

REVOLUTIONISING HEALTH COMMUNICATION THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA AND CHANGING DYNAMICS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Upali Mitra

Research Scholar, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Babasaheb
Bhimarao Ambedkar University, Lucknow

Mahendra Kumar Padhy

Research Supervisor, Associate Professor, Department of Mass Communication and
Journalism, Babasaheb Bhimarao Ambedkar University, Lucknow

ABSTRACT:

The evolutionary rise of digital media has transformed the landscape of interpersonal communication in every sector whether it is agriculture, health care, development, disaster management, or even maintenance of social bonds within and outside the society, presenting both opportunities and challenges. This study particularly explores the changing dynamics of interpersonal communication in health communication, with the intervention of digital media.

This research analyzes how social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Reddit, etc., other online platforms, and mobile health applications such as Sanjeevani, Ayushman Bharat, etc., have redefined the way healthcare professionals, patients, and caregivers interact. The findings reveal a shift from traditional, paternalistic models to more collaborative, patient-centered approaches.

Digital media has enabled patients to assume a more active role in their healthcare, accessing information, and connecting with others who share similar experiences. Healthcare professionals, in turn, must adapt to these changes, embracing digital media as a tool for education, support, and empowerment.

However, concerns arise regarding privacy, misinformation, and the digital divide. This study highlights the need for a balanced approach, harnessing the potential of digital media while addressing its limitations.

The researcher has analyzed the already existing data and trends which has been conducted through secondary data collection and expert interviews of medical professionals and beneficiaries. The research concludes that the effective integration of digital media in health communication requires a multidisciplinary effort, emphasizing media literacy, critical thinking, and empathy. By embracing these changes, this can foster more inclusive, patient-centric, and empowering health communication strategies.

Keywords - Interpersonal communication, Intercultural communication, Digital Media, Healthcare, Health Communication, Public Health

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Health communication is vital for effectively promoting and sharing essential healthcare information and its key elements to improve and advance public health. It encompasses all strategies employed to convey essential information, like comprehending the origins of a disease, preventive measures, and more, which helps in shaping and grasping the public's

behavior toward health care. Health communication acts as a link between healthcare providers/doctors/physicians and patients, addressing gaps and removing barriers to effective dialogue, ensuring smooth information exchange regarding diseases, prevention, and treatment.

Digital media has revolutionized the way individuals access health information, communicate with healthcare providers, and manage personal well-being. From social media platforms to mobile health applications, digital technology plays a crucial role in shaping modern healthcare. According to a study by Statista (2023), over 70% of internet users seek health-related information online, reflecting the growing dependence on digital resources for medical knowledge.

The rise of telemedicine has further enhanced healthcare accessibility, especially in remote areas. As the World Health Organization (WHO) notes, "Digital health interventions can help overcome geographical barriers and improve health outcomes globally" (WHO, 2021). Wearable technology, such as smartwatches and fitness trackers, also contributes to health monitoring, promoting proactive disease prevention (Patel et al., 2022).

With the rise of digital platforms, the communication style in the health sector which was earlier dominated by traditional models of communication, where the information flow was in a top-down approach, has now shifted to a more collaborative, patient-centric, and participatory manner.

There is a revolution in how health information is shared, consumed, and acted upon.

Digital media has closed all geographical gaps and grants patients' immediate access to health information, creating new opportunities for professional development and collaboration.

However, concerns about misinformation, privacy, and digital divide pose significant challenges. Chou et al. (2020) highlight that "the spread of health misinformation on social media can lead to harmful behaviors and reduced trust in healthcare professionals." Therefore, while digital media offers immense benefits, critical evaluation of online health information remains essential.

Even healthcare professionals and caregivers seek ways to course through these new waters, skills will have to be learned to realize benefits and at the same time limitations of the digital media to be addressed and understood.

The present study focuses on the transformative influence of digital media in health communication by describing how digital media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and health mobile apps reshape the encounters of healthcare practitioners with patients.

2.1. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A study by Parija PP, Tiwari P, Sharma P, Saha SK. (2021) titled Determinants of Online Health Information-Seeking Behavior: A Cross-Sectional Survey Among Residents of an Urban Settlement in Delhi found that 88.2% (283 out of 321) of participants used the internet to seek health information. The study revealed that younger individuals (aged 18–30 years), those who were literate, and those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (upper middle class and above) were significantly more likely to access health information through digital media. These findings underscore the role of demographic factors in shaping online health information-seeking behavior.

Trust in healthcare providers is a crucial element in effective patient-provider communication. A systematic review by Brennan N et al. (2013) titled Trust in the Health-Care Provider-Patient Relationship: A Systematic Mapping Review of the Evidence Base examined the role of trust in patient perceptions of healthcare quality. The review emphasized that trust is essential for effective communication and quality care. Patients who trust their healthcare providers are likelier to share pertinent information and adhere to treatment recommendations. Furthermore, effective interpersonal communication, particularly characterized by empathy and active listening, is instrumental in fostering and maintaining this trust.

Nonverbal communication also plays a critical role in healthcare interactions. A study by Riess et al. (2014) titled E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.: A Tool to Enhance Nonverbal Communication Between Clinicians and Their Patients introduced an innovative teaching tool designed to assess nonverbal behavior using the acronym E.M.P.A.T.H.Y. This tool highlights the importance of nonverbal cues in fostering empathy between clinicians and patients, thereby improving the quality of healthcare interactions.

Active listening has been identified as another vital component of effective communication in healthcare. A recent study by Tustonja Marijan et al. (2023) titled Active Listening: A Model of Empathetic Communication in the Helping Professions explored the development of active listening as an empathetic communication model. The study emphasized that active listening ensures understanding, acceptance, and engagement in communication processes, which are essential in healthcare settings.

The effectiveness of health communication also depends on how well patients understand their medical conditions and treatment options. Healthcare professionals must often simplify complex medical terminology to enhance patient comprehension. Techniques, such as using straightforward language and visual aids can help bridge the gap between medical jargon and patient understanding. Supporting this notion, Berkman et al. (2011) in their meta-analysis titled Health Literacy and Adherence to Medical Treatment in Chronic and Acute Illness found that patients with higher health literacy levels were better equipped to make informed decisions and adhere to prescribed treatments. Additionally, a systematic review by Nutbeam (2020) highlighted that improving patient health literacy can significantly enhance disease management behaviors, including adherence to treatment plans.

2.2. Research Gap

There is plenty of literature present that examines the role of Interpersonal communication in healthcare and the rapid growth of online health information. There is limited work focusing on the transformative influence of digital media in health communication and changing of the traditional patterns due to the intervention of Digital media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and health mobile apps. There is a lack of insights from healthcare professionals and practitioners who are at the center of this communication chain.

3.1. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant as it investigates the effect of digital media on health communication by emphasizing its influence in changing the interactions between healthcare providers and patients. It also examines the changing dynamics of interpersonal communication due to digital media intervention. The conventional top-down communication approach which once was the core of healthcare communication now is changing and becoming more collaborative and patient-centric. This research will help in understanding the role of digital platforms as

well as their vital function in the current scenario. The research is significant for policymakers and healthcare entities as it provides insights into effective digital health communication strategies while highlighting the importance of addressing ethical and privacy issues. Additionally, it recognises the difficulty faced by health professionals emphasizing the importance of skill building and best practices to address these challenges.

4.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 4.1.1. To examine the impact of digital media platforms on the interpersonal communication dynamics among healthcare professionals, patients, and caregivers.
- 4.1.2. To identify the important factors that influence the adoption and use of digital media in healthcare communication.
- 4.1.3. To explore the challenges and barriers faced by healthcare professionals and patients while utilizing digital media for health communication.

5.1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Following will be the research questions that the research wants to address -

- 5.1.1. How has the growth of digital media platforms (such as social media and mobile health applications) changed the dynamics of communication among healthcare professionals, patients, and caregivers?
- 5.1.2. What are the most important elements impacting patients' and healthcare professionals' use and engagement with digital media in healthcare communication?
- 5.1.3. What are the obstacles and barriers that healthcare professionals and patients experience when utilizing digital media for health communication?

6.1. METHODOLOGY

This research aims to examine the evolving dynamics of interpersonal communication in healthcare through the lens of digital media, exploring how platforms like social media and mobile health applications are reshaping interactions between healthcare professionals, patients, and caregivers. To achieve this, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research methods to offer a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. The methodology is divided into the following key sections:

6.1.1. Secondary Data Collection

Secondary data was gathered from a range of sources to understand the historical context and current trends in health communication. These sources included Peer-reviewed articles, papers, and research journals on the impact of digital media in healthcare, focusing on themes like patient-centered care, digital health tools, and communication technologies in health. This secondary data provides a foundation for understanding how digital media is integrated into healthcare communication and the broader societal impacts.

6.1.2. Sampling and Data Collection

The data collected from secondary sources, interviews, content analysis, and surveys was analyzed using both **qualitative** and **quantitative methods**. For **Qualitative Analysis**,

thematic analysis was conducted on interview transcripts to identify common themes, patterns, and insights related to the changing dynamics of health communication. For **Quantitative Analysis** Survey data which was obtained through systematic questionnaires were analyzed. 50 Medical professionals have been purposely selected for this study from multiple backgrounds such as General Surgeons, General Physicians, Nurses, MBBS students, Therapists, and Anesthesiologists.

This mixed-methods approach, along with secondary data, and expert interviews has been conducted to gather quality information. Apart from this, content analysis has been done to understand the current patterns in health-related content on social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. All these enable a holistic understanding of how digital media changing the course of health communication and is transforming interpersonal communication in healthcare. By integrating both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, the research aims to provide actionable insights into the opportunities and challenges posed by digital health communication and strategies.

7.1. FINDINGS

Interpersonal communication is a cornerstone of effective health communication. It builds trust, enhances understanding, promotes engagement, supports emotional well-being, facilitates shared decision-making, manages conflicts, and improves team collaboration. By developing strong interpersonal communication skills, healthcare providers can significantly improve patient experiences and outcomes, contributing to a more effective and compassionate healthcare system.

7.1.1. Shift from traditional to modern ways

Earlier doctors' and patients' interactions were localized, and dependent on certain factors like location of clinics, hospitals, and other healthcare facilities. People had to visit doctors for even simple queries for which taking appointments beforehand was necessary. Getting the appointment was in itself a task. Due to the inclusion of Digital media, this trend is changing as now doctors and patients can connect via digital media tools like WhatsApp and other medical health apps. Doctors can also follow up on their patients while the patients can get advice and get their queries resolved without the need to visit the hospitals.

Dr. Vipin Kumar, a general surgeon with 24 years of experience at Budaun Medical College, observes a significant shift in doctor-patient communication. Previously limited by technology, interactions were restricted to medical facilities or in-person visits. However, the widespread use of applications like WhatsApp now enables doctors to maintain contact with and support patients throughout their recovery.

Additionally, there has been a substantial increase in online appointments and the use of video calls for enhanced communication. As per Fig 1.1, 58.3% of healthcare professionals use Digital media platforms for following up on treatments, educating patients, and sharing test results while 25% of them use various applications for scheduling appointments.

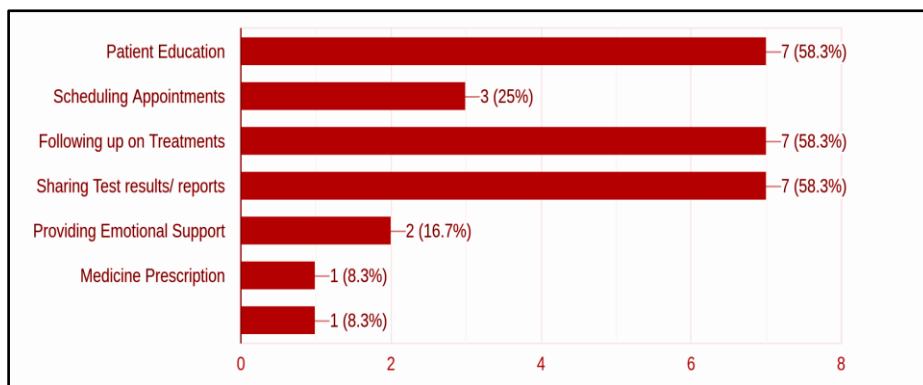


Figure 1.1

Another change is that now the patients have the liberty to choose from the best. They can now compare doctors based on the ratings and experiences of other people with that doctor/ healthcare professional. According to a participant, scheduling appointments for regular visits has become easy with digital media platforms as it saves the time and energy of standing in lines or waiting for the doctor. In addition, they have been given the option of visiting the hospitals as well as choosing to get online consultations via video calls.

Dr. Vipin Kumar further stated that he uses social media and digital platforms to educate people about medical procedures and this even helps medical students to get more insights about the disease and medical information. He says that posting informative content on digital media platforms has also helped in reshaping his relations with his patients and even with the medical students he teaches at the Medical College Budaun.

On asking how frequently the medical professionals use digital media platforms 50% of them frequently use digital media platforms daily for work-related objectives. (see Fig. 1.2)

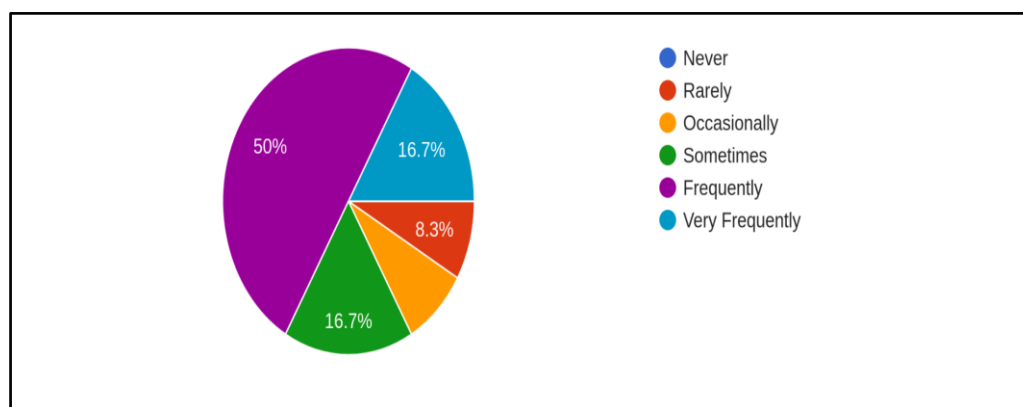


Figure 1.2

7.1.2. Uses of Digital Media Platforms in Health Communication

On asking which digital platform is most commonly used for patient interaction, about 66.7% of the medical professionals chose WhatsApp followed by Mobile Health apps such as Sanjeevani and Practo (33.3%), along with Instagram and YouTube.

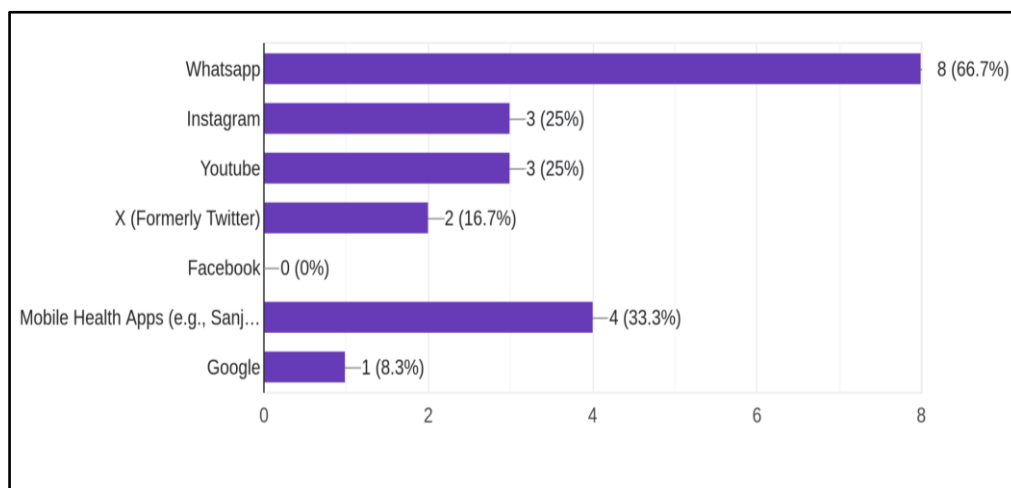


Figure 1.3

As shown in Fig 1.4, 54.5% of healthcare professionals see digital media platforms as moderately effective for enhancing interpersonal communication between doctors/ healthcare professionals, patients, and caregivers. On the other hand, 36.4% of them think that is very effective while 9.1% remained neutral on this. This suggests that digital media platforms have the potential to change the course of interpersonal communication in health effectively.

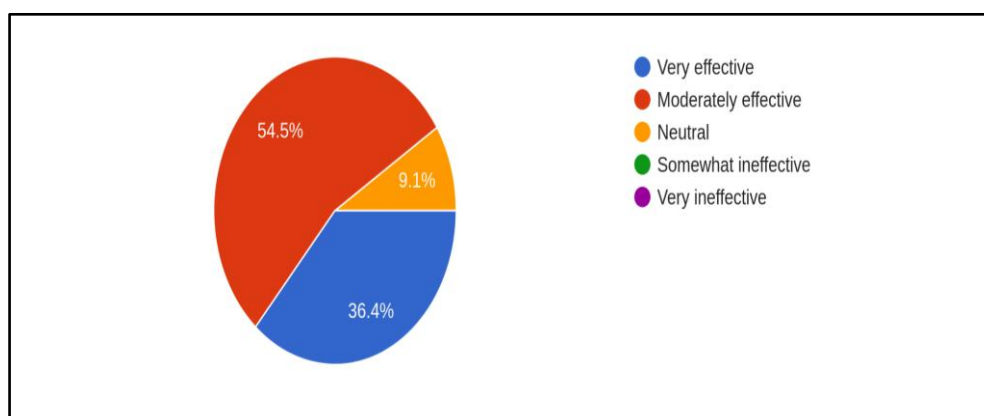


Figure 1.4

7.1.3. The Rise of Medical Professionals as Influencers

Medical professionals such as doctors, therapists, and caregivers are seeking the help of new-age media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook to make people aware of health-related information, issues, queries, and misinformation. Doctors as influencers is a fascinating trend that can be seen nowadays. This is helping doctors increase their reach to wider populations and spread health-related information as well. This ongoing trend not only gives doctors and health influencers the power to spread awareness to the masses but also helps empower patients to take control of their health and make informed decisions. Along with this, becoming a health influencer also benefits them for their professional development as engaging with the audience makes them more updated and informed about the latest trends and research in the field of health and medicine. The researcher has analyzed the content of a few health influencers.

Health influencer Dr. Tanaya, famously known as Dr. Cuterus uses social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube to spread awareness about sexual health through her content. She uses sarcasm in her content to spread awareness and break stigmas around sexual intercourse and sexually transmitted diseases. She often uses funny references, attractive videos full of information, and live videos to connect with the audience.

Another health influencer Dr. Jainith Lowvanshi, a pediatrician by profession uses Instagram to share health-related information through his content. He mainly focuses on breaking stigmas around health issues and sharing descriptive yet short videos/reels for educational purposes.

Therapists, Psychologists, and psychiatrists are also getting on to these platforms to connect with larger audiences.

In this line, Dr. Sarthak Dave, a Psychiatrist from Ahmedabad uses Instagram and YouTube to spread awareness about mental health issues and encourages seeking help among people suffering from mental health conditions. He uses interactive videos like Dr. Cuterus which target one problem at a time in each video.

Although these health influencers are doing a great job of spreading the right information, there is always a threat of fake health influencers that can mislead people with their content.

7.1.4. Interpersonal Communication in Health and the Role of Digital Media

Interpersonal communication is generally defined as an exchange of information between two or more individuals through verbal or non-verbal methods. Various models explain the complexity of this process, such as Shannon and Weaver's linear model, Schramm's interactive model, and Barnlund's transactional model, which emphasize feedback and context.

Interpersonal communication plays a pivotal role in health communication as it influences patients' understanding and other outcomes related to the health care system. It is the key to doctor-patient relations as it fosters the trust of patients in doctors or health care providers. Interpersonal communication is a type of communication that means communicating directly, and it often includes face-to-face interactions. The advantage of this type of communication is that it builds trust between doctors and patients and helps enhance understanding and decision-making collaborations while promoting adherence to the ongoing treatment.

In the age of digital media, the dynamics of interpersonal communication have also changed. According to a participant who is going through treatment for mental health issues, because of digital platforms like WhatsApp it has become very easy to reach out to the therapist for emergencies. Visiting the therapist to the clinic can sometimes become challenging with the busy schedule but due to digital media platforms, patients can get a therapy session from anywhere without the need to visit the therapist.

Dr. Sanjay Kumar who is a General Physician at ESI Chest Hospital Kanpur adds that now patients are more aware of health-related information because of which they are now able to ask questions about the ongoing treatments. Access to information empowers the patients to develop an in-depth understanding of their disease and its treatment. This new phenomenon affected the interpersonal relationship between health professionals and patients. The patients feel more connected with their healthcare provider. However, certain challenges persist with this.

8.1. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVE

The use of Digital media for seeking health information by common people has exploded in recent years. Dr. Sanjay Kumar, a medical officer at ESI Chest Hospital Azad Nagar Kanpur, expressed concerns about the spread of misinformation among patients who lack digital literacy. He noted that patients often search online for medical information before consulting a doctor. Due to their lack of proper knowledge, they may delay seeking medical attention, leading to complications and delusions. This creates additional challenges for medical professionals. Fig 1.5 shows about 66.7% of medical professionals find a lack of digital literacy among patients as the biggest challenge, followed by misinformation spread by patients (41.3%), Privacy Concerns, and the difficulty in maintaining professionalism as well.

Not only this, the biased and commercial influence on some online health information can lead to further problems for patients, caregivers as well as medical professionals.

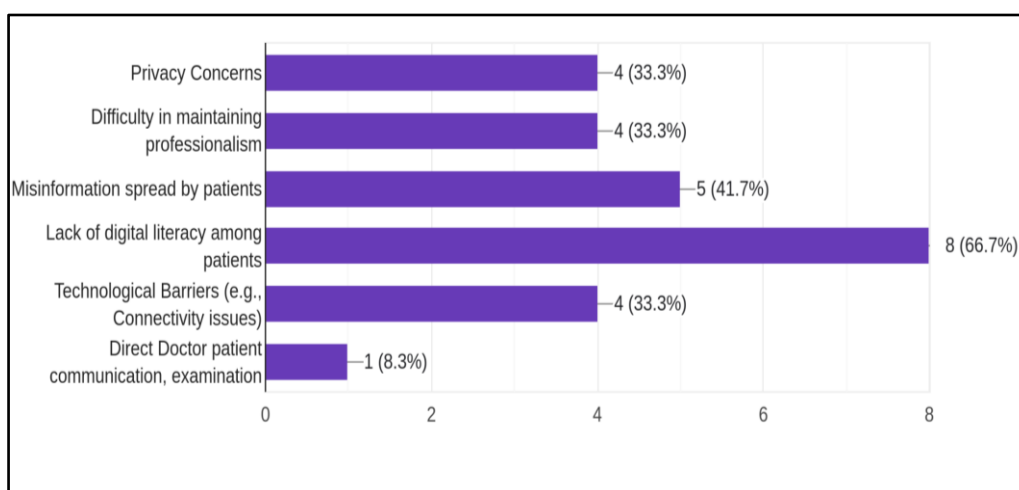


Figure 1.5

When asked how to ensure the authenticity of online health information, half of the participants (50%) recommended verifying the information against a reliable source, as shown in Figure 1.6. While 25% of the participants suggest educating patients and caregivers about trusted sources can be an effective way to ensure the authenticity of online health information.

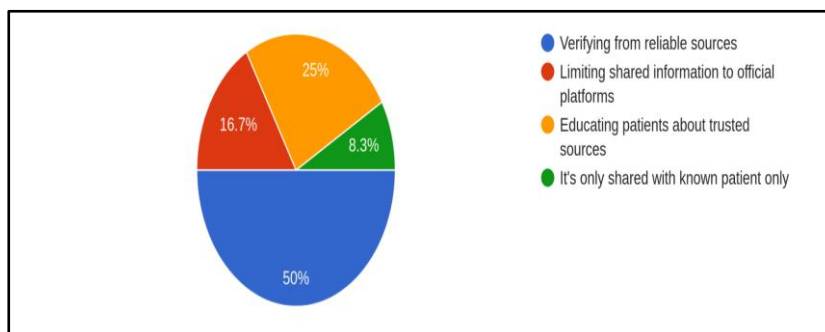


Figure 1.6

There is also a lack of training in using digital media for health communication among medical professionals. The majority (66.7%) of participating medical professionals lacked formal training on the appropriate use of digital media to enhance health communication. Two-thirds of healthcare professionals expressed interest in further training on how to integrate digital media into healthcare. They were also interested in tools that could improve interpersonal communication between patients, caregivers, and healthcare professionals. The majority of the participants believe that media literacy is an integral part of health communication in today's digital era.

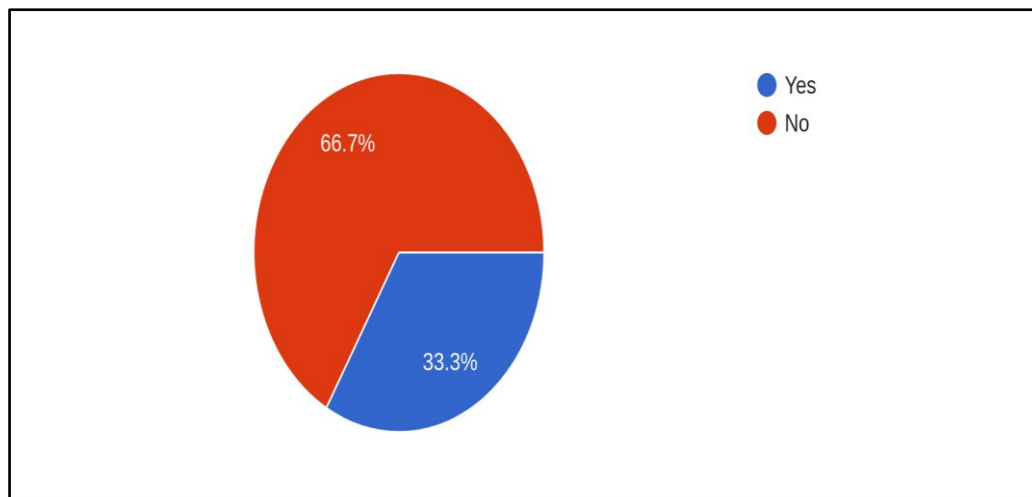


Figure 1.7

9.1. DISCUSSION

Effective health communication is the center of improving the present state of the healthcare system. Digital media plays a very transformative role in health communication and is successfully helping the process of communication between health care professionals, caregivers, and patients. Platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and medical health applications are providing smooth channels for health information and services by transforming conversational ways of communication to new and innovative models. This further helps in the transformation of the dynamics of interpersonal communication used in the health sectors. By utilizing these patients can be enabled to make informed decisions due to access to health information. Using digital media platforms health communication can be eased out due to the more participatory nature of it. Doctors can use these tools to manage scheduling and build trust and close bonds with patients during the journey of treatment.

There is no doubt that the inclusion of digital media in the healthcare system has improved the communication process but there are also some concerns around this. Lack of Digital media literacy in public as well as healthcare providers remains a big challenge along with the concerns of getting misinformed of unverified health information undermines public health initiatives. Furthermore, the digital divide persists in obstructing fair access to digital healthcare resources, particularly in low-income and marginalized communities. For more inclusive growth of utilizing digital media, there is a need to find ways to reach the rural audience as well.

The research highlights the necessity for healthcare professionals to cultivate digital literacy skills to successfully interact and connect with patients via digital platforms. Policymakers

and healthcare entities must develop guidelines to promote responsible digital health communication while protecting patient confidentiality.

This study mainly emphasizes the importance of digital media platforms in health communication and how it is reshaping the dynamics of healthcare communication. Future studies might investigate the efficacy of digital health communication methods, the influence of artificial intelligence, and the lasting effects on health results. Tackling these aspects will lead to a more comprehensive, efficient, and safe digital health communication environment that benefits both patients and healthcare professionals.

10.1. CONCLUSION

Digital media platforms not only revolutionized health communication but also changed the dimensions of earlier and conventional ways of healthcare systems. Although there are so many benefits of using Digital Media platforms in Health Communication there is a need to understand how to utilise this technology at full length. There is a need to tackle all the challenges along with proper training and resources. More studies are needed focusing on the role of communication in the healthcare system as there is a lack of proper training on the role of proper communication among healthcare professionals.

11.1. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While the research offers valuable insights into the evolving landscape of digital health communication, it is important to note a few limitations:

- **Sampling Bias:** While efforts were made to ensure diversity, the sample of healthcare professionals and patients may not fully represent all demographics, especially in rural or underserved areas.
- **Access to Digital Platforms:** The digital divide is a significant issue, and the study may not fully account for the experiences of individuals without access to digital tools or the internet.
- **Subjectivity of Interviews:** The qualitative nature of the expert interviews means that the findings are based on subjective perceptions, which may not be universally applicable.

REFERENCES

1. Parija PP, Tiwari P, Sharma P, Saha SK. Determinants of online health information-seeking behavior: A cross-sectional survey among residents of an urban settlement in Delhi. *J Educ Health Promot.* 2020 Dec 29;9:344
2. Brennan N, Barnes R, Calnan M, Corrigan O, Dieppe P, Entwistle V. Trust in the health-care provider-patient relationship: a systematic mapping review of the evidence base. *Int J Qual Health Care.* 2013 Dec;25(6):682-8.
3. Riess H, Kraft-Todd G. E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.: a tool to enhance nonverbal communication between clinicians and their patients. *Acad Med.* 2014 Aug;89(8):1108-12.
4. Baker, D. W., Brown, J. A., & Pincus, T. (2007). "Communicating with patients with low health literacy: a systematic review." *Health Services Research*, 42(1), 88-118.
5. Betancourt, J. R., Green, A. R., & Carrillo, J. E. (2003). "Cultural competence and health care disparities: Key perspectives and trends." *Health Affairs*, 22(5), 499-505.

6. Benson, J. M., & Dundis, S. P. (2003). "The role of communication in health care." *International Journal of Clinical Rheumatology*, 8(4), 223-229.
7. Chou, W. Y. S., Gaysynsky, A., Vanderpool, R. C., & Shafer, A. (2020). The COVID-19 misinformation challenge. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 34(5), 569-572.
8. Patel, M. S., Asch, D. A., & Volpp, K. G. (2022). Wearable devices as facilitators, not drivers, of health behavior change. *JAMA*, 327(3), 209-210.
9. Statista. (2023). Share of internet users seeking health information online worldwide.
10. World Health Organization. (2021). Global strategy on digital health 2020-2025.