

Health Influencers on Social Media: Shaping Followers' Beliefs and Behaviours

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, social media (SM) has become an influential platform for healthcare practitioners (HPs), also known as "health influencers," to disseminate health information and shape public health behaviors. This study explores the impact of social media promotion by healthcare practitioners on followers' health beliefs and behaviors, specifically regarding nutritional medicine. Nutritional medicine, focusing on diet and nutrition's role in health promotion and disease prevention, is increasingly significant in public health initiatives. Using the Source Credibility Model (SCM) and the Health Belief Model (HBM), this study investigates how source credibility and health beliefs shape individual health behaviors. Semi-structured interviews with followers of healthcare practitioners promoting nutritional medicine on social media will be analysed through thematic analysis to uncover insights into messaging strategies, credibility perceptions, and health beliefs influencing dietary decisions. This study contributes to existing literature by addressing the research gap regarding social media promotion of nutritional medicine by healthcare practitioners in Malaysia. It proposes a framework for understanding the interplay between source credibility and health beliefs in influencing health behaviors, offering practical recommendations to optimize social media strategies for healthcare communication.

Keywords: Healthcare Practitioners, Social Media, Nutritional Medicine, Health Beliefs, Health Behaviours

INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

In the contemporary digital era, social media (SM) has emerged as a crucial and influential platform within the healthcare domain. The use of SM and the internet in healthcare has expanded significantly (Ahmed et al., 2022). Healthcare practitioners increasingly use SM platforms to engage with the public, disseminate health information, and influence health behaviors due to expanding internet access and widespread smartphone use. Health promotion, research, marketing and branding, and recruitment represent the main areas where SM significantly impacts the healthcare sector. Moreover, improved consumer understanding of health information and active engagement in health maintenance have transformed patient-practitioner relationships (Farsi, 2021).

Additionally, the increasing use of social media by healthcare practitioners (HPs) to promote nutritional

medicine significantly impacts followers' beliefs and behaviors. Unlike traditional media, SM allows healthcare influencers to directly communicate with followers, providing timely and personalized health advice (Farsi, 2021). Research indicates individuals often find influencers more relatable than healthcare professionals in formal settings due to personalized content (Gupta, 2024). This creates opportunities and challenges regarding influencers' effectiveness in shaping health behaviors, primarily influenced by perceived credibility, expertise, and trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990). Followers' adoption of promoted health behaviors also depends on their perceived health risks and benefits (Becker, 1974).

A critical issue is healthcare practitioners' perceived credibility, significantly shaping followers' acceptance and adherence to nutritional advice. Misrepresentation of credibility can mislead followers, promoting unsupported diets and creating ethical dilemmas for practitioners responsible for evidence-based advice. In Malaysia, conflicting information disseminated by influential healthcare practitioners on SM poses public health risks, ethical challenges, and potential erosion of trust in healthcare systems.

This study investigates social media's role in shaping followers' health behaviors concerning nutritional medicine, focusing on source credibility and health beliefs. Despite extensive research on social media and healthcare, a notable gap exists regarding healthcare practitioners' promotion of nutritional medicine through SM in Malaysia. Understanding effective content and messaging strategies can enhance practitioners' credibility and positively influence health behaviors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Use of Social Media and Intervention in Health Behavior

Social media platforms are vital resources in healthcare, supporting health education, patient communication, medical research, and professional growth (Jeyaraman et al., 2023). Behavioural interventions help individuals (patients and healthy consumers) modify behaviors to improve their overall health. Recent research has shown social media's efficacy in influencing individual health behaviors, supporting health advocacy, informing medical research, and promoting health services. Social media-based interventions foster social support, enhancing health outcomes through improved knowledge, motivation, self-efficacy, and attitudes towards health behaviors (Petkovic et al., 2021).

Significantly, approximately 80% of internet users utilize social media to access health information (El Kheir et al., 2021). Online social networks provide cost-effective tools for public health initiatives targeting critical health behaviors such as physical inactivity, smoking, obesity, poor diet, and alcohol abuse, allowing greater audience participation and information sharing (Plackett et al., 2020). While social media increases patient knowledge, caution is essential to evaluate the reliability of health information sources (Farsi et al., 2022). Ethical principles, including patient confidentiality and professional conduct, must be upheld to maintain public trust in social media (Jeyaraman et al., 2023).

Health Influencers and Social Media

Health influencers, typically healthcare professionals such as doctors, dietitians, or fitness experts, use social media platforms to impact audience health choices and behaviors. These influencers often endorse products, services, or health behaviors based on expertise or personal experiences.

Digital platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have broadened healthcare communication opportunities beyond traditional formats, enabling direct public engagement (Engebretsen, 2024). Influencers include medical doctors advocating evidence-based treatments, nutritionists promoting balanced diets, and fitness experts endorsing specific regimens (Dureau et al., 2024).

Impact on Health Behavior

Social media's impact on health behaviors is increasingly studied. According to the Two-Step Flow Theory, credible influencers greatly affect behaviors by serving as intermediaries between mass media and the public

(Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Social media influencers enhance influence through personal connections with followers (Cheung et al., 2022).

Influencers promoting scientifically backed health advice significantly affect positive health behaviors (Alber et al., 2020; Al-Hasan et al., 2021). According to the Health Belief Model, influencers shape followers' perceived health risks, benefits, and confidence, motivating healthier behaviors through engaging, relatable content (Champion & Skinner, 2008; Chen et al., 2022).

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework for this study. To examine the interplay between source credibility and individuals' health beliefs to their actual health behaviors concerning the ketogenic diet, a research framework that integrates two theoretical perspectives is developed: the Source Credibility Theory and the Health Belief Model.

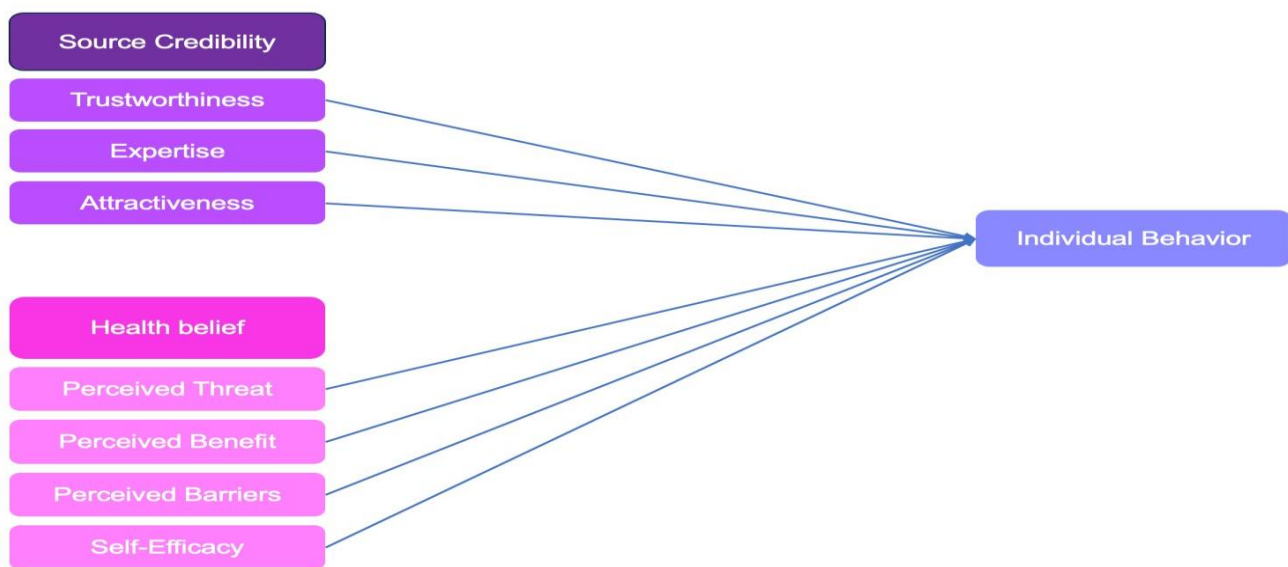


Figure 1: Interplay of Source Credibility, Health Beliefs, and Health Behaviours in Nutritional Medicine Adoption

The framework would visually represent how these factors interact to influence individuals' behaviours. The outcome of this conceptual framework would be a better understanding of how source credibility and health beliefs interact to impact individuals' actual health behaviours concerning nutritional medicine. In health communication research, the Health Belief Model (HBM) and Source Credibility Model (SCM) are two often employed models. They offer a framework for studying how people perceive health risks and make decisions about health-related actions, hence they are seen as being suited for evaluating health behavior.

The Health Belief Model is predicated on the notion that individuals' perceptions of the advantages and drawbacks of acting, as well as cues to action, might predict their health-related actions. The model contends that people are more likely to adopt healthy habits if they sense a threat to their health, feel that acting would be beneficial and will outweigh the costs, and are provided with a cue or trigger to do so (Ghorbani et al., 2021). The Source Credibility Model, on the other hand, highlights the significance of the source of health information in influencing health behaviours. According to the concept, if a person believes that a source is reliable and trustworthy, they are more likely to accept and act on health information (Ohanian, 1990). These two models collectively offer a thorough grasp of how individuals react to and comprehend health information. While the SCM explains how people interpret health information and how it influences their behavior, the HBM explains why people engage in particular health activities. This study can provide a more holistic understanding of the interplay between source credibility, health beliefs, and individual health behaviours within the dynamic environment of healthcare practitioners' social media endorsement of nutritional medicine by addressing these shortcomings.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative approach to investigate how healthcare practitioners use social media to promote nutritional medicine. By employing the case study method, the research analyses two main areas: healthcare practitioners' use of social media as a tool for promoting nutritional medicine and followers' perceptions of these accounts as credible sources of health information. This study will examine two case studies: healthcare practitioners' social media accounts promoting nutritional medicine and their followers' perceptions and behaviors. To assess the credibility of the practitioners' accounts, the study will apply Ohanian's Source Credibility Model (SCM). The Health Belief Model (HBM) will be used to explore followers' beliefs, attitudes, and intentions regarding the promotion of nutritional medicine by healthcare practitioners on social media.

Primary data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, which allow for in-depth exploration of participants' opinions. An interview guide and protocol will be developed based on the research objectives. The researcher will use purposive sampling to select participants who are actively engaged with healthcare practitioners' social media content and have been exposed to nutritional medicine promotions. In summary, this study aims to understand the role of healthcare practitioners' social media in promoting nutritional medicine and how followers perceive and react to this content. By combining credibility assessment and health behavior analysis, the research will provide insights into the effectiveness and influence of social media-based health promotion.

The researcher employs thematic analysis to review and interpret the data obtained from interviewees' responses, to identify patterns and underlie themes. This approach aims to uncover both explicit and implicit ideas present in the data. The identified themes will be used for a deeper understanding of the research topic. Initially, manual coding will be performed to ensure rigor and accuracy in identifying preliminary themes, followed by automated coding using Nvivo software to systematically organize and further validate these themes.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this concept paper is to critically explore the theoretical implications of social media's influence on followers' adoption of nutritional medicine as promoted by healthcare practitioners. Given the significant role digital platforms play in shaping health behaviours, understanding these dynamics is increasingly essential. Theoretically, anticipated themes such as practitioner credibility, trustworthiness, and the effectiveness of visual and interactive content align with existing literature in digital health communication.

This paper expands current theoretical discussions by specifically focusing on nutritional medicine, highlighting unique challenges faced in its promotion through social media. The anticipated themes underscore the critical need for healthcare practitioners to adopt strategic, evidence-based communication approaches to effectively promote nutritional health behaviours. Additionally, the theoretical exploration includes understanding how social media algorithms may influence content visibility, engagement, and overall effectiveness in shaping dietary behaviours.

Importantly, this conceptual analysis identifies potential limitations, primarily due to the speculative nature of anticipated findings, thus emphasizing the necessity for future empirical research. Further studies should empirically validate these theoretical insights and clarify the nuanced role social media plays across various contexts and demographics. Such empirical research could significantly enhance practitioners' capabilities in designing targeted, credible, and impactful social media content, ultimately contributing to improved public health outcomes in nutritional medicine promotion.

FINDINGS

This study anticipates identifying specific insights into followers' motivations for adopting nutritional medicine promoted by healthcare practitioners on social media. The anticipated empirical findings will highlight key themes, including followers' perceptions of practitioners' credibility, their understanding and acceptance of the

proposed health benefits, and the potential barriers they experience, such as encountering conflicting or misleading information online. The findings are expected to reveal in-depth accounts from interviewees, capturing their lived experiences and genuine perceptions regarding nutritional medicine content on social media. It is anticipated that these insights will uncover how followers evaluate and interpret the credibility of healthcare practitioners and the factors that enhance or diminish their trust in the advice provided.

Additionally, the study anticipates uncovering critical challenges faced by followers, including navigating misinformation, reconciling generalized dietary advice with individualized health needs, and managing information overload from various influencers. By highlighting these anticipated challenges, the findings can inform healthcare practitioners about potential pitfalls to avoid in their communication strategies. Ultimately, these anticipated empirical results aim to provide valuable practical insights into how healthcare practitioners can better tailor their social media content to resonate with diverse audience needs, effectively communicate accurate nutritional information, and positively influence health behaviours. The findings will lay a foundation for enhancing targeted and credible health promotion strategies in the digital landscape.

RECOMMENDATION

Future research should prioritize empirical studies that assess the direct effects of social media content on dietary adherence and health outcomes. Additionally, exploring how social media algorithms shape public health messages could enhance our understanding of effective health communication strategies. Qualitative longitudinal studies could be valuable for examining how followers' perceptions and behaviours evolve when exposed to nutritional medicine promotion by healthcare practitioners on social media. Comparing different diets and social media platforms could shed light on the factors influencing follower engagement.

It is also important to explore the dynamics of credibility and trust in practitioner-follower relationships. Narrative inquiry could help uncover the psychological impacts, while examining demographic differences could enrich the findings. Participatory action research and the investigation of technological advancements, such as the integration of AI in diet promotion, could provide insights for improving the effectiveness and reach of these interventions. Future research could also delve into the cultural factors that affect followers' receptiveness to nutritional medicine promotion and analyse how visual and content design influence engagement. Ethical considerations, particularly around misinformation and the role of peer influence on social media are critical areas to explore. Additionally, understanding how engagement metrics impact followers' perceptions and decisions could lead to more effective promotion strategies.

In summary, this concept paper establishes a foundation for exploring the complex relationships between social media, healthcare practitioners, and followers' health behaviours. By investigating these dynamics, the study aims to contribute to the creation of more effective and personalized health communication strategies in the digital era.

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