

Attitudes and Responses of Female Postgraduate Students of Taraba State University Toward Weight-Loss Drug Advertisements on Social Media: A Sense-Making Theory Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the attitudes and responses of female postgraduate students of Taraba State University toward weight-loss drug advertisements on social media, using Sense-Making Theory (Dervin, 1998) (as the theoretical framework. The study recognizes that individuals are not passive recipients of media messages but active interpreters who construct meaning based on personal experience, peer influence, and social context. A descriptive survey design was adopted, with a sample of 169 female postgraduate students selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and interviews and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings revealed that exposure to weight-loss drug advertisements on social media is very high, especially on Facebook and WhatsApp. However, most respondents (87.6%) perceived such advertisements as not credible, and only 18.2% found them persuasive. Despite this skepticism, 43.8% of the participants admitted to purchasing or using weight-loss products, largely influenced by peer discussions and curiosity rather than trust in the advertisements. The study concludes that while female postgraduate students demonstrate strong media literacy and critical awareness, peer influence and social. The study therefore recommended stricter government regulation of online health advertising and integration of media and health literacy into university validation, which still play significant roles in shaping their behavioral responses. programs, and peer-led awareness campaigns to counter misinformation. These measures would help ensure that social media users make informed, safe, and health-conscious decisions.

Keywords: *Sense-Making Theory, social media advertising, weight-loss drugs, female postgraduate students, peer influence, attitude, and behavior.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, scholarly attention has been drawn to examining the current social media usership that is almost entrenched in the traditional media practices. Social media adoption in the realm of communication is gradually changing practically every practice that was there before its emergence. Before now, there were channels of communication through which information could be delivered to people on all issues of life that had to befall society. It could be on health, agriculture, religion, transportation, and fashion, as well as beauty. In times past, information on health products could be advertised for a direct public consumption only when such a channel advertising such direct consumer product would be satisfied that the product contained information such as medical approval and a government-endorsed number, for the fact that it would not want to do something that would destroy its credibility in the eyes of its unsuspecting public and also shy away from government sanctions against fake information.

A long time ago, people had no concern, whatever the size or shape of the body that nature had afforded them, and hence there was limited attention drawn to the production of pills or supplements to enhance body shapes and sizes. However, advances in technology and the level of education as well as the nature of our society, have drastically changed the narrative. The desire for beauty, fitness, and health has increasingly shaped how individuals perceive themselves and how they interact with consumer products, especially those that are curious about body and weight management. Among cultures, religion, or traditions, physical appearance is often associated with stigma, social disapproval, and professional opportunity neglect, thereby making weight control a matter of not only health but also identity and social positioning. This attitude has greatly

become persistent as a result of the ever-changing and quick expansion of social media, that is predominantly embraced as the most accessible platform for the promotion of many products

which may be consumed directly or indirectly, as may be in the case of weight loss pills or supplements. In Nigeria, as in other parts of the globe, the desire for a slimmer body structure is increasingly common, especially among young ladies. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter are filled up with advertising content, promoting various weight loss drugs and supplements that promise quick results with minimal effort. These advertising campaigns sometimes feature celebrity endorsements, drama, and images/symbols, and persuasive appeals, designed to appeal to the status quo of some consumers. Female postgraduate students, who are expected to be both highly educated and socially exposed, are not just prone to these influences on the face value. It may occur that some may approach such advertisements with doubts and critical approaches, while others may quickly be hoodwinked into patronizing these products to conform with societal beauty standard, pressure from groups, or the desire for quick solutions to weight management challenges. Advertising campaigns on the promotion of weight loss drugs have raised concerns about the ethics of advertising, the accuracy of health claims, and the potential risks of consuming such products without professional guarantee or guidance. Some advertisements are metaphorical and deceptive, meaning that they over hype claims and conceal harmful side effects, and also manipulate consumer emotions. This can endanger the health of users while fostering distorted perceptions of beauty. Consequently, understanding how female postgraduate students of Taraba State University perceive and respond to weight loss drug

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advertisements on social media is essential. It provides insights into advertising's influence on health behavior, throws light on how education moderates consumer responses, and contributes to the wider discourse on health communication and consumer protection in Nigeria.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

Majorly, this study is undertaken to examine the attitudes and responses of female postgraduate students of Taraba State University towards weight loss drug advertisements on social media. The set objectives are as follows:

- i. To examine the extent to which female postgraduate students of Taraba State University are exposed to weight loss drug advertisements on social media.
- ii. To determine their attitudes towards the credibility and persuasiveness of such advertisements.
- iii. To examine their responses in terms of intention to use, actual use, or rejection of weight loss

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Sense-Making Theory, developed by Brenda Dervin (1998), which explains how individuals actively interpret and use information based on their experiences and social contexts. The theory posits that people are not passive receivers of media messages; rather, they construct personal meaning by relating new information to what they already know and believe.

Dervin identifies three key elements in this process:

- a. Situation – the context in which one encounters information;

- b. Gap – the difference between what is known and what is uncertain; and
- c. Bridge – the strategies used to close that gap through evaluation or information seeking.

Under this study, female postgraduate students of Taraba State University encounter numerous weight-loss drug advertisements on social media. Their responses depend on how they interpret these messages, assessing credibility, consulting peers, and connecting them to personal beliefs about health and beauty. This process represents sense-making, where individuals actively construct meaning rather than accept media messages at face value.

The theory is relevant because it explains why exposure to the same advertisement can yield different attitudes and behaviors. It highlights the roles of peer influence, education, and personal experience in shaping how these students understand and respond to slimming-drug promotions. Therefore, Sense-Making Theory provides the framework for analyzing how female postgraduate students interpret, evaluate, and act upon weight-loss drug advertisements on social media.

2. REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Zolkepli, Omar, Ab Rahim, Mohd Tahir, and Tiwari (2022) undertook a study on social media advertising appeal, celebrity endorsement, and electronic word-of-mouth, they adopted quantitative survey of 322 Malaysian social media users to examine the impact of health supplement purchasing. Their findings revealed that advertising appeal and eWOM significantly shaped purchase behavior, while celebrity endorsements were not statistically significant. This suggests that consumers tend to trust peer

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reviews and testimonials more than celebrity endorsements when making health-related product decisions. The authors recommended that marketers focus on building credible peer-driven online conversations rather than relying heavily on celebrity figures. The point here as clearly visible in the findings underscores the influence of peer groups in shaping the perception of and purchasing behavior of targeted consumers of a given product. This then agrees with the assumptions of the sense-making theory that people do not respond to media messages directly as they received them but they react based their interpretations of their experiences. The findings also validate the adoption of sense-making theory in the study on weight loss drug advertisements, where postgraduate students may seek validation from peers and online communities before making purchase decisions.

Chung et al. (2021) investigated in the United Kingdom adopting a scoping review of adolescent peer influence on eating behaviors via social media. They drew evidences from six studies across countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Brazil, and Australia, their reviews highlighted that social media influences both healthy behaviors (e.g., fruit and vegetable intake) and unhealthy ones (e.g., fast-food consumption, “thinspiration” blogs). The study identified four central themes of influence: visual appeal, content dissemination, socialized digital connections, and peer influencers. They found in their study therefore that, Visual imagery and peer reinforcement were powerful tools in shaping behavior, particularly when users perceived posts as aspirational or socially endorsed. The authors recommended that health interventions should leverage peer networks to promote positive dietary behaviors while mitigating harmful influences. For the present study, this underscores

how postgraduate students’ responses to slimming ads may no stem solely from the advertisements themselves, but from intermediate agents such as peer advice.

Other studies also affirm the role of peer influence and credibility cues in online health product advertising. For instance, de Jans, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2018) examined how adolescents in Belgium respond to social media marketing of unhealthy food products. Their experimental study found that peer endorsement cues likes, shares, and comments significantly increased persuasive effects, even when participants were aware of the promotional intent. Likewise, Coates, Hardman, Halford, Christiansen, and Boyland (2019) showed that repeated exposure to food marketing on social media increased snacking intentions among UK adolescents, further emphasizing the persuasive power of social content.

Taken together, these studies highlight consistent patterns:

Social media advertisements alone are rarely persuasive without peer validation. Visual appeal and emotional triggers before-and-after photos, testimonials strengthen influence. Peer influence, more than celebrity endorsement, shapes how users interpret and respond to slimming or supplement advertisements.

This evidence aligns strongly with Sense-Making Theory, which posits that individuals interpret media messages within their social and cultural contexts rather than absorbing them passively. Female postgraduate students at Taraba State University are therefore likely to rely on peer discussions, online reviews, and personal health knowledge to make sense of weight loss drug

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advertisements, leading to varied responses ranging from acceptance to rejection.

Research evidence consistently demonstrates that social media advertising exerts strong influence on consumer decisions regarding health-related products, especially when peer cues and credibility signals are involved.

In terms of vulnerable groups, Kendal et al. (2017) and Castro and Osório (2012) found that online forums and blogs could both support recovery from eating disorders and, conversely, encourage harmful practices such as anorexic thinpiration. These findings emphasize the dual nature of peer influence, showing that the same mechanisms that promote positive health behaviors can also reinforce harmful ideals.

Beyond adolescents, broader research confirms the role of credibility cues in health-related advertising. Dens and De Pelsmacker (2010) showed that emotional and rational advertising appeals significantly shape consumer attitudes toward health products, while Chu and Kim (2011) and Chan and Ngai (2011) demonstrated that eWOM on social platforms strongly predicts consumer purchase intentions due to its perceived authenticity. In contrast, classic studies on celebrity endorsement (e.g., Ohanian, 1991) highlight that credibility depends on expertise and trustworthiness, yet more recent evidence (Singh & Banerjee, 2018) suggests that online consumers are increasingly skeptical of celebrity-driven promotions.

Taken together, these studies affirm that peer influence and eWOM are more powerful drivers than celebrity endorsement in shaping consumer behavior online. For female postgraduate students at Taraba State University, this implies that exposure to weight loss drug advertisements on

social media will likely be mediated by peer reviews, group conversations, and the credibility of shared testimonials rather than the glamour of celebrity figures. This supports the Sense-Making Theory, which posits that individuals interpret media messages within their personal and social contexts, actively filtering them through existing values, peer norms, and lived experiences

Methodology: Survey research using primary data collected via an online questionnaire from residents of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The final usable sample reported was 137 respondents. Data were analyzed using SPSS, with Pearson's correlation and descriptive statistics; the authors reported an explanatory power (r^2) of approximately 0.309 (30.9%) for social media marketing predicting purchase decisions.

Social media marketing had a statistically significant positive relationship with consumer buying behaviour. Those captured in the study showed higher levels of engagement with social advertisements and were more likely to make unplanned purchases after exposure. They reveal further that respondents commonly used social media both as an and as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Again, it was revealed in their research that a substantial proportion followed brands on social platforms to capture information source deals and new product information; many reported that social proof such as likes/comments influenced trust. Hence, female postgraduate students are part of the digitally active youth segment highlighted in Hussain et al.; the study's demonstration that social proof and engagement drive buying is directly applicable to how postgraduate women might interpret slimming drug ads.

The finding that social media explains a sizeable chunk of variance in purchase decisions

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underscores the potential magnitude of advertising influence on health-related purchases among students. However, what Hussain et al. did not address is that the study focused on general consumer goods and broad demographic groups in Pakistan; they did not limit their study to the female postgraduate group or on the psychological/health consequences of purchasing weight-loss drugs. Hence, my study will fill this by focusing on educated female students in Nigeria and the health-risk framing of slimming ads

Zhao & Zhang (2017) conducted a study on Consumer health information seeking in social media. A systematic literature search of the Web of Science Core Collection (2011–2016). Of 214 initially returned records, 21 full-text studies met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed qualitatively to synthesize patterns of health information seeking on social platforms. They revealed in their study that Consumers seek health information for different reasons (disease management, prevention, public health concerns), and needs vary by topic. Again, the study reveals that though social media provides valuable peer support, symptom sharing, and emotional reassurance, which are strong motives for engagement, consumers often worry about quality and authority; thereby reducing engagement with some sources or leading them to preferentially trust peer testimony over anonymous/official sources.

In a way, their study has aligned with my theory's assumptions that individuals make decisions based on the interpretation they have made and the experiences they have had about a given situation. As indicated in their study, respondents did not directly consume advert messages from their preferred social media platforms but preferred to seek more information about the products they

took from their peers who might have used them. Zhao & Zhang's findings significantly demonstrate that peer support and concern about credibility directly underscore the dilemma female postgraduate students face when they come in contact with slimming advertisements on social media. Though the review synthesises global studies, it does not disaggregate findings for Nigerian contexts or postgraduate populations, nor does it focus on commercial slimming drug advertising specifically, and this is the gap that the study is looking to fill.

Kuncoro & Kusumawati (2021) did a quantitative study among Generation Z respondents (aged 17–26) in Jabodetabek and Bandung, Indonesia. The authors collected 220 responses via questionnaire and used multiple linear regression to test the effects of product-related, social-related, **and** personal-related value, sales promotions, and social media marketing on purchase decisions. Reliability and validity tests were performed (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.6$, Pearson r-table thresholds). They found that five factors, including product, social, personal value, promotions, and social media marketing, had significant positive impacts on purchase decisions. The study also found that social-related value, such as acceptance, compliments, and social standing, emerged as the strongest predictor among the value dimensions. It adds further that Sales promotions, including discounts, BOGOs, and free samples, were effective in triggering unplanned purchases, particularly among students. Furthermore, the study revealed that social media functioned not only as an information channel but also amplified social proof (reviews, comments), enhancing perceived trust. The relevance of their study to my study is the gap created; hence, it has failed to address the question of the extent to which postgraduate students perceive social media adverts on slimming drugs whenever they are

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exposed to them, and whether they interpret the messages before consuming them or not. With this limitation, the sense-making theory does not have a space for justification. Contrastingly, Varghese & Agrawal (2021) adopted a quantitative survey of 200 respondents (urban Indian sample) examining how social media affects the consumer decision process, using the Engel-Blackwell-Miniard (EBM) decision model to map stages from need recognition to post-purchase behaviour. Convenience sampling and structured questionnaires were used; analysis included descriptive and inferential statistics. Their findings revealed that, though social media significantly informs consumers at every stage of the decision process: awareness, information search, evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase sharing. User-generated content (UGC) and peer feedback exert a strong influence on attitudes and can spill into offline word-of-mouth. This has underscored the relevance of the sense-making theory as the study revealed that consumers were not directly affected by the social media ad messages but were rather influenced by their peer groups in their decision-making on products. The study focused on general consumer products and urban Indian users. It did not investigate medical claims, alleged efficacy, or regulatory status of drugs, nor did it probe how highly educated women evaluate clinical claims vs. peer endorsements. Hence, my study is set to explore this gap. tensions.

Dominic et al (2019) conducted a study on The Effects of Social Media Advertising on Consumer Behaviour: A Study on The Patronage of Cosmetic Products Among University Students. The study developed three objectives, which were To identify various social media advertising platforms.s To ascertain the perception of consumers about the use of social media as advertising

platforms. To ascertain the link between the perception of customers about social media advertising and their purchase intentions. The study was anchored on the theories of uses and gratification and the black box model. Furthermore, the study adopted a mixed-method approach of research to arrive at the findings and conclusions. It was indicated in their findings that, although many of the participants used social media platforms, the reason for use of these social media platforms was not to see adverts, but rather for other reasons, like generating and maintaining friendships. For this reason, most of the participants had the perception that social media adverts were not helpful, which informed their low patronage

thereof. This finding not only supports sensemaking theory but also underscores the limited effect media messages have on the decisions made by media consumers. This poses some similarities to my study, which explores the effects of social media advertising on consumer behaviour and patronage among university students; however, it has discussed university students at the wider level, whereas the present study is limited to a more advanced level of knowledge, giving focus on post-graduate students and limiting it further to Taraba State University.

showing that adverts alone have a limited impact without peer reinforcement. This aligns with the assumption in the present study that postgraduate women may rely more on peers and personal interpretation when responding to slimming drug adverts. The study was limited to cosmetic products and general university students. It did not examine postgraduate students or the health implications of weight loss drug promotions. The present study, therefore, narrows the focus on educated ladies at the postgraduate level and explores health-related risks tied to slimming drug advertising.

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While previous studies have emphasized the influence of social media advertising, peer endorsement, and user-generated content on consumer behavior, gaps therefore occur in the Nigerian context, particularly among female postgraduate students:

Little attention has been drawn to health-related products. Most empirical studies have examined general consumer goods such as cosmetics, food, and electronics, rather than the specific case of weight loss drugs, which carry potential health risks. Prior studies often focus on adolescents, undergraduate students, or general youth populations, neglecting postgraduate students, who are more educated and socially exposed, and may interpret social media adverts differently, using critical appraisal rather than passive consumption. Furthermore, the previous studies have underexplored the Nigerian contexts, and focus on global studies consistently show that peer validation and social proof strongly mediate responses to social media adverts. However, there is minimal evidence on how Nigerian female postgraduate students rely on peer networks to interpret health product promotions online.

Few studies investigate how consumers balance the persuasive elements of social media adverts against concerns about credibility, safety, and efficacy of products, leaving a gap in understanding the attitudes and responses to potentially risky weight loss drugs. Cultural, social, and regulatory differences between Nigeria and the international studies mean that findings cannot be directly generalized. The unique Nigerian socio-cultural and digital media environment requires context-specific investigation. This gap will be filled by exploring how Nigerian female postgraduate students at Taraba State University perceive, interpret, and respond to weight loss drug advertisements on

social media, accounting for peer influence, social proof, and health-risk considerations there. These areas are largely neglected by prior research.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts the descriptive survey research design. This design is suitable because it enables the researcher to collect, describe, and analyze data from a defined population without manipulating any variables. The descriptive survey is particularly appropriate for studies that seek to understand existing attitudes, opinions, and behaviors.

In this study, the design helps to systematically investigate the level of exposure, attitudes, and behavioral responses of female postgraduate students of Taraba State University toward weight loss drug advertisements on social media platforms.

3.1.1 Area of the Study

The study was conducted at Taraba State University (TSU), Jalingo, Taraba State, Nigeria. The institution has several faculties and departments offering postgraduate programs across diverse fields of study. Taraba State University was chosen as the study area because it hosts a growing number of female postgraduate students who are active users of social media and thus are likely to have encountered advertisements for weight loss products online.

3.2 Population of the Study

The targeted population of this study comprises all female postgraduate students of Taraba State University, Jalingo, during the 2024/2025

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academic session. According to official data obtained from the office of the Secretary, School of Postgraduate Studies, the university has a total of, 2,213 postgraduate students, distributed as follows:

- PGD students – 158
- Master’s students – 1,752
- Ph.D. students – 303

However, this population comprises both female and male students, since the office would not provide the exact number for the both sexes, the researcher decided to divide the total number into two, the researcher did so to ensure equitable distribution to avoid been biased. the study focuses only on the female postgraduate students within these categories, as they form the core group relevant to the topic. Hence the actual population would be divided by two (2)

Therefore, the total number was divided as thus:

$$\frac{2213}{2} = 1106.5 = 1106$$

Therefore, the population for the study is 1106.

3.2.1 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The sample size was determined using **Aroaye’s (2004)** formula for sample determination from a known population:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n = Sample size

N = Population size (1106)

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e = Margin of error (0.05)

Substituting values:

$$n = \frac{1106}{1 + 420(0.05)^2} = \frac{1106}{1 + 5.5325} = \frac{1106}{6.5325} = 169$$

Therefore, a total of 169 respondents were selected as the sample size.

To ensure fair representation, the population was divided proportionally across the postgraduate levels (PGD, Master’s, and Ph.D.). The proportional allocation formula used was:

$$n_i = \frac{N_i}{N} \times n$$

Hence every total figure for each programe type was divided into two as presented below:

PGD: $158 \div 2 = 79$

Masters: $1,752 \div 2 = 876$

Ph. D: $303 \div 2 = 151.5 \approx 152$

Where:

n_i = number of respondents from each group

N_i = population of each group

N = total population

n = total sample size

Thus:

PGD. $\frac{79}{1106} \times 169 = 12.1$

169 = 4

MASTERS

$\frac{876}{1106} \times 169 = 134$

Ph.D

$$\frac{152}{1106} \times 169 = 23$$

Hence, 4 Diploma, 134 Master's, and 23 Ph.D. female students were sampled.

The stratified random sampling technique was adopted to ensure that all categories of postgraduate students were adequately represented. Within each stratum, participants were selected using simple random sampling, giving every eligible student an equal chance of being included.

3.2 Sources of Data

This study utilized both primary and secondary data sources:

- Primary Data: Collected directly from respondents through the administration of structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.
- Secondary Data: Obtained from textbooks, academic journals, institutional reports, and credible online publications related to advertising, media influence, and consumer behavior.

The use of both data sources enhanced the reliability and validity of the research findings.

3.3 Research Instruments

Two main instruments were used for data collection:

Questionnaire:

The structured questionnaire was divided into sections that aligned with the study's objectives. It contained both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions to obtain data on respondents' exposure

to, attitudes toward, and behavioral responses to social media advertisements of weight loss drugs.

1.5.6 Validity of the Instruments

To ensure content and face validity, the questionnaire and interview guide were reviewed by three experts in Mass Communication and Media Studies. Their feedback helped refine the wording, structure, and relevance of each item to ensure that all questions accurately captured the variables under investigation. A pilot test involving 20 female postgraduate students (outside the main study population) was also conducted to assess clarity and comprehension. Feedback from the pilot test informed further adjustments before the main administration.

1.5.7 Method of Data Collection

The researcher, with the help of two trained research assistants, personally distributed the questionnaires to respondents across various postgraduate departments. Respondents were given one week to complete and return the forms.

1.5.8 Method of Data Analysis

Data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. Inferential statistics such as the Chi-square test and Pearson correlation were used to examine the relationships between exposure, attitudes, and behavioral responses to weight loss advertisements.

1.5.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and assured that

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their responses would be used solely for academic purposes. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. No form of coercion or manipulation was involved.

1.6 Data Presentation

This section presents and interprets the data collected through questionnaires administered to female postgraduate students of Taraba State University. The analysis aligns with the study's three objectives. Returned and valid 137, Returned but invalid 17, Not returned 7, Total distributed 161, total returned 154. Therefore, valid questionnaires for the presentation are 137.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1: Age Distribution

Age Group (Years)	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
25–30	37	27
31–35	54	39.4
36–40	46	33.6
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

The majority of respondents (39.4%) are between 31–35 years old, followed by 33.6% aged 36–40. This distribution suggests that most participants are young to middle-aged adults an age group known for balancing self-image, career aspirations, and health awareness. According to Kapoor et al. (2017), this demographic constitutes the most active users of digital platforms for lifestyle-related content. From the lens of Sense-Making Theory, this age group's exposure to advertising is situated within complex meaning-making processes shaped by self-identity and social validation. Their reactions to slimming drug

adverts, therefore, are not purely driven by persuasion but by attempts to negotiate societal beauty ideals and personal well-being. This reinforces Wang and Kim's (2017) argument that age mediates how health-related advertising is interpreted where older young adults tend to apply more cognitive evaluation and skepticism compared to teenagers or undergraduates.

Table 2: Marital Status

Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Single	45	32.8
Married	90	65.7
Divorced/Widowed	2	1.5
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

Married respondents constitute 65.7% of the sample, suggesting that the majority of participants navigate social and familial expectations that often intersect with body image and appearance. Tafesse and Wien (2018) emphasize that marital and social roles significantly influence engagement with beauty and health advertising. Married women, for instance, may experience subtle pressure to maintain certain physical standards tied to marital satisfaction and public presentation. In the context of this study, these findings imply that married postgraduate women are both subjects and interpreters of social-media narratives on "ideal" body forms. Their responses to slimming drug advertisements are thus filtered through domestic, relational, and social responsibilities aligning with Dervin's (1998) proposition that individuals construct meaning through contextual gaps between where they are and where they wish to be. This underscores the multidimensionality of

advertising influence: it is not merely persuasive but dialogical, shaped by lived experience.

Table 3: Academic Programme

Programme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Postgraduate	4	2.9
Diploma (PGD)		
Master's	111	81.0
Doctorate (Ph.D.)	22	16.1
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

The data show that Master's students dominate the sample (81%). This implies a population with significant academic maturity and critical reasoning ability. Dens and De Pelsmacker (2010) argue that higher educational attainment correlates with advertising skepticism and media literacy. The implication for this study is that most respondents possess the intellectual tools to question, analyze, and deconstruct persuasive health messages on social media. Within Sense-Making Theory, these respondents likely interpret slimming drug advertisements not as simple informational cues but as discursive texts messages that can be decoded, challenged, or resisted. This aligns with Media Literacy Theory, which posits that education enhances consumers' ability to discern manipulation or misinformation (Potter, 2018). Therefore, any persuasiveness found later in behavioral responses must be understood as negotiated rather than automatic suggesting an active, interpretive audience rather than a compliant one.

Table 4: Faculty Distribution

Faculty	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Education	30	21.9
Arts	14	10.2

Science	22	16.1
Social Sciences	24	17.5
Law	19	13.9
Management Sciences	25	18.2
Others	3	2.2
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

Respondents represent a wide array of disciplines, with Education, Management Sciences, and Social Sciences leading. This heterogeneity enhances the validity of the study by incorporating multiple cognitive and disciplinary orientations. Wang and Kim (2017) note that individuals' academic and professional training shape how they process and evaluate advertising information. For example, a science student may focus on chemical composition, while an arts student may analyze aesthetic appeal. This disciplinary diversity reflects the plurality of sense-making emphasized by Dervin (1998) that meaning is always locally produced based on personal knowledge systems and communicative experiences. In the current study, the range of faculties ensures that the observed attitudes are not confined to a single worldview but represent a spectrum of interpretive practices that collectively define postgraduate women's negotiation of slimming-drug advertising discourse.

Exposure to Weight-Loss Drug Advertisements

Table 5: Frequency of Social Media Use

Frequency of Use	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily	112	81.8
A few times per week	20	14.6
Occasionally	4	2.9
Rarely	1	0.7

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Total	137	100
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Source: field survey 2025

The majority (81.8%) of respondents use social media daily as indicated in the table above, this confirms that digital interaction forms a routine part of their communication ecology. This high exposure environment supports the availability heuristic described by Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) frequent exposure heightens recall, which in turn may affect perceived familiarity or credibility of repeated messages. However, in the context of this study, daily use does not necessarily translate to persuasion. Instead, it creates a dense communicative space where users are constantly decoding, sharing, and debating content. From Dervin's (1998) Sense-Making Theory, such frequency means that respondents continuously encounter "information gaps" which they fill through dialogue with peers and internal reasoning. Hence, their exposure to slimming adverts is part of an ongoing interpretive cycle rather than uncritical acceptance.

Table 7: Social Media Platforms Mostly Used

Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Facebook	71	51.8
WhatsApp	55	40.1
TikTok	7	5.1
Instagram	3	2.2
Twitter (X)	1	0.7
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

Facebook and WhatsApp dominate as the most used platforms, accounting for over 90% of social media activity. These platforms encourage interpersonal sharing and commentary, which facilitate the social diffusion of health-related content. As Asur and Huberman (2010) found,

networked interactivity allows health information accurate or otherwise to spread virally through emotional contagion and trust-based connections. Dominant conversational platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook underscore the social nature of exposure: slimming drug advertisements are not just viewed but discussed, forwarded, and reinterpreted. This has authenticated the central claim of Sense-Making Theory that meaning is co-constructed in social interaction.

Table 8: Frequency of Encountering Weight-Loss Advertisements

Frequency	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very frequently	123	89.8
Frequently	14	10.2
Occasionally	0	0.0
Rarely	0	0.0
Never	0	0.0
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

89.8% of respondents affirm that they do encounter slimming-drug advertisements very frequently. This establishes that these students inhabit a media environment saturated with weight-loss content. According to Perloff (2014), constant exposure to body-related messages fosters the internalization of beauty ideals, especially among women in appearance-conscious societies. Yet, Sense-Making Theory helps interpret this exposure beyond mere repetition. Rather than being passive receivers, respondents continuously engage in evaluating, comparing, and questioning the credibility of these adverts. This aligns with Osei-Frimpong et al. (2020), who found that audiences interpret online health promotions through both cognitive (knowledge-based) and affective (emotional) filters. Thus, high exposure in this study does not

automatically imply high susceptibility but reflects the density of meaning-making experiences in digital advertising contexts.

Table 9: Types of Weight-Loss Advertisements Seen

Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Slimming teas/drinks	60	43.8
Pills/capsules	48	35.0
Herbal mixtures	25	18.2
Creams/lotions	4	2.9
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

Slimming teas and capsules account for nearly 80% of all observed advertisement types. These products are often marketed as “natural” and “risk-free,” mirroring Zhao and Zhang’s (2017) observation that consumers perceive herbal-based weight-loss products as safer and more socially acceptable. In the context of this study, the dominance of such ads implies that digital marketers strategically target educated female audiences with pseudo-scientific narratives that appeal to logic (ELM’s central route while simultaneously triggering affective desires for quick transformation the peripheral route. This dual targeting reflects a complex persuasive ecology where scientific rhetoric coexists with emotional appeal. Dervin’s (1998) model helps situate this as a meaning-making tension between knowledge” and hope respondents are caught between rational caution and aspirational desire for bodily improvement.

Table 10: Sources of Advertisements

Source	Frequency	Percentage (%)
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Celebrity endorsements	90	65.7
Friends/peer sharing	16	11.7
Paid social media ads	17	12.4
Influencers/bloggers	14	10.2
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

The results have indicated that celebrity endorsements are the dominant source of exposure (65.7%), followed by paid ads and peer sharing. This distribution highlights the prevalence of parasocial influence a phenomenon where audiences form symbolic relationships with media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In the Nigerian context, where social-media influencers often double as lifestyle authorities, this confirms the growing commodification of beauty ideals through aspirational marketing. However, previous studies such as Zolkepli et al. (2022) argue that while celebrity endorsement increases visibility, it does not necessarily enhance credibility. This aligns with the present study’s later findings that respondents remain largely skeptical of such adverts. From the Sense-Making perspective, this pattern signifies that postgraduate women may use celebrity content as reference frames rather than persuasive authorities an example of cognitive distancing. In essence, they observe and discuss such messages, but interpret them through their own social and moral frameworks.

Table 11: Perceived Credibility of Advertisements

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Credibility Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very credible	14	10.2
Somewhat credible	3	2.2
Not credible	120	87.6
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

An 87.6% of respondents perceive slimming-drug advertisements on social media as *not* credible. This pervasive distrust underscores a critical and media-literate audience base. Dens and De Pelsmacker (2010) identified education as a moderating factor that fosters advertising skepticism, particularly toward health-related claims lacking regulatory validation. In theoretical terms, these results exemplify the central route processing of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) respondents are engaging cognitively rather than emotionally, evaluating claims based on perceived evidence and logic. Under Sense-Making Theory, this skepticism is an active interpretive act respondents are bridging “knowledge gaps” by comparing online messages with their lived realities, peer discussions, and prior understanding of health practices. The implication for this study is twofold: first, educational attainment enhances critical resistance to digital persuasion; second, distrust toward slimming-drug ads reflects a moral and epistemic awareness that advertising often exaggerates benefits. This awareness, however, does not always translate to behavioral abstinence, as later tables will show.

Table 12: Persuasiveness of Advertisements

Persuasiveness	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very persuasive	14	10.2

Somewhat persuasive	11	8.0
Not persuasive	112	81.8
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

Only 18.2% of respondents find slimming-drug advertisements persuasive, suggesting low message penetration among postgraduate female students. This finding corroborates Chu and Kim (2011), who found that educated consumers rely more on electronic word-of-mouth such as peer trust, than on commercial messages. This implies that, exposure does not equate to belief, and belief does not guarantee behavioral compliance. In other words, female postgraduate students demonstrate cognitive autonomy in receiving persuasive health messages a sign of digital empowerment that challenges traditional hypodermic needle assumptions of advertising effects.

Table 13: Features That Influence Respondents Most

Feature	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Health/scientific claims	87	63.5
Testimonials/reviews	20	14.6
Before-and-after pictures	17	12.4
Celebrity/influencer promotion	13	9.5
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

Health and scientific claims (63.5%) are the most influential features, overshadowing emotional appeals such as testimonials and before-and-after images. This suggests that respondents are drawn

to rational credibility cues what Petty and Cacioppo (1986) describe as central-route arguments. However, as Zhao and Zhang (2017) caution, pseudo-scientific rhetoric in online advertising often blurs the line between empirical evidence and fabricated authority. Thus, while postgraduate women may respond to such claims cognitively, they remain vulnerable to informational manipulation. In the Sense-Making framework, this illustrates the audience's struggle to reconcile informational reliability with emotional aspiration a process Dervin (1998) calls bridging the gap.

This implies therefore that education fosters critical evaluation but does not fully immunize against sophisticated forms of misinformation. The preference for health-based reasoning highlights a trust deficit in entertainment-style marketing, while affirming the centrality of perceived authenticity in influencing consumer response.

Table 14: Perceived Safety of Weight-Loss Drugs

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	15	11.0
Agree	23	16.8
Neutral	7	5.1
Disagree	19	13.9
Strongly disagree	73	53.3
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

A majority of respondents (67.2%) either disagree or strongly disagree that weight-loss drugs advertised on social media are safe. This finding underscores high health literacy and critical awareness. According to Coates et al. (2019),

skepticism toward online health marketing reflects increased consumer awareness of deceptive practices and unregulated advertising environments. The implication here is that, the respondents' rejection of safety claims demonstrates an experiential evaluation process they do not merely absorb advertising messages but reconstruct them through comparison with real-world risks and peer narratives.

Behavioral Responses to Weight-Loss Drug Advertisements

Table 15: Purchase or Use of Weight-Loss Drugs

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	60	43.8
No	77	56.2
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

Though there is a wide range of doubt, 43.8% of respondents have purchased or used slimming drugs based on social media exposure. This paradox reflects what Ajzen (1991) describes in the Theory of Planned Behavior as the attitude-behavior gap the inconsistency between knowledge and action. This implies that, postgraduate females' behavioral engagement with slimming drugs cannot be explained solely by persuasion or ignorance. Instead, it reveals negotiated agency a process where individuals momentarily suspend disbelief to explore potential benefits despite awareness of risk. This pattern captures the complexity of Sense-Making Theory, wherein meaning is fluid, and behavior represents an evolving experiment in identity, trust, and self-care.

Table 16: Factors Influencing Purchase or Use

Factor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Peer influence	73	53.3
Curiosity	40	29.2
Desire for quick results	20	14.6
Trust in the advert	4	2.9
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

Peer influence (53.3%) emerges as the most decisive factor in driving behavioral response, followed by curiosity (29.2%). This finding reinforces the social constructionist premise of Sense-Making Theory: that individuals derive meaning from interpersonal interactions rather than isolated media exposure.

De Jans et al. (2018) argue that peer validation amplifies credibility, especially among female consumers navigating appearance-related anxieties. For this study, the implication is that postgraduate students, despite their education, are not insulated from collective interpretation. Their peers function as interpretive communities who co-author meaning, normalize experimentation, and occasionally downplay risk.

This finding also connects with Tafesse and Wien's (2018) observation that social context, not message quality, predicts consumer behavior in digital environments. Therefore, interventions aimed at curbing unsafe slimming drug use should target peer communication dynamics, not merely content regulation.

Table 17: Common Reactions After Seeing Advertisements

Reaction	Frequency	Percentage (%)
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Discuss with peers/friends	87	63.5
Consider trying later	30	21.9
Ignore advertisement	13	9.5
Research more about the product	7	5.1
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

Majority of respondents (63.5%) report discussing adverts with peers before forming opinions or acting on them. This communicative behavior underscores the social-interactive foundation of Sense-Making Theory. Dervin (1998) asserts that people construct meaning through conversation, using dialogue to resolve informational gaps. This implies therefore that, female postgraduate students use peer discussion as a strategy to evaluate, question, and reinterpret slimming-drug messages collectively. This behavior also reflects the two-step flow of communication (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), where opinion leaders, friends or classmates mediate advertising impact.

Table 18: Opinions on Regulation of Weight-Loss Advertisements

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	125	91.2
Agree	10	7.3
Neutral	2	1.5
Disagree	0	0.0
Strongly disagree	0	0.0
Total	137	100

Source: field survey 2025

98.5% of respondents have agreed that, slimming-drug advertisements on social media should be

regulated by government agencies. This near total agreement, reveals high civic consciousness and a recognition of the state's role in protecting public health. Coates et al. (2019) similarly found that educated digital users often demand institutional accountability for online health misinformation. This finding implies that, Taraba State University's female postgraduates are not merely defensive media users but proactive social agents who articulate ethical expectations from governance. Their endorsement of regulation extends Sense-Making Theory beyond personal meaning construction to collective advocacy the transformation of private interpretation into public action.

Summary, Conclusion, And Recommendations

This study examined the attitudes and responses of female postgraduate students of Taraba State University toward weight-loss drug advertisements on social media, using Sense-Making Theory (Dervin, 1998) (as its theoretical anchor. A total of 161 questionnaires were distributed; 137 valid responses (85.1%) were analyzed. Findings revealed that exposure to slimming-drug adverts is extremely high, especially on Facebook and WhatsApp, yet most respondents remain skeptical about their credibility and safety. Despite their skepticism, 43.8% of respondents have tried slimming products mainly due to peer influence and curiosity. This confirms the attitude-behavior gap described in persuasion literature (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Respondents' strong call (98.5%) for government regulation reflects not only awareness of media manipulation but also civic engagement and digital health consciousness. The study concludes that female postgraduate students are active, critical interpreters of social media advertising, guided by education, peer dialogue, and ethical reasoning.

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Their responses validate Sense-Making Theory, demonstrating that audiences construct meaning through social interaction and contextual evaluation rather than passive consumption.

Recommendations

- i. NAFDAC and NCC should jointly regulate online health advertising and penalize false claims.
- ii. Universities should integrate media- and health-literacy programs into postgraduate curricula.
- iii. Peer-led digital campaigns should be encouraged to counter misinformation.
- iv. Advertisers must adopt ethical, evidence-based communication practices.
- v. Future research should explore male perspectives and cross-institutional comparisons.

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