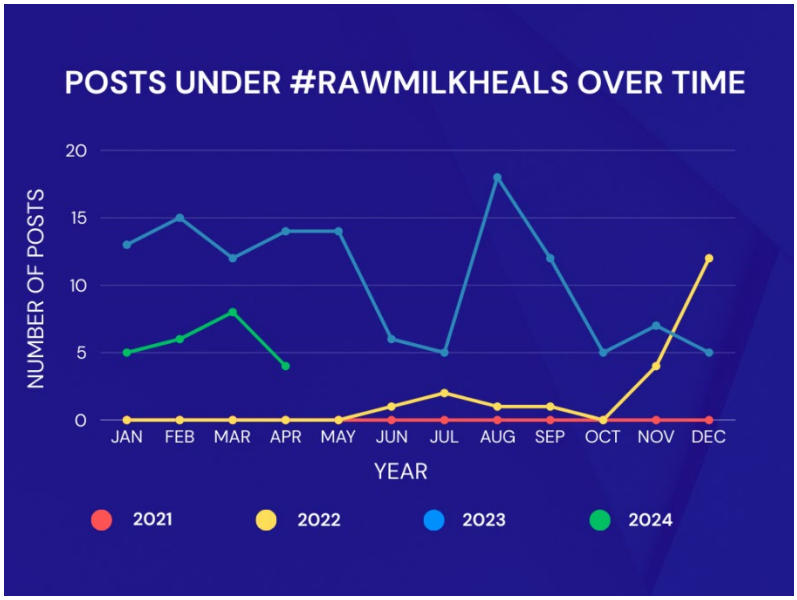

Figure 6: Graph of the number of posts with #rawmilkheals from 2021-2024

Comments

The raw milk trend on TikTok has sparked various discussions and mixed reactions from users, with some expressing dedicated support for its consumption and others opposing it. Under TikTok videos, users left their opinions in the form of comments, which revealed a wide range of perspectives in our analysis. For instance, one user with the name “Sammie.b” commented on May 5th, 2023, shown in Figure 7, “The farmer I buy mine from says he has customers who swear it’s cured early stages of cancer!” showing their support for raw milk consumption based on their personal and others’ experiences. On the surface, the user is in support of raw milk consumption as they provide a personal anecdote in which the farmer, they purchase raw milk from personally knows consumers who have had major health benefits from consuming unpasteurized milk. Based on this user’s experience we see that they may be a strong advocate for raw milk as they have heard it contributed to many consumers' cancer recovery. Even though there may have been positive changes towards raw milk consumption for some individuals in strengthening their health, their experiences lack scientific evidence that provide the necessary research in understanding the broader impact that raw milk may have. The benefits that raw milk had on those certain individuals who cured their early stages of cancer may have been due to other factors such as diet, lifestyle changes, or medical treatments that coincided with their consumption.

Figure 7: Comment made from “@sammmie.b” on 5-15-2023

Another user, "Emma,” commented on February 28, 2024, shown in Figure 8, that there are “No benefits from drinking raw milk that you would not get from pasteurized milk. No reason to drink raw

milk," demonstrating the opposing side that is against the consumption of raw milk. While this user is on the opposing side of the conversation, their statement focuses more on the lack of benefits from raw milk consumption. Despite their opposing stance on raw milk consumption, their comment fails to bring attention to the potential health risks of raw milk consumption, which still overlooks many warnings from public health organizations.

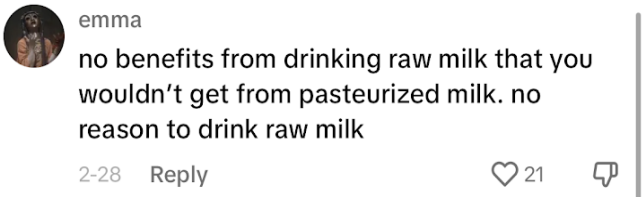

Figure 8: Comment made from "emma" on 2-28-2024

Sarcastic remarks such as "love kills listeria?" from Rubric Marauder shown in Figure 9 and "Hello listeria," from @beccyop shown in Figure 10 were also observed and reflect the age distribution of users on TikTok. As mentioned previously, the largest age demographic on TikTok is 10–19-year-olds who can strongly express their opinions. Many of these younger users enjoy expressing their views and opinions satirically or humorously, which can be seen in the comments presented. Viewing these comments allowed us to infer and determine the type of distribution being presented. The mixed reactions highlight the two sides of the conversation regarding raw milk consumption, as one side of users fully supports and endorses it while the opposing side expresses concerns about health risks related to raw milk.

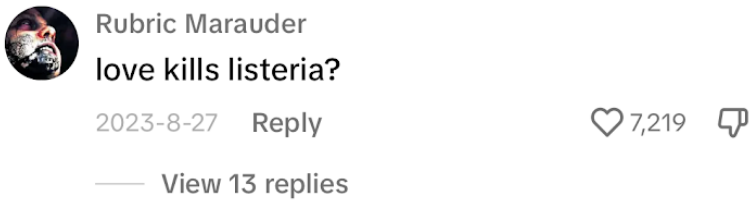

Figure 9: Comment made from "Rubric Marauder" on 8-27-2023

Figure 10: Comment made from "@beccyop" on 6-20-2023

Misconception #1: Raw Milk Can Cure Health Conditions

Popular influencer Paul Saladino has gathered the attention of audiences through his promotion of raw milk as a remedy for a wide range of health conditions. These conditions include skin issues, joint pain, and asthma, which may lead many followers to believe that consumption of raw milk relieves them of these health concerns (Saladino). After careful research, it has been found that these claims made about raw milk have been proven to be false as scientific evidence worked to disprove these claims. A study that worked to investigate microorganisms present in numerous foods and beverages found L. monocytogenes (listeria) to be common in raw milk and a dangerous pathogen. In this study, it found that "L. monocytogenes is recognized as an animal pathogen capable of causing severe

infections," (Settanni and Miceli). In contrast to the claims made by Saladino of curing asthma, the bacteria found in raw milk causes serious infections, contradicting the claim that was originally made. Consuming unpasteurized milk has the bacterium Listeria that may compromise the immune system. While Saladino's experiences may have improved his aliments, it is important to recognize medical experts' emphasis on the risks of bacterial contamination within raw milk that poses a health risk to vulnerable individuals.

Furthermore, a case study that was conducted on septic arthritis found a link between the condition of unpasteurized milk to patients who showed increased joint damage due to pathogenic bacteria that were presented like Listeria. This case study demonstrated that "[T]here will continue to be numerous cases of serious, or even fatal, diseases caused by milk-borne organisms," (Campbell, P., et al., 1057). Instead of alleviating joint pain or reducing asthma as claimed by Saladino, raw milk has been found to pose a significant health risk to the public, and ideas of it providing health benefits ignore the real dangers that are presented when consuming unpasteurized milk. Having misinformation spread by influencers creates a concerning rising trend that does not implement all the scientific research necessary, which may lead to serious health consequences. Having the proper education and research around this topic is essential to help prevent the spread of misinformation, along with protecting people's health from dangerous practices.

Misconception #2: Raw Milk Cures Lactose Intolerance

Another prominent influencer in the raw milk health trend, Olivia Robertson Moe [@revolveprimalhealth], has gained popularity on the platform with her claims that raw milk is better suited for lactose-intolerant individuals. According to Robertson Moe, she claims that "[N]aturally occurring enzymes and probiotics remain intact. So, some people who are lactose intolerant or cannot tolerate pasteurized dairy do fine with raw dairy. And raw dairy is a major source of quality, easy-to-digest nutrients like complete protein, choline, calcium, and vitamin K2" (Robertson Moe), under the belief that raw milk contains lactase. Despite her strong beliefs and claims, Moe is not scientifically accurate, as lactase is not entirely responsible for lactose intolerance. Moe's claims have been disproven by the FDA's report that "Lactose is a unique disaccharide found in milk. People with lactose intolerance lack the enzyme, beta-galactosidase, or lactase, to break down lactose into glucose and galactose during digestion. All milk, raw or pasteurized, contains lactose and can cause lactose intolerance in sensitive individuals," (FDA) which means that raw milk does not cure lactose intolerance. Both raw and pasteurized milk contain lactose and can affect individuals with lactose intolerance in the same ways. Furthermore, Moe claims that raw milk contains beneficial probiotics, enzymes, and nutrients. This can again be disproven by the FDA's assertion that "raw milk does not contain probiotic organisms" (FDA).

Additionally, in a randomized controlled pilot study focused on the effect of raw milk on lactose intolerance, its objective was to determine whether drinking raw milk would reduce lactose malabsorption and other lactose intolerance symptoms. The results of this study concluded that "Raw milk failed to reduce lactose malabsorption or lactose intolerance symptoms," (Mummah, S., et al., 6). As this study asserts that "these results do not support anecdotal claims that raw milk reduces the symptoms of lactose intolerance" (Mummah, S., et al., 6), Moe's claims are again proven to be scientifically inaccurate and are debunked.

In a second study that addressed the public debate on benefits regarding the growing popularity of raw milk, it also found that there were no additional nutritional benefits to be found in raw milk, as pasteurized milk also provides ample nutrition. The study emphasized that there is “No evidence that raw milk has any inherent health or nutritional benefits [...]. Pasteurized milk remains an important dietary source for many important nutrients,” (Lucey J., 4). This goes against Moe’s previous claims that raw milk has more beneficial nutrients since they are still readily available in the milk and are not destroyed by pasteurization. This study refutes the claims that raw milk has more nutritional benefits than pasteurized milk. This is important to point out as Moe has a reach on TikTok with over 37 thousand views. These false claims and incorrect assumptions about raw milk can wrongly influence individuals who might be looking for solutions to dealing with lactose intolerance and are vulnerable to misinformation.

Misconception #3: Raw Milk Is Safe When Sourced from Local Farms

Influencer Healthanie [@healthanie] stresses that there can be many benefits of raw milk, as it can be nutritious and safe for consumption when sourced correctly from local farms. She informs her audience that purchasing raw milk directly from the source will ensure that it has been through proper sanitation, making it beneficial and ready for consumption. However, health experts, such as the ones from the CDC, found that there is many potential health risks posed when getting milk sourced directly from farms. The CDC goes on to conclude that “Insects, rodents, and other small animals can get in the milk,” proving that many health concerns still exist in milk production, even if they are coming from local farms. As germs from animal feces and skin contaminate the milk, many hazards put consumers at risk.

As the trend of raw milk consumption continues to grow, there have been more states adamant on establishing regulations around the production and sales of milk. For example, the SF 315 Bill passed in Iowa as of July 2023 required the producers to report their manufacturing, processing, and distribution activities to the Department of Human and Health Services. Unfortunately, even with these rules implemented, the information given to the Department of Health and Human Services is self-reported, which creates a potential loophole in the system. The result of this is that the production, manufacturing, and processing of raw milk may not be up to the standards of health and safety, as producers want to reduce costs by not implementing regulations.

Unexpected Results

In our research, we discovered an unexpected pattern in the ethnic demographic of influencers promoting and supporting the consumption of raw milk on TikTok. Under many popular and specific hashtags, we reviewed, like #RawMilk and #RawMilkRevolution, we noticed that most influencers advocating for raw milk consumption appeared to be from predominantly white backgrounds. In contrast, we observed that most of the influencers making videos in opposition to raw milk consumption happened to be predominantly people of color. It is important to note that while we did not initially plan to look for this disparity in our research, it is not clear whether there is a strong correlation between background and an individual's support for raw milk consumption. Despite this, there was a clear divide in demographics and their perceptions towards the consumption of raw milk since those who supported raw milk on TikTok specifically were from less marginalized communities, whereas those who opposed raw milk consumption were people of color. These unexpected results

indicate that public health trends and access to health information on social media, particularly on TikTok, may not be shared or distributed evenly across populations and communities.

Conclusion

The rising popularity of the raw milk health trend reflects the power that social media holds over spreading information and shaping public behaviors, regardless of the accuracy of the information. While prominent public health organizations have agreed that raw milk consumption comes with many health risks, TikTok influencers continue to oppose this information and promote its benefits. The topic of raw milk becomes more relevant as the trend continues to gain momentum as acceptance for raw milk consumption on the platform continues to grow despite the significant health concerns that have been presented. Consumption of raw milk has been proven to cause infections and other adverse reactions, but as its popularity rises, there are often popular creators who continue to spread misinformation regarding raw milk. Advocations for raw milk often led to the sharing of personal testimony, and although it is important to acknowledge and respect an individual's own experiences, these stories lack the rigorous scientific evidence needed to back up their claims. The issues become more prevalent as many followers may become influenced by trends, they are seeing online without the proper research conducted to understand potential dangers that arise from raw milk. It is essential to educate the public about the risks that arise from both misinformation and the consumption of unpasteurized milk.

Considering the public health concerns raised by the raw milk trend on TikTok, future avenues of research could focus on the potential role of TikTok in countering misinformation. Regarding public health misinformation specifically, TikTok could collaborate with various health organizations, such as the CDC and FDA. While various initiatives to combat misinformation exist on TikTok already, new collaborations with prominent health organizations will mitigate the spread of misinformation related to health risks and illnesses. It is also important to examine the effectiveness of these potential collaborations on user engagement and behavior. This could be done by exploring whether health organizations that have collaborated with TikTok creators can influence public health perceptions on controversial topics like raw milk consumption. Studying how audiences perceive and respond to information that is released on social media would give more insights on how to combat this digital age of misinformation.

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