

Appropriate Information for meaningful appropriation: An attempt to understand the relevance and veracity of Health Communication in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The rise of modern social media platforms has revolutionized information sharing, notably in health communication. This study aimed to explore the widespread adoption of new media for health-related enquiries, communication, and advice-seeking. It aims to assess the credibility of health information disseminated through social media and its increasing use for general health queries and specific conditions. Employing a comprehensive mixed-methods approach, this study aims to identify the factors that drive individuals' engagement with digital platforms related to health issues. It holds promise for illuminating the influence of social and new media on public health discourse and individuals' verification practices.

INTRODUCTION

We are living in an information era where we have access to information from various sources, such as television, books, magazines, websites, blogs, and social media platforms. Innovation in social media platforms powered by digitization connects

people worldwide. Among the various communication media and messages, communication about health and health-related information is significant. Social Media platforms are one of the platforms for disseminating health communication. In the modern age, the growth of social media platforms has given users access to many

information resources. Recently, seeking and sharing health-related information on social media has become common. According to a Pew Survey (Fox & Duggan, 2013) conducted in America, 59% of American adults use online resources to obtain health-related information. Most people use internet sources to seek health-related information rather than going to the Doctor (Hu & Hargraves, 2003, 1-4).

This study aims to explore the adoption of new media, particularly in the context of seeking health-related information, communicating about health, and obtaining health advice. Furthermore, this study plans to analyse the relevance and veracity of information disseminated through social media. This study aims to gain an understanding of the fundamental causes and factors that influence people's interactions with social media and new media platforms concerning their health issues.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. This study attempts to understand the adaptation of new media for health-related information by the prominent.
2. A quest to analyses the relevance and veracity of health information disseminated through social media platforms.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Formation of information

Information serves as the fundamental "lifeblood" of the world, transforming raw human experience into the knowledge essential for survival and well-being. While thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes (1651) initially downplayed the significance of new media, such as the printing press, favoring the original creation

of words, history demonstrates that every medium fundamentally alters human cognition. This complexity is further evidenced by the Western discovery of African drum languages; while early explorers like Francis Moore (1767) perceived drums as mere tools for basic tactical signals like "attack" or "retreat," later researchers such as John F. Carrington (1974) revealed they were actually sophisticated instruments used to transmit poetry, humor, and prayer through a unique, modified language.

Beyond cultural expression, information is deeply embedded in biology (Werner R. Lowenstein (1999) asserts that information is encoded within genes and processed by every cell, suggesting that life itself spreads through these biological networks. However, the transition to visual media has several drawbacks. Jonathan Miller (1972) notes that while speech is a holistic, multi-sensory experience, the alphabet and print media can lead to "visual specialization and fragmentation," creating a "desert of classified data" that restricts the fluid nature of human interaction.

The vitality of appropriate information for Human beings

Modern engagement with information has evolved from a purely academic skill to a fundamental aspect of the "digital human" identity. Lynch (2017) posits that society has moved past the stage of feeling overwhelmed by technology, instead accepting it as a new reality in which digital habits become so deeply integrated into daily life that they are difficult to isolate or evaluate. This shift necessitates a contemporary understanding of how these behaviors reshape social structures and personal identities.

Furthermore, the scope of information literacy has expanded significantly, beyond traditional research. Kim et al. (2014) observe that literacy now encompasses personal and professional spheres, including the frequent use of social networking sites as primary information sources. A specialized branch of this literacy is "eHealth literacy", which Norman and Skinner (2006) define as the ability to find, appraise, and apply electronic health information to solve medical issues. As the Internet becomes the dominant source of health data across all demographics, these digital competencies are increasingly vital for individual well-being and effective problem-solving in modern society.

The essentiality of information for meaningful human Living

In the contemporary information landscape, information literacy has evolved from a technical skill into a vital tool for individual and community empowerment across sectors such as health, education, and economic development (Garner, 2006). This literacy now requires a blend of critical thinking and interpretive abilities to navigate a "rapidly changing information matrix", where the speed of content creation—especially on social media—often outpaces thoughtful reflection, leading to potential societal risks (Poirier & Robinson, 2014).

A significant shift in information behavior is the blurring of the boundaries between formal and informal sources. For example, while academia often views Wikipedia as non-authoritative, many users have established its credibility by tracing its citations to scholarly literature and traditional encyclopedias (Martzoukou & Abdi, 2017). This dynamic environment, fueled by advancements in computing, allows for greater user content engagement

and easier access to knowledge compared to traditional media.

The rise of digital media has particularly impacted health information seeking behavior. While many users, especially youth, turn to social media for the speed and convenience of finding natural remedies or fitness advice (Choudhury et al., 2014), the quality and trustworthiness of this information are contentious. While some scholars highlight the prevalence of misinformation and the individual responsibility to verify content (Thompson & Lazer, 2020), others note that serious health seekers are often diligent and use varied sources to ensure the accuracy of the data they find (Morahan-Martin, 2004). Ultimately, as digital media use surges globally, including in contexts such as India, understanding these behaviors becomes inevitable for modern society.

HYPOTHESIS

Social media platforms are reshaping how audiences consume health information; however, this trend is often undermined by the prevalence of misinformation and unreliable sources.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate health communication perceptions in India's Tirunelveli District, the researcher utilized a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative surveys with qualitative in-depth interviews. This dual strategy was chosen to capture both the broad trends in perception and nuanced individual perspectives on the complexities of social media information.

The study initially employed a survey tool to efficiently gather data from 125 respondents, prioritizing participant anonymity to ensure honest feedback on sensitive health topics. Purposive sampling was used to select eight

participants from the initial pool for in-depth interviews. These interviews allowed the researcher to move beyond numerical data and capture rich, detailed accounts of the participants' experiences, emotions, and nonverbal cues. This methodology was particularly relevant to the local context, where the researcher noted prevalent confusion among the population regarding how to navigate and validate health information found on social media.

DATA ANALYSIS AND REFLECTION

Communication messages and appropriation influences on Digital Natives

Understanding the audiences

In the Tirunelveli district, a study of 125 respondents revealed a significant reliance on digital platforms for health communication, with 90.2% of the participants actively using social media to seek and share health-related information. The survey demographic skewed slightly male (58.4%) and was predominantly composed of digital natives (those born after

1995), who accounted for 68.5% of the sample size. In contrast, 31.5% were identified as digital migrants, reflecting a population in the process of adapting to digital tool use. Despite this generational mix, the overwhelming engagement with online health data suggests that social media has become the primary infrastructure for public health literacy in the region.

Social Media Influence on Digital Natives

Digital natives, defined as individuals who have spent their entire lives immersed in technology-rich environments, demonstrate a clear preference for visual and interactive platforms when seeking health-related information. According to recent survey data, YouTube is the dominant source for this demographic, utilized by 55.5% of young users. This is followed by Instagram at 32.8%, while traditional text-based or older social networking sites like Facebook (6.7%) and X (5%) see significantly lower engagement for health-related queries. These findings highlight a generational shift toward video-centric and algorithm-driven content for personal health education.

Digital natives- social media usage	
Platform	Percentage
YouTube	55.5%
Instagram	32.8%
Facebook	6.7%
Twitter or X	5.0%

Qualitative insights from in-depth interviews with four digital natives (two male, two female) indicate that social media is the

preferred medium for health information due to its ease of access, simplified explanations

of complex issues, and affordability of content, particularly on YouTube.

Social media and Health Information

Research findings indicate that male digital natives primarily utilise social media to enhance their physical appearance, focusing on fitness routines and exercise content. Qualitative interviews suggest that these users are motivated by "self-improvement journeys", specifically targeting goals such as weight gain and skin care. While general health concerns (e.g. colds, headaches) and nutritional advice are secondary interests, areas such as mental health and specific medical conditions receive significantly less engagement from this group of users.

Female digital natives mirror the male preference for fitness but place a significantly higher priority on aesthetic concerns such as skincare, hair growth, and hair fall control. Qualitative interviews highlighted that women utilise these platforms not only for beauty remedies but also as a practical tool for lifestyle management, including establishing healthier dietary habits and tracking reproductive health (e.g. irregular periods). While social media serves as a vital resource for daily wellness, such as hydration and nutrition, deep medical conditions and mental health topics remain less explored among this demographic.

Digital natives - Use of social media to seek health information		
Purpose	male	Female
General health tips	17.8%	15.2%
Medical conditions and treatment	8.9%	8.9%
Nutrition and diet	10.4%	14.3%
Fitness or Exercise	25.9%	17.9%
Mental health and wellness	13.3%	10.7%
Beauty tips and remedies	8.1%	17%
Healthy food habits	15.6%	16.1%

Reliability of Health Information on Social Media

Using a semantic scale to measure perceived reliability, research indicates that digital

natives maintain cautious and fragmented trust in social media health content. While 32.4% viewed the information as "slightly trustworthy", the majority maintain a neutral

or skeptical stance, with 25.7% remaining neutral and a significant portion finding it "slightly untrustworthy" (20.3%). Qualitative interviews confirmed this "cautious mindset", revealing that while

some users find the content personally beneficial, many emphasise the necessity of critical thinking and source evaluation to navigate the prevalence of misinformation.

Digital Natives- Trustworthiness of social media health information

Trustworthiness Level	Percentage
Very Trustworthy	9.5%
Moderately Trustworthy	5.4%
Slightly Trustworthy	32.4%
Neutral	25.7%
Slightly Untrustworthy	20.3%
Moderately Untrustworthy	4.1%
Very Untrustworthy	2.7%

Accuracy of Health Information on Social media

Digital natives demonstrate a proactive but varied approach to information verification, with most engaging in some form of fact-checking. Data from a 7-point Likert scale indicates that 15.6% of users verify health content every time, while a combined 52% do so either "frequently" or "occasionally."

Qualitative interviews revealed that this behaviour is often driven by the "inconsistency" of online remedies and a reliance on secondary research, such as Google searches, to validate claims. While a small minority (6.5%) never verify information, most respondents prioritize discernment, especially when the content directly impacts their personal health practices

Digital Natives - Checking the accuracy of information

Frequency	Percentage
Every time	15.6%

Usually	2.6%
Frequently	23.4%
Occasionally	28.6%
Sometimes	14.3%
Rarely	9.1%
Never	6.5%

Trustworthiness of Health Information on Social Media

Digital natives face significant hurdles when navigating the landscape of online health information, primarily driven by the difficulty in sifting through "noise" to find credible sources. According to the data, 36.6% of users struggle to identify trustworthy sources, while nearly a quarter (24.7%) lack the time or energy for rigorous fact-checking.

This creates a reliance on social media metrics as a shortcut for credibility;

22.6% of individuals trust content simply because it has high engagement, such as likes and shares. Qualitative interviews reflect these statistics, with young adults admitting that they sometimes share popular videos without verification owing to time constraints or the sheer exhaustion of sifting through the 16.1% of content they find overwhelming. Ultimately, the abundance of irrelevant data makes identifying reliable health information a daunting and often avoided task.

Digital Natives - Verification techniques used to validate	
Verification Technique	Percentage
Checking the credentials of the channel or organization	15.3%
Cross-referencing	30.6%
Reading comments and reviews	25.2%
Consulting with a doctor	28.8%

Health Information and Misinformation

Digital natives demonstrate a high level of digital literacy and a cautious

approach to online health content, actively utilising diverse verification strategies to mitigate misinformation risks. Data suggest that 28.8% of these individuals consult medical professionals before acting on information, while 25.2% rely on community feedback, such as comments and reviews, to gauge accuracy. Furthermore, 15.3% meticulously vetted the credentials of content creators, often using external search engines to confirm a speaker's medical background.

Qualitative insights highlight a multi-platform approach to validation; users often cross-reference social media claims with trusted organisations on X (formerly Twitter) or use Google to identify a "majority consensus" among credible sources. This proactive behaviour, ranging from background checks to professional consultations, underscores a sophisticated refusal to accept health information at face value without rigorous cross-verification.

Digital Natives - Reasons for verify the Health Information

Reason	Percentage
Past experiences with misinformation	7.3%
Seriousness of the topic	27.1%
Seeing conflict Information on same topic	24.0%
Personal relevance or impact	41.7%

Significance of Health Information on Social Media

The motivation for digital natives to verify health information is primarily driven by perceived personal risk and the gravity of the subject matter. Research indicates that 41.7% of individuals are prompted to verify content when it holds personal significance to them or their family, while 27.1% do so if the health topic is deemed serious. Conflicting information also acts as a catalyst, with 24% seeking validation when encountering contradictory claims.

Qualitative accounts further emphasise that the decision to fact-check is often a defensive response to past failures; for instance, personal experiences with ineffective natural remedies or the awareness that content is often created solely for "views" leads to a more sceptical mindset. This suggests that for digital natives, verification is not just a routine habit but a targeted action triggered by the high stakes of physical well-being and a desire to avoid the consequences of misinformation.

Digital Natives - Barriers or challenges while verifying the information

Barrier	Percentage
Trusting content based on likes	22.6%
Difficult to find a reliable source	36.6%
Overwhelming information on health topics	16.1%
Lack of time or Effort	24.7%

Health Information on Social Media as Messages of Health Awareness

Digital natives primarily share health information on social media to raise awareness and support their community's well-being. Driven by a desire to inform and care for others, respondents highlighted a focus on available treatments (24 people)

and preventive measures (18 people). Qualitative interviews suggest that this sharing is often highly targeted; users pass along useful content to friends or family dealing with specific health issues or use it to encourage healthy habits, such as manageable fitness routines among their peers.

Digital Natives - Reasons for sharing Health information	
Reason	Percentage
Preventing	18%
Awareness	34%
Let others know about treatments	24%
Care	24%

Digital natives frequently translate online health information into real-world lifestyle changes, particularly in terms of physical fitness. The data show that 62.8% of males have modified their exercise and workout routines based on social media guidance, while 18.6% have adjusted their dietary habits. Personal accounts reinforce these trends, with users reporting positive outcomes from following specific weight

gain tips and specialised workout regimens discovered online.

Female digital natives actively use social media to influence their health and wellness routines, with 39.4% adopting workout plans and 33.3% exploring natural remedies through social media. Additionally, over 27% of the participants had adjusted their dietary habits, such as reducing junk food consumption. Qualitative

responses highlighted the practical application of these trends, with women reporting successful outcomes from using platforms to manage menstrual health,

experimenting with natural beauty treatments such as aloe vera, and cultivating healthier eating patterns.

Digital Natives Male - Adaptation from the influence of social media		
Adaptation	Male	Female
Changed food habits	9.3%	21.2%
Changed diet	18.6%	6.1%
Using natural remedies	9.3%	33.3%
Exercise and workout	62.8%	39.4%

Health Information on Social Media / Gratification and Reaction

Most digital natives reported a positive experience with social media health information, with 37 individuals expressing satisfaction. A smaller group of 21 respondents were dissatisfied, while 20

remained neutral or held mixed feelings. Overall, these findings indicate that while most users find value in digital health content, a significant portion harbour scepticism or experiences inconsistent results.

Digital Natives - Satisfaction using social media for health information	
Level of satisfaction	Percentage
Very Satisfied	9%
Satisfied	7.7%
Slightly Satisfied	30.8%
Neutral	25.6%
Slightly Dissatisfied	19.2%
Dissatisfied	2.6%
Very Dissatisfied	5.1%

Communication Messages and Appropriations Influence on Digital Migrants

Social Media Influence on Digital Migrants

Digital migrants—those who adapted to digital technology as adults—primarily favour **YouTube** for health information, with

59.2% of users preferring video-based content. This was followed by **Instagram (20.4%)** and **Facebook (12.2%)**, while **X (8.2%)** remained the least utilised platform for health seeking. To supplement these findings, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with four digital migrants to better understand their specific adaptation to digital health resources.

Digital Migrants - social media usage	
Platform	Percentage
YouTube	59.2%
Instagram	20.4%
Facebook	12.2%
witter or X	8.2%

Social media and Health Information

Male digital migrants primarily use social media for fitness and weight loss, with a strong preference for workout routines that accommodate their busy schedules. Beyond exercise, they show equal interest in nutrition, mental health, and general health tips, although they rarely seek beauty advice. Qualitative interviews highlighted a reliance on social media for practical solutions, such as routines to reduce abdominal fat or using natural foods for weight loss, which users reported as highly effective.

Female digital migrants primarily use social media for beauty tips, followed by general health advice and healthy eating. They also utilise these platforms for workout plans and information on specific medical conditions, although they show significantly less interest in diet-specific or mental health content. Interview responses confirmed that these users valued social media as a practical tool for enhancing fitness routines, adopting beauty regimens, and making informed dietary adjustments.

Digital Migrants male - Use of social media to seek health information		
Purpose	Male	Female
General health tips	18.2%	17.1%

Medical conditions and treatment	4.5%	14.3%
Nutrition and diet	18.2%	8.6%
Fitness or Exercise	22.7%	14.3%
Mental health and wellness	18.2%	8.6%
Beauty tips and remedies	0%	20%
Healthy food habits	18.2%	17.1%

Reliability of Health Information on Social Media

Digital migrants generally maintained a cautious or neutral stance toward social media health information, with a 7-point Likert scale revealing that **11 individuals** remaining neutral and **five expressing distrust**. Only a small minority (two individuals) reported full

trust. Qualitative interviews indicate that credibility is earned through specific markers, such as the use of medical terminology, professional credentials (e.g. being a doctor), or consistent messaging across multiple sources. Ultimately, these users emphasised that while social media is a helpful mix of data, rigorous verification is essential before application.

Digital Migrants - Trustworthiness of social media health information	
Trustworthiness Level	Percentage
Very Trustworthy	8%
Moderately Trustworthy	0%
Slightly Trustworthy	28%
Neutral	44%
Slightly Untrustworthy	12%
Moderately Untrustworthy	4%
Very Untrustworthy	4%

Accuracy of Health Information on Social media

Digital migrants generally lack the habit of consistently verifying online health content. Research shows that only 14.7% of the

respondents verify information every time, while the largest group (29.4%) does so only occasionally. Factors such as the simplicity of the advice or seeing the same information across multiple videos often lead these users

to skip formal fact-checking processes. When they verify, they typically use Google, read user comments, or focus only on "crucial" information that directly impacts their family's well-being.

Digital Migrants - Checking the accuracy of information	
Frequency	Percentage
Every time	14.7%
Usually	8.8%
Frequently	8.8%
Occasionally	29.4%
Sometimes	20.6%
Rarely	11.8%
Never	5.9%

Trustworthiness of Health Information on Social Media

Digital migrants face several significant barriers to verifying online health information, primarily a lack of time or effort (30.6%) and feeling overwhelmed by the volume of content (28.6%). Additionally, 26.5% of the participants

struggled to locate reliable sources amidst digital noise.

Qualitative interviews confirmed that the sheer abundance of conflicting videos on the same topic made it difficult to identify what was valid. Notably, unlike younger users, most digital migrants do not view high "likes" or "shares" as an automatic indicator of trustworthiness.

Digital Migrants - Verification techniques used to validate	
Verification Technique	Percentage
Checking the credentials of the channel or organization	19.2%
Cross-referencing	25%
Reading comments and reviews	19.2%

Consulting with a doctor	36.5%
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Health Information and Misinformation

Digital migrants prioritise professional consultation as their main verification method, with 19 individuals directly consulting doctors to validate health claims on social media. Others relied on cross-referencing via Google or X (13 people) and analysing user comments or

creator credentials (10 people). Qualitative interviews suggest that while verification is not always a daily habit, it becomes a rigorous process involving multiple platforms and professional medical advice when the information is deemed critical to personal health.

Digital Migrants - Reasons for verify the Health Information	
Reason	Percentage
Past experiences with misinformation	13%
Seriousness of the topic	34.8%
Seeing conflict Information on same topic	15.2%
Personal relevance or impact	37%

Significance of Health Information on Social Media

Personal relevance and the severity of a health issue are the main drivers for digital migrants to verify online content, with 37% fact-checking when information impacts them personally and 34.8% fact-checking for serious topics. Conflicts between sources (15.2%) and negative past experiences with misinformation (13%) also triggered caution.

Qualitative interviews highlighted that health crises, such as a family member's heart problem or personal struggles with kidney stones, necessitated rigorous verification. Furthermore, physical consequences, such as an allergic reaction to a social media skincare remedy, serve as powerful motivators for future scepticism and fact-checking.

Digital Migrants - Barriers or challenges while verifying the information	
Barrier	Percentage
Trusting content based on likes	14.3%
Difficult to find reliable source	26.5%

Overwhelming information on health topics	28.6%
Lack of time or Effort	30.6%

Health Information on Social Media as Messages of Health Awareness

Digital migrants share health information primarily out of altruism, with most focusing on awareness (15 people), prevention (14 people), and treatment options (13 people). Qualitative interviews

show that this sharing is often triggered by specific needs, such as a friend's hair loss or the urgency of the COVID-19 pandemic. Users feel motivated to pass along content when they believe it provides proven solutions or valuable protection for their social circles.

Digital Migrants - Reasons for sharing Health information	
Reason	Percentage
Preventing	24.1%
Awareness	25.9%
Let others know about treatments	22.4%
Care	27.6%

Social media drives significant lifestyle changes among male digital migrants, particularly in terms of nutrition and fitness. The data show that 34.5% transitioned to healthier eating habits, while 27.6% adopted new workout plans. Additionally, 20.7% of the respondents made specific dietary adjustments, and 17.2% turned to natural remedies. Interviews confirmed these shifts, with participants reporting that they successfully used social media guidance to start weight-loss diets, begin cycling, or follow

structured exercise routines to improve their health.

Female digital migrants were most influenced by social media to adopt natural remedies (seven people) and exercise routines (six people). Changes in dietary habits are also common. Interviews showed that practical applications ranged from using natural drinks to manage blood sugar to following beauty tips and basic workouts, with many users reporting that these digital resources were highly beneficial for their daily wellness.

Digital Migrants Male - Adaptation from the influence of social media		
Adaptation	Male	Female
Changed food habits	34.5%	22.7%

Changed diet	20.7%	18.2%
Using natural remedies	17.2%	31.8%
Exercise and workout	27.6%	27.3%

Health Information on Social Media / Gratification and Reaction

Digital migrants generally viewed social media health information positively, although 30.3% remained neutral. While 42.4% reported some level of satisfaction (ranging from slightly to very satisfied),

only a small 9.1% expressed any form of dissatisfaction. This suggests that while most find the information useful, a significant portion of digital migrants maintains a cautious, middle-ground perspective on its overall value.

Digital Migrants - Satisfaction using social media for health information	
Level of satisfaction	Percentage
Very Satisfied	9.1%
Satisfied	12.1%
Slightly Satisfied	21.2%
Neutral	30.3%
Slightly Dissatisfied	9.1%
Dissatisfied	9.1%
Very Dissatisfied	9.1%

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Findings and Discussion

Both digital natives and digital migrants rely heavily on social media for health information because of its accessibility, with YouTube serving as the primary platform for both groups. While interests generally centre on exercise and well-being, gender-specific trends emerge:

males across both generations focus on workout plans, whereas females prioritise a mix of workouts, beauty tips, and natural remedies.

Credibility is largely tied to professional authority, and content from doctors is deemed the most reliable. While

both groups trust social media health data, digital natives verify content more frequently, often cross-referencing claims via Google or official X (Twitter) accounts, especially when the information has high personal relevance to them.

However, a significant risk remains: both groups frequently share health tips—particularly beauty and general wellness advice—without prior verification of their accuracy. This has led to real-world behavioural shifts, such as modified diet and new workout regimens. While many report satisfaction with these digital resources, this study highlights a critical ethical responsibility for users to fact-check information to prevent the spread of misinformation and avoid the potential dangers of unverified medical changes, such as self-prescribing natural remedies.

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