



NEW ERA MEDICAL JOURNAL



Mini Review

Impact of Social Media Health Information on Medical Decision-Making

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ABSTRACT

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DOI: 10.62502/nemj/v2i1art5

Received: 30/12/2025

Accepted: 28/02/2026

Published: 28/03/2026

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Social media has become an important source of health information and increasingly influences how individuals interpret symptoms, seek healthcare, evaluate treatment options, and make medical decisions. Although social media can improve access to health education, patient engagement, and peer support, it also facilitates the rapid dissemination of misinformation and unverified medical claims. The impact of social media on medical decision-making is influenced by health literacy, digital literacy, perceived source credibility, emotional responses, social influence, and previous healthcare experiences. Evidence indicates that reliable online health information can support informed decision-making and patient-provider communication, whereas misleading content may contribute to self-diagnosis, treatment refusal, inappropriate self-medication, delayed healthcare seeking, and vaccine hesitancy. This review summarizes the potential benefits and risks of social media health information and discusses the role of digital health literacy and healthcare professionals in promoting evidence-based decision-making.

Keywords: Social Media, Health Information, Medical Decision-Making, Health Misinformation, Digital Health Literacy, Patient Education

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of social media has fundamentally changed how health information is accessed and shared. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and X allow users to obtain health information immediately and interact with healthcare professionals, patients, organizations, influencers, and online communities. Social media is consequently becoming an important component of the contemporary health-information environment. ^[1] Individuals commonly use online resources to understand symptoms, investigate diagnoses, compare treatment options, identify healthcare providers, and obtain information about medications and preventive care. A systematic review of online health information found that such information can influence subsequent health decisions, including communication with healthcare professionals, healthcare visits, medication adherence, and self-care. ^[2] Social media may therefore complement conventional healthcare communication when information is accurate and appropriately interpreted. However, the open and highly interactive nature of social media also creates substantial risks. Unlike peer-reviewed medical literature or professional clinical guidelines, much social media content is not subjected to scientific or editorial review. Misinformation may therefore circulate rapidly, particularly when it is emotionally engaging, controversial, commercially motivated, or consistent with existing beliefs. ^[3,4]

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A SOURCE OF HEALTH INFORMATION

Social media differs from traditional health-information sources because users can simultaneously consume, produce, modify, and redistribute information. Health-related content may originate from hospitals, professional organizations, government agencies, researchers, patients, celebrities, influencers, commercial companies, or anonymous users. The quality and credibility of this information therefore vary considerably. ^[5] A systematic review of social media use for health purposes demonstrated that individuals use these platforms for health education, disease information, social support, health promotion, and communication. ^[6]

Social media can also provide patients with opportunities to exchange experiences and obtain emotional support, particularly when dealing with chronic or rare diseases. The accessibility of social media may be particularly useful for individuals who experience geographical, financial, or informational barriers to conventional healthcare. However, accessibility does not guarantee accuracy. The credibility of health information depends on the source, evidence base, transparency, context, and user's ability to critically evaluate the information.

INFLUENCE ON MEDICAL DECISION-MAKING

Medical decision-making involves the integration of clinical evidence, professional judgment, patient preferences, perceived risks and benefits, and contextual factors. Social media can influence several stages of this process. First, online health information can affect symptom interpretation and self-diagnosis. Individuals may search for symptoms before consulting a healthcare professional and develop expectations regarding possible diagnoses. This may increase awareness but can also produce unnecessary anxiety or incorrect self-diagnosis. Second, social media may influence healthcare-seeking behaviour. Positive patient experiences and educational content may encourage individuals to seek professional care, whereas negative experiences or distrust-promoting content may discourage healthcare utilization. A systematic review found that online health information can influence health decisions in both supportive and potentially problematic ways, with the patient-provider relationship acting as an important moderating factor. ^[2] Third, social media can influence treatment preferences and adherence. Patients may

enter clinical consultations with information about particular medications, procedures, supplements, or alternative therapies. When online claims conflict with clinical recommendations, disagreements may occur.

Conversely, reliable educational content can improve understanding and facilitate shared decision-making. ^[7] Evidence from India is particularly relevant. A cross-sectional study among 673 adults attending a tertiary-care hospital in West Bengal reported that 70.4% of participants had made health-related decisions based on social media messages, posts, or updates. Only 44.7% reported checking the authenticity of such information with healthcare professionals before making a decision. ^[8] These findings demonstrate the potential influence of social media on health decisions in the Indian population.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

The influence of social media is not exclusively negative. Reliable social media content can improve access to health education, increase disease awareness, and encourage preventive behaviors. ^[6] During public health emergencies, social media can provide rapid communication regarding symptoms, preventive measures, vaccination, and healthcare services. Social media may also promote patient empowerment. Patients can access educational material before clinical consultations, develop questions, compare available options, and participate more actively in healthcare discussions.

Online patient communities can provide practical information and emotional support that may complement formal healthcare services. Healthcare professionals and institutions can use social media to disseminate evidence-based information through videos, infographics, educational posts, and live discussions. The World Health Organization has emphasized the importance of increasing access to science-based health information and improving the identification of credible sources on social media. ^[9,10]

HEALTH MISINFORMATION AND MEDICAL DECISIONS

The principal concern associated with social media health information is misinformation. Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information that may be shared without an intention to deceive, whereas disinformation generally involves deliberate manipulation or dissemination of false information. ^[11] Health misinformation has been documented

across numerous areas, including infectious diseases, vaccination, cancer, nutrition, mental health, reproductive health, and chronic diseases.^[3,12] Such information may influence individuals to reject evidence-based treatments, use unproven therapies, self-medicate, delay professional consultation, or adopt inappropriate health practices. The World Health Organization identifies misinformation and disinformation as threats to public health because they can undermine trust, influence health behaviours, and interfere with informed decision-making.^[11] Recent evidence also indicates that exposure to health misinformation on social media is common but varies substantially by health topic, platform, population, and method of measurement. Lower health or digital literacy has been repeatedly associated with greater reported exposure.^[13]

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Health influencers have become increasingly important sources of health information. Their perceived authenticity, relatability, and communication style may generate considerable trust among followers. A systematic review of social media influencers found evidence that influencer-generated content can affect health-related attitudes and behaviours.^[14] The problem arises when popularity is interpreted as evidence of medical expertise. Influencers may discuss nutrition, medications, mental health, cosmetic procedures, supplements, or disease treatments without appropriate professional qualifications. Commercial sponsorship may further introduce conflicts of interest. Transparent disclosure of qualifications, sponsorship, and evidence sources is therefore important. Social media users should be encouraged to distinguish personal experience from scientific evidence.

DIGITAL HEALTH LITERACY

Digital health literacy is a key factor determining whether social media health information supports or harms medical decision-making. It involves the ability to locate, understand, evaluate, and apply health information obtained through digital technologies.^[15] Individuals with higher digital health literacy may be better equipped to evaluate the credibility of online sources and identify unsupported claims. Conversely, limited health literacy may increase susceptibility to misinformation. Recent systematic evidence among older adults indicates a reciprocal relationship between social media use and eHealth literacy, suggesting that social media can both influence and be influenced by users' digital health capabilities.^[16]

Therefore, improving digital health literacy should be considered an important component of modern health education.

ALGORITHMS, CONFIRMATION BIAS, AND ECHO CHAMBERS

Social media algorithms frequently recommend content based on previous user interactions. This personalization can create repeated exposure to similar information and potentially reinforce existing beliefs. Confirmation bias may lead individuals to preferentially accept information that agrees with their existing views while rejecting contradictory evidence. Emotional and sensational content may receive greater engagement, increasing its visibility. Consequently, simply providing accurate information may not always be sufficient to counter misinformation. Effective interventions should combine health literacy, critical thinking, trusted communication, appropriate corrections, and improved access to credible sources.^[17]

ROLE OF HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

Healthcare professionals have an important role in helping patients interpret online health information. Rather than dismissing social media use, clinicians can encourage patients to discuss information encountered online during consultations. Patients should be encouraged to consider several questions: Who produced the information? Is the source professionally qualified? Is the claim supported by scientific evidence? Are references provided? Is the information selling a product? Are benefits presented without discussion of risks? Is the claim consistent with recognized guidelines? A constructive clinician–patient discussion can correct misinformation without undermining patient autonomy. The therapeutic relationship is particularly important because patients may be more receptive to information when they trust their healthcare professionals.^[2]

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research should investigate not only the frequency of social media use but also the type, quality, source, and credibility of health information encountered by users. Cross-sectional studies can assess associations between social media exposure, health literacy, trust, and decision-making, whereas longitudinal studies are required to determine whether repeated exposure produces sustained behavioural changes. Research should also evaluate interventions designed to reduce misinformation. A recent scoping

review identified education, misinformation correction, media-literacy interventions, and decision-support approaches, but concluded that current interventions often inadequately address the risks of medical overuse and misleading marketing.^[18] Emerging research should additionally examine the role of artificial intelligence-generated health content. Generative AI may substantially increase the availability of personalized health information while creating new challenges related to accuracy, transparency, accountability, and source verification.

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The influence of social media health information on medical decision-making can be conceptualized as: Social media exposure → perceived credibility → information interpretation → risk perception and emotional response → health beliefs and self-efficacy → medical decision-making → healthcare behavior and outcomes

This pathway is influenced by health literacy, digital health literacy, education, age, previous healthcare experiences, social networks, source credibility, algorithmic personalization, cultural beliefs, and accessibility of professional healthcare. This framework highlights that exposure alone does not determine medical decisions. Rather, the effects of social media depend on how information is evaluated, interpreted, trusted, and integrated with professional healthcare advice.

CONCLUSION

Social media has become an important determinant of the contemporary health-information environment and can meaningfully influence medical decision-making. Reliable content can improve health awareness, patient engagement, communication, and shared decision-making, whereas misinformation may contribute to self-diagnosis, inappropriate treatment choices, delayed healthcare seeking, and reduced trust in healthcare professionals. Improving digital health literacy, promoting credible sources, strengthening clinician–patient communication, and developing effective strategies for identifying and correcting misinformation are therefore essential. Social media should not be regarded simply as a threat to evidence-based medicine; rather, it should be integrated into modern health communication in a manner that supports informed, patient-centered, and evidence-based medical decision-making.

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How to cite: Verma Kumari B. Impact of Social Media Health Information on Medical Decision-Making. *New Era Medical Journal*. 2026;2(1):24-28