

Social Media in Healthcare: Opportunities and Obstacles

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The increasing prevalence of social media in healthcare has significantly changed how individuals acquire and understand health-related information. Unfortunately it also becomes a frequent source of misinformation. Within this rapidly evolving digital landscape, our comprehension of health literacy often struggles to keep pace with the immense volume of information circulating throughout society (Multas, 2024). Social media has broadened the definition of health literacy beyond simply understanding and utilizing health information and services; it now encompasses how individuals engage with health information in their daily lives (Multas, 2024). The traditional definition has expanded to include engagement with social media videos, podcasts, and influencers, thereby redefining how people experience health. Consequently, society now actively contributes to the collective construction of health knowledge, often influencing changes people make to their everyday routines. This article examines the opportunities and challenges that social media presents within the healthcare environment.

The rapid growth of social media and readily available online health information offers both infinite resources and easy sharing, but the problem of misinformation could undermine the advantages for both individuals and healthcare professionals.

Health Information Exchange on Social Media

Social media offers a powerful opportunity for delivering health interventions, information, and education, and often provides a

convenient and low-cost manner to obtain healthcare services. Personal accounts of healthcare experiences tend to attract more attention and are often seen as more engaging compared to platforms offering general health information or emotional support (Wu, et al., 2024). While a wealth of general healthcare information is easily accessible online, it is important to remember that the majority of social media users are individuals without extensive medical backgrounds. When it comes to sharing health information, older adults show a greater tendency to engage than younger individuals, possibly due to more frequent encounters with health issues. Furthermore, men generally exhibit less willingness to participate in health information exchange compared to women (Wu, et al., 2024).

Social media platforms provide a valuable space for patients with shared health conditions to connect, support each other's self-care, and exchange advice, and influence each other's healthcare decisions through suggestions and recommendations. Online forums and health groups, particularly for those with chronic diseases, have emerged as communities where people share knowledge, personal experiences, and offer healthcare tips (Lin & Kishore, 2021). Healthcare professionals have also recognized the usefulness of these discussion forums for patient education and self-management of chronic conditions. By engaging with clinicians on social media, patients can enhance their ability to manage chronic illnesses and ultimately improve their health outcomes (Lin & Kishore, 2021).

Information Source Credibility and Content Reliability

The rapidly growing demand for health information raises concerns about source credibility and content reliability, yet the burden of verification rests with the user. The endless amount of available informa-

tion often outweighs its quality. While social media users express a preference for identifying legitimate sources, they often do little to confirm their authenticity. Unidentified, unverified, and unregulated sources frequently spread misinformation. Without the ability to ascertain the accuracy of health information, social media users risk worsening their health conditions (Egala et al., 2024). Conversely, reliable information can reduce anxiety and psychological distress related to illness. Credible sources, marked by authorship, affiliation, current information, and disclosure, enhance perceived reliability, fostering user communication, community input, interaction, sharing, and collaboration (Egala et al., 2024).

Challenges Posed by Health Misinformation

Although social media users look for trustworthy health information, they often lack the necessary health and digital knowledge skills to decipher health misinformation. Cultural backgrounds can shape how misinformation is received, and even healthcare professionals can be susceptible. Importantly, research suggests that simply presenting facts isn't enough to counteract misinformation, making it difficult to debunk online falsehoods. Healthcare practitioners have a key role in directing patients to reliable, evidence-based medical information. They can encourage individuals to critically assess their information sources and provide new information with additional context, rather than just labeling their perception as incorrect (Kbaier et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The rapid growth of social media and readily available online health information offers both infinite resources and easy sharing, but the problem of misinformation could undermine the advantages for both individuals and healthcare professionals. While social media platforms ideally should ensure information accuracy, ultimately, a joint effort of healthcare leaders and government policymakers is needed to manage health information. This collaboration would foster

the expansion of trustworthy sources and reliable information on social media. ■

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