

EXAMINING SOCIAL MEDIA AND HEALTH COMMUNICATION: SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CRITICAL ILLNESS

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Abstract

Figures of social media users have been amplifying drastically in the past decade. The last two years have seen the additive role of social media particularly in the domain of health communication. This platform is being used by healthcare professionals, patients, caregivers for fulfilling their diverse health-related needs. The option of instant penetration, overcoming shortcomings of time and distance enabled this channel of communication to gain fuel in the field of health care. Health communication along with social media sprouted as a multifaceted approach used to reach different audiences fulfilling their assorted needs and requirement, and percolate deeper creating behavioural changes. Social media crafted a path for innovation of terms such as e-health, digital health, etc. This paper is a secondary review paper understanding the reach and potential of the diverse changes being brought in by social media in the arena of health communication. The Paper further expounds on the role of social media in health communication particularly in the lives of critically ill, like cancer patients. It also draws inferences between social media and health communication concluding its importance in the domain of health care.

Key words – *Social Media, E- Health, Digitalisation, Critically ill*

INTRODUCTION

Changing people's attitudes, convincing them to adopt a particular measure, to improve their

health has always been a challenge for the establishment or any agency. An example

of resounding people for vaccination for children in the past, to vaccination of covid in the present, tells the complexity of the task. These arguments tell the importance of health communication in the lives of the common man. Health communication is an evolving and increasingly prominent field in both the public and commercial health sectors. It has a multi-disciplinary nature which further delimits it. There are varying definitions available defining health communication in multiple ways. However, if we analyse the given definitions the crux of them comes out to be that it is a term that holds a pertinent position in the lives of the common man, communities, healthcare professions, policymakers to use this term in effect to make behavioural changes. Creating a desired change of perspective while making decisions related to health. "Understanding the true meaning of health communication and establishing the right context for its implementation may help communication managers and other health care professionals identify early, the training needs of staff and others who are involved in the communication process" (Influence perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes that may change social norms, NCI, 2002, p. 3). It sets goals for a particular organization to work in a particular direction or devise a particular strategy to reach the health goals which are pre-set in the minds of the

organizers. Almost all definitions of health communication aim towards improving health outcomes of individuals, groups or communities, or nations. This paper is a secondary review paper to set the premises of importance of social media in the domain of health communication, in the lives of critically ill. Restricting to two critical illnesses cancer and cardiovascular because of the death rates they have in our country. Paper throws light on the dynamic role of social media which is constantly evolving in the health sector. Moving forward to understand the term health communication better it is important to define 'health' and 'communication' then together set the foundation for health communication.

WHAT IS HEALTH

As aptly said in the words of Mahatma Gandhi it is health which is real wealth and not pieces of gold and silver. WHO in 1947 defined health as complete wellbeing of physical, social, and emotional and not mere absence of disease. With the changing needs of society, the definition of health has also been altering. Trying to absorb and correctly define the needs of the people to represent themselves as healthy individuals. As observed by WHO Report 2020 life expectancy slowly and steadily increased during the course of the 20th century resulting in a change in the

concept of health for both individuals and society. This has been primarily because of the advancement of technology, particularly in the health sector. The traditional fear of living has been replaced by finding the best techniques to live a healthy life. Lawrence Henderson recognized adaptability as a basic biological phenomenon. Correct nutritional requirements and haemostatic mechanisms have a directly proportional relationship. Apart from the importance health holds for every individual, health is also regarded as an indicator for a prosperous society. These ideas seem embodied in the World Health Organization's (WHO's) definition of health: "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." The most significant and sprouting problem is how to convert this definition into practical applicability. Since according to NCB getting access to measures to remain healthy is a right of an individual. This has further strengthened this term and has been included in the list of determinants of health.

WHAT IS COMMUNICATION

Communication is defined in this way: "1. Exchange of information, between individuals, for example, using speaking, writing, or using a common system of signs and behaviours; 2.

Messages spoken or written message; 3. Act of communicating; 4. Rapport a sense of mutual understanding and sympathy; 5. Access a means of access or communication, for example, a connecting door" (Encarta Dictionary: English, North America). Communication can be verbal, non-verbal, symbolic, written, audio, in any form depending on who the target audience is. The various definitions of communication can help give concrete meaning to various modes of health communication programs. Health communication should generally be a two-way communication that is based on a common set of signs and behaviours. For health communication, it is vital to create a feeling of sympathy and belongingness among the members of the communication channel.

The roots of communication reside in the basic need of people to share their feelings, emotions, and ideas. If we analyse earlier forms of communications such as writings, drawings, etc. It depicts one of the many reasons why people started graphic communication and other forms of writings one of them being health communication.

HEALTH COMMUNICATION DEFINED

Health communication aims at impelling individuals or communities or societies. Its

major goal is to improve the health outcomes of the target population. The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) define health communication as “the study and use of communication strategies to inform and influence individual and community decisions that enhance health”. Thus, the major function of health communication is to influence people to have behavioural changes. The word influence is also included in the Healthy People 2010 definition of health communication as “the art and technique of informing, influencing, and motivating individual, institutional, and public audiences about important health issues” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005, p. 11-2).

Health communication intrusion has been applied to various profit, non-profit organizations, other corporate sectors to achieve health-related goals. “As many authors have noted, health communication draws from numerous disciplines, including health education, mass and speech communication, marketing, social marketing, psychology, anthropology, and sociology” (Bernhardt, 2004; Institute of Medicine, 2003; World Health Organization, 2003). “It relies on different communication activities or action areas, including interpersonal communications, public relations, public advocacy, community mobilization, and

professional communications” (World Health Organization, 2003; Bernhardt, 2004). One of the most critical characteristics of health communication is sustainability. The behavioural change must be sustained and not be a one-day activity. Elements of a health communication program or campaign that includes long-term planning should encapsulate long-term goals, should devise strategies to make the program sustainable as well as designing a message which can easily be adopted and imbibed by the target audience. Thus, we can define health communication as

Health communication is a multi-layered as well a multi-dimensional discipline. With the intention of reaching the target audience to influence them and bring about a desired long-lasting behavioural change. It involves the common man, communities, societies, government, and private setups as well as healthcare professionals. So that that they can come up with a policy that can create a behavioural change that can ultimately lead to improved health outcomes.

“Health communication is about improving health outcomes by encouraging behaviour modification and social change. It is increasingly considered an integral part of most public health interventions” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,

2005). Now if we try and explain each keyword of the definition of health communication literature gives it roots and authenticity making it more meaningful. "Health communication is a key strategy to inform the public about health concerns and to maintain important health issues on the public agenda" (New South Wales Department of Health, Australia, 2006).

Finally, it should be remembered that for health communication to act as a magic bullet it should always remain open to various interventions and technological advancements. It is an evolving field and needs to incorporate various lessons as and when it moves forward or learns something new or fails. With the addition of social media health communication has overcome the hindrance of reach, time, and geographical limitations. So, to understand the incorporation of social media in health communication it is vital to get a brief overview of social media.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social networks are a way of creating an image for the public or semi-public profile. It works systematically within a wired system. Sites are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system. "To articulate a list of other

users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system"(d. m. Boyd and N. B. Ellison, "Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 13, no. 1, p. 210–230, 2007) With the convergence of media social media has penetrated in every household and every individual's life in the form of smartphones. With the extensive use of the internet social network has become a dominant and omnipresent form of human interaction, and it constantly changing and evolving the modes of interface and evolving mediated communication. "At least 8 billion minutes are spent on Facebook each day. One of the reasons Facebook is so addictive is because it is a convenient way to track the life of your friends. India has the second-largest online market in the world.

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN HEALTH COMMUNICATION

Major dimensions of access to health services are affordability, acceptability, accommodation, availability, and accessibility. Seventy-two percent of the Indian population lives in semi-urban and rural areas. The skewed patient-doctor ratio further makes it difficult for the common man to get the health facility they deserve. The health cost is becoming

unaffordable with passing time, demographics are changing, the population is increasing thus our economies require a proper channel of health communication. A developing country like India is burdened with a great disease load because of the inversely proportional relationship between increasing population and good quality health infrastructure. Here arises the need to incorporate new technologies in the healthcare system to overcome the loopholes and become more accessible and better.

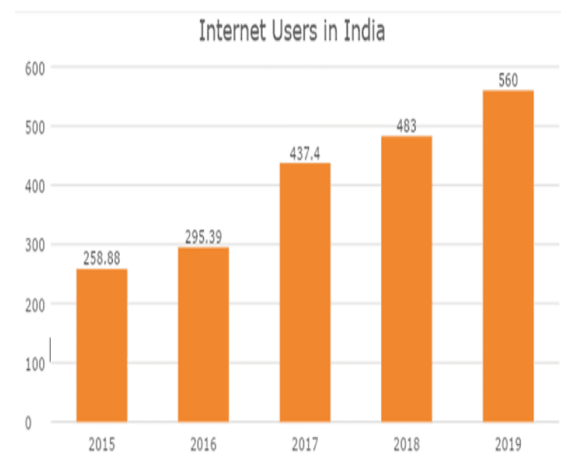
“Social media is now a buzzword in the new generation of digital communications. Social networks are networks that link people and machines” (Wellman B, Hay Thornthwaite CA, *The Internet in everyday life*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub; 2002). A lot of efforts have been made to digitalise the healthcare sector, particularly in the rural and semi-urban areas by encasing the power of digital smartphones.

Physicians most often join online communities where they can read news articles, listen to experts, research medical developments, consult colleagues regarding patient issues, and network (George DR, Rovniak LS, Kraschnewski JL *Clin Obstet Gynecol*. 2013 Sep, p.453-62.).








Patients should have been central in the mechanism of healthcare delivery however

their inputs have always been in the last of ranking. But with the influx of social media, this is changing, and patients are playing a stronger role across various dimensions and patient-centred healthcare is slowly and gradually sprouting across the health care domain. An example of this is patient focussed medicines development (PFMD) an initiative making active use of social media to integrate the voice of the patients. The increased importance of social media usage in health communication gave birth to the term ‘Digital health’.

INTERNET PENETRATION & AUDIENCE ON TOP SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES



SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE IN INDIA

Social Networking Site	Monthly Visits	Mobile Traffic Share	Desktop Traffic share
Facebook 	1.6 Billion	99.25%	0.75%
YouTube 	1.2 Billion	59.96%	40.04%
Quora 	215.8 Million	98.89%	1.11%
Instagram 	191.1 Million	99.02%	0.98%
Twitter 	125.2 Million	97.81%	2.19%
Pinterest 	49.8 Million	98.40%	1.60%
LinkedIn 	29.9 Million	90.97%	9.03%

DIGITAL HEALTH

The Indian government also realised the potential of digital technologies in the health care sector and hence launched the national digital health mission (NDHM). E-health is seen following a trend the care provided to tier 1 cities are being replicated in tier 2 and tier 3 cities and this is happening with the help of the internet through e- consultations, telemedicine, and another similar sort of technological innovations. This trend is surfacing to the level where e ICUs and neonatal units can be observed and taken care of without the doctor being present there.

“India currently has more than 11.5 lakh doctors, more than 25,000 government hospitals, and more than 7 lakh beds in these hospitals. These sizeable assets, which are being improved upon, can be extended and more optimally utilised by using digital approaches to healthcare” (NDHM report 2020). This proves to be a solution-driven approach that can change and alter the healthcare landscape of our country

drastically. Another important usage of digitalisation is online training and education of the medical professionals, now geographical imitation is no longer a hindrance. A related trend is that with the need for greater accreditation, hospitals and doctors are investing in knowledge to be on par with global standards. What we saw in the last year was an abundance of webinars and online discussions—all great forums for practicing doctors to participate in and get updated on the latest techniques in medicine and surgery. This undoubtedly results in better diagnosis and care. “Coming back to the NDHM (which saw more than 1 lakh health IDs being created within a month of its launch), it provides a stellar benefit in ensuring the safe and secure availability of patient medical records across the country” (NDHM Report 2020). These statistics provided by website statica show how people have accepted the changed form of health communication and what the future looks like.

As provided by the website statica these are the statistics which show the future of digital healthcare.

Characteristic	2015	2016	2017	2018
		6		1
Health IT	-	134	-	280

mHealth	-	23	-	-
Wearables	0.28	-	-	-
EHR/EMR	-	23	-	-
Personal genomics Population	-	-	15	-
Health Management	-	9	-	-
Medical Imaging	-	53	-	-
Telehealth	-	2.5	-	-
Gamification in Healthcare	-	16	-	-

CRITICALLY ILL PATIENTS

Critically ill patients are those patients who are suffering from a life-threatening disease such as cancer cardiovascular disease, diabetes, etc which have life-altering impacts. Such patients are generally looking for answers to their problems and are also looking forward to some medium where they get emotional as well as mental support. And the impact of critical illness is not just limited to the patients but is extended to the family, particularly to the caregivers. In such situations, social media

proves to be of great help. Critical illness which has been picked by random selection method which this paper particularly talks about is cancer.

CANCER

As defined by Harsha Moraliyage in the article *Cancer in the lockdown, 2020* Cancer is a generic term for a large group of diseases that can affect any part of the body. One defining feature of cancer is the rapid creation of abnormal cells that grow beyond their usual boundaries, and which can then invade adjoining parts of the body and spread to other organs. As cited in the article *communication in Cancer care by the National Institute of Cancer*, this disease is a leading cause of death worldwide, accounting for nearly 10 million deaths in 2020. The burden and spectrum of disease in India has witnessed a major transition from predominantly infectious diseases and malnutrition to Non-Communicable Diseases during the last two decades. Among the NCDs, Cancer is emerging as a significant public health problem. In India due to lifestyle and environmental factors. As per the recent National Cancer Registry Programme (NCRP) report 2020, the Cancer burden in India was 1.26 million cases in 2016, 1.39 million in 2020, and expected to increase to 1.57 million cases by 2025. Despite

significant progress made in the field of health care, several challenges related to Cancer management still need to be addressed. Major areas of concern are limited health care infrastructure, resource constraints, and shortage of oncology workforce. Access and affordability to health care is a major issue of concern for a significant proportion of Indian Cancer patients. There is a need to explore innovative methods, including leveraging technology to further strengthen Cancer care services in India. "As oncology care hangs on a fine-scale balance amidst the Covid pandemic, striking a balance between delivering or delaying treatment during the crisis, becomes crucial not only for oncology patients but also for the treating clinician," wrote Divyesh Kumar, MD, and Treshita Dey, MD, in *recent perspective on oncology treatment delays during the COVID-19, 20*. Digital transformation is the assimilation of digital technology with patients, healthcare providers, and regulators. Healthcare transformation will add an opportunity to translate new data into actionable information, allowing earlier diagnosis and precise treatment options. This integration of innovative technologies will improve the patient's experience" (Social informatic research unit Report, 2021)

Thus, it cannot be denied that the need of the hour is massive digital emotionalization in the health care sector, which can help the vulnerable as well as the non-vulnerable population during such tough times of health crisis being faced by our country.

One of the offshoots of digitalisation in the health communication is virtual cancer care or VCC "With digitalisation in the healthcare system, a quantum leap forward has taken place in VCC, while the will and means to change attitudes exist and tackle some of the regulatory hurdles that have prevented the more widespread adoption of VCC. Now is the time to take a data-driven and patient-centred approach to learning how to optimally deliver VCC, both during the crisis and in the future" (Nicholas, 20). The various components of VCC technology are as follows: -

➤ **Patient Centered and Equitable**

Once the data of virtual Cancer communication is analysed then tools need to be designated to address the problems of requirements and needs of the patients as well as the caregivers. Without the inclusion of voices of the patients this model will not be able to cater to all the requirements of the receivers. Patients from all segments rural and urban need to be included in this program. This will allow for the creation of care delivery

models that are generalizable, representative, and equitable.

➤ **Appropriateness**

This model helps in understanding when a visit can be virtual and when it is unavoidable to visit a doctor in person. To design and build effective and resilient VCC delivery models, One approach is to develop a triage framework that is designed to encompass patient characteristics, cancer features, and treatment-related details. These variables will be used to decide whether VCC or in-person assessment is appropriate.

➤ **Medical Education**

Medical school and residency training have to be updated to cater to the changing paradigms of health care. As the full spectrum of healthcare providers and allied health moves to virtual platforms to support patients with acute and chronic issues, complete training in this paradigm shift in healthcare delivery needs to be given to health care professionals.

The next major shift that came in the healthcare industry was the boom of telemedicine. Telemedicine proved to be an inclusive and robust mechanism that paved its way in the healthcare industry during the times of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety.

CONCLUSION

It is pertinent to provide an outlet to promote translational health communication effective data dissemination in ways that allow users to not only adopt and get knowledge but create knowledge and share it as well. Social media is one such platform that provides greater reach, diminishes the boundaries, and provides effective health communication with greater efficiency and lower costs for the common masses. “As with other technological innovations in healthcare, these efficiencies may be viewed by those providing funding as an opportunity to decrease budgets and increase the scope of health promotion activity delivered by health education specialists and their organizations” (Barrett KP, Mac Sweeney R. social media in Critical Care. *Int Anaesthesia Clin*, 2019, p.103–17). This mode of communication may reduce dependence on traditional media of communication if not replaced completely.

Health communication specialists must devise campaigns and strategies particularly keeping in mind the target audience and the various segments of the population to increase e-health, and e-literacy. Social media can be used effectively like it was used to fight corona globally, which united everyone on one platform. Examples of social media platforms

helping critically ill are Facebook online health groups, Twitter, You tube, WhatsApp groups.

Thus, this paper elucidates a better understanding of how social media can have a multidisciplinary and innovative approach to help the critically ill. This article delves into socio-cognitive and affective factors that help in improving community engagement and establishing a positive relationship between the users and the various social media platforms.

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