

## Health in The Age of Social Media: A Review of Online Health Communities and

### Misinformation

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#### ABSTRACT

In the digital age, social media platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram have become pivotal in shaping public perceptions of health, illness, and medical knowledge. This review paper critically examines the sociological dimensions of online health communities and the spread of health-related misinformation on these platforms. While digital spaces have enabled new forms of peer support, democratized access to health information, and amplified the voices of marginalized individuals, they have also facilitated the rapid circulation of unverified, misleading, and sometimes dangerous health content. The paper synthesizes existing sociological literature to explore how social media alters traditional hierarchies of medical authority, influences health behaviour, and contributes to the erosion or reinforcement of public trust in scientific and medical institutions. Key themes discussed include the formation of online health communities, the role of influencers and algorithms in shaping health



discourse, and the sociopolitical implications of health misinformation, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The review concludes by identifying gaps in the current research and suggesting directions for future sociological inquiry into the complex interplay between health, technology, and society in the digital era.

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## **Introduction**

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed how an individual access, interpret, and shares health-related information. Among the most significant developments in recent years is the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok as central venues for health communication and discourse. No longer confined to clinics, hospitals, or formal health education settings, health knowledge now circulates in real-time through user-generated content, influencer narratives, and peer-to-peer interactions. This shift has made health information more accessible to a wider public, especially in regions where formal health services may be limited or stigmatized. Social media platforms have enabled the emergence of online health communities, virtual spaces where individuals share personal health experiences, seek advice, and form support networks around specific conditions such as diabetes, cancer, mental health issues, reproductive health, and rare diseases.

These communities can be empowering, especially for marginalized groups whose voices may be overlooked in traditional medical institutions. They provide emotional support, reduce isolation, and democratize the production of medical knowledge. Yet, this transformation also raises critical sociological concerns. Alongside genuine support and information-sharing, social media has become a fertile ground for misinformation, health rumours, pseudoscience, and conspiracy theories. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, platforms like WhatsApp and YouTube were widely used to spread unverified treatments, vaccine scepticism, and anti-science sentiments, contributing to public confusion and undermining public health efforts. This dual role of social media as both a tool for health empowerment and a source of misinformation demands a nuanced sociological examination. Also, the algorithmic logic of social media platforms tends to prioritize content that is emotionally charged, visually appealing, or highly engaging, regardless of its factual accuracy. This creates “echo chambers” where



misleading or harmful health information can be amplified. The blurring of boundaries between expert knowledge and lay opinions, the rise of health influencers, and the commodification of wellness culture also complicate traditional ideas about medical authority and patient agency.

This review paper explores the intersection of health, technology, and society by critically examining how social media platforms are reshaping public perceptions of health and illness. Drawing upon contemporary sociological theories and empirical studies, it reviews the role of online health communities, the social dynamics of misinformation, and the broader implications for health literacy, trust in institutions, and the production of biomedical knowledge in the digital age.

### **Research Methodology**

This paper uses a qualitative, narrative literature review method also draws on a wide range of academic journal articles, reports, and empirical studies published between 2000 and 2024 from disciplines such as sociology, media studies, and public health. Key databases consulted include Google Scholar, PubMed, JSTOR, and Scopus. The review focuses on how social media platforms influence public understanding of health, the spread of misinformation, and changes in health-related behaviours and beliefs. The sources were selected based on relevance, recency, and contribution to the sociological understanding of health in digital spaces. The review is organized around three main themes that emerged during analysis:

- (1) Online health communities
- (2) Health misinformation
- (3) Commercialization and influencer culture.

### **Literature review**

#### **Online Health Communities and the Restructuring of Medical Authority**

Online health communities (OHCs) have transformed how individual access and share health-related knowledge. These digital spaces, often hosted on platforms like Reddit, Facebook, and disease-specific forums, enable users to exchange personal experiences and peer advice, reshaping the traditional hierarchy of medical expertise. Hardey (1999) was among the first to document how patients were becoming more active participants in their healthcare, challenging the authority of physicians through internet-based knowledge. The idea of the “informed patient” has since expanded to include the “expert patient” someone



who gains credibility within online spaces through experiential knowledge rather than formal medical training (Fox, Ward, & O'Rourke, 2005).

Ziebland and Wyke (2012) highlight the emotional and social support functions of online health communities, especially for people with chronic or stigmatized conditions. These networks often provide validation and comfort that clinical encounters may lack, suggesting a shift toward more communal forms of care. Yet, this decentralization of authority is not without risk. As Lupton (2014) points out, digital health participation is not evenly distributed and may reflect broader inequalities in access to technology and digital literacy.

### **The Dynamics of Health Misinformation in Digital Spaces**

One of the most critical challenges in digital health communication is the spread of misinformation. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored how rapidly false or misleading health information can circulate on platforms like WhatsApp and YouTube, contributing to what the WHO labeled an “infodemic.” Bridgman et al. (2020) found that misinformation spread faster on social media than corrections by public health authorities. This dynamic is partly due to platform algorithms that prioritize engaging content over factual accuracy. Allington et al. (2020) argue that the popularity of conspiracy theories and anti-vaccine sentiments is linked to declining trust in political and medical institutions. Donovan (2020) emphasizes the sociopolitical dimension of misinformation, suggesting that it thrives in polarized environments where identity and ideology override evidence. Cinelli et al. (2020) used cross-platform analysis to show that echo chambers reinforce these beliefs, making misinformation more resistant to correction. Jolley and Douglas (2014) demonstrate the behavioural consequences of misinformation, finding that belief in vaccine conspiracies directly correlates with vaccine hesitancy.

### **Platform Politics, Health Influencers, and the Commercialization of Wellness**

The rise of health influencers and the commodification of wellness culture on social media reflect broader shifts in how health is marketed and consumed. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have turned health into a lifestyle brand, with influencers promoting everything from diets and supplements to alternative therapies. Lupton (2016) discusses how health influencers represent a form of “soft authority,” drawing followers through relatability rather than credentials. These influencers often blend personal narratives with product promotions, blurring the line between empowerment and marketing. Abidin (2016) introduces the concept of “calibrated amateurism,” where influencers perform authenticity to gain



followers' trust, making their health recommendations appear more believable even when lacking scientific basis. The wellness industry, driven by neoliberal ideologies of self-optimization and personal responsibility, aligns well with social media's visual and individualistic culture. Cairns and Johnston (2015) argue that wellness culture reinforces class-based health distinctions by promoting consumption-based pathways to "health." Moreover, platform policies often lag behind the ethical implications of influencer marketing. Fuchs (2017) highlights the complicity of digital capitalism in turning health concerns into data and profit streams, raising concerns about surveillance and exploitation.

### **Conclusion**

Social media has profoundly reshaped how people engage with health information, support, and care. On one hand, online platforms have created new spaces for community-building, peer support, and patient empowerment, especially among those with chronic or stigmatized conditions. On the other hand, these same platforms have also become major channels for the spread of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and unverified health claims, often driven by algorithmic amplification and influencer culture. This dual nature of social media, as both a helpful tool and a source of confusion, reflects deeper issues related to trust in institutions, digital inequality, and the commercialization of health. Sociological insights are essential in understanding how people interpret health messages in these environments and how social, cultural, and economic factors shape their responses. Moving forward, there is a need for stronger digital health literacy, responsible platform governance, and more inclusive research that captures diverse user experiences. As society becomes increasingly digitized, understanding the sociological dynamics of health on social media will be crucial for building more ethical and effective health communication systems.

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