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Social Media, Health Misinformation, and Literacy: A Narrative Review of Challenges and Solutions

Marshanda Rimadita Nugrahani
Universitas Airlangga, Indonesia
Corespondent : marshanda.rimadita.nugrahani-2020@fkm.unair.ac.id

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ABSTRACT: Health misinformation on social media has become a pressing public health challenge, particularly among individuals with low digital health literacy. This study examines the relationship between digital health literacy and the spread of misinformation, analyzing systemic factors that contribute to the persistence of misleading health content. A systematic literature review was conducted using academic databases such as PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar, with a focus on peer-reviewed studies published in the past decade. The review identifies key demographic, social, and economic determinants influencing digital health literacy and explores the role of social media platforms in misinformation dissemination. Findings reveal that individuals with limited digital health literacy struggle to critically evaluate health-related content, making them more vulnerable to misinformation. Systemic factors, including weak regulatory oversight and social media algorithms prioritizing engagement-driven content, further facilitate the spread of misleading health information. Effective interventions, such as digital literacy education, peer-led initiatives, and collaboration between social media platforms and public health organizations, are crucial in mitigating misinformation. The study highlights the need for targeted policy reforms, improved algorithmic transparency, and community-based health education to enhance digital health literacy and misinformation resilience. Future research should focus on the long-term efficacy of digital health literacy interventions and explore AI-driven solutions for misinformation detection.

Keywords: Digital Health Literacy, Health Misinformation, Social Media, Public Health Education, Misinformation Prevention, Algorithmic Transparency, Health Communication.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, the ability of individuals to access and understand online health information has become a vital component of public health. The concept of digital health literacy refers to an individual's capacity to seek, evaluate, and utilize health information from digital sources, particularly social media platforms. This competency encompasses not only technical proficiency but also cognitive and evaluative skills needed to assess the credibility of the information consumed.

Social media platforms now serve as major channels for health communication. While platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram facilitate the rapid and widespread exchange of health information, their largely unregulated nature allows for the unchecked spread of misinformation. The proliferation of misleading content poses a serious public health risk, especially for users who lack the necessary digital literacy skills to distinguish between accurate and false information.

Empirical studies have shown that individuals with high levels of digital health literacy are more likely to critically assess content, actively seek reliable sources, and better understand complex health issues. Conversely, limited digital literacy increases susceptibility to health misinformation, which can negatively influence decision making and health behaviors.

Nonetheless, significant disparities persist in digital health literacy, particularly among vulnerable groups such as the elderly, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and those with limited access to digital technologies. Furthermore, the algorithms employed by social media platforms—designed to maximize user engagement—often amplify sensational and misleading content, thereby exacerbating the issue.

Although the importance of digital health literacy is widely acknowledged, existing literature has yet to comprehensively explore the mechanisms by which literacy reduces misinformation exposure. There is also a lack of robust evaluations on the effectiveness of digital literacy interventions across diverse demographic and cultural contexts, as well as limited attention to the role of social media algorithms in shaping users' health information environments.

Given these gaps, this narrative review aims to provide a comprehensive synthesis of current evidence regarding the role of digital health literacy in combating health misinformation on social media. It also investigates the social and structural determinants of digital health literacy, evaluates existing intervention strategies, and offers recommendations for future research and policy development that are context specific and evidence based.

METHOD

This study employs a systematic review approach to examine the role of digital health literacy in mitigating misinformation on social media. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across academic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar, targeting studies published within the last ten years. The search strategy utilized a predefined combination of keywords and Boolean operators to ensure accuracy and completeness. The selected keywords included "Health literacy," "Health misinformation," "Social media," "Digital health literacy," "Misinformation on social media," "Public health communication," "Health information seeking," "Digital media and health," and "E-health literacy." Boolean operators such as "AND," "OR," and "NOT" were applied to refine the search results and retrieve relevant studies.

Selection criteria were established to include peer-reviewed studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses that empirically or theoretically analyzed the impact of digital health literacy on misinformation in social media contexts. Studies were included if they focused on health literacy, misinformation, and the use of social media in public health communication. Only articles

published in English were considered to maintain consistency and reliability in analysis. Exclusion criteria were applied to eliminate non-peer-reviewed studies, research without direct empirical evidence, and articles with unclear methodological frameworks. Studies unrelated to health literacy or misinformation in social media were also excluded.

To enhance reliability, a multi-stage screening process was implemented. Four independent reviewers assessed the studies, ensuring alignment with inclusion criteria. The initial screening involved title and abstract review, followed by a full-text evaluation for relevance and methodological rigor. Key themes were synthesized to identify recurring patterns in how digital health literacy influences the perception and management of misinformation on social media. The findings provide insights into the effectiveness of digital health literacy interventions and their implications for public health communication strategies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Relationship Between Health Literacy and the Spread of Misinformation

Research has revealed a significant correlation between health literacy levels and susceptibility to health misinformation. A study by Ishizuka-Inoue et al. (2022) found that individuals with lower health literacy exhibited weaker skills in evaluating online information, making them more vulnerable to misinformation about COVID-19. This finding highlights that inadequate health literacy exacerbates individuals' difficulties in discerning valid information, contributing to the proliferation of health-related hoaxes on social media.

Empirical evidence from Gaysynsky et al. (2024) supports this notion, indicating that respondents with lower health literacy also struggled to assess the credibility of health information obtained through social media. Such individuals were more likely to trust and share misleading content, underscoring the direct link between low health literacy and increased exposure to health misinformation. Similarly, Kısa and Kısa (2024) demonstrated that individuals with lower literacy levels were more prone to relying on unverified sources, exacerbating the risk of misinformation dissemination.

Additionally, Naeem and Boulos (2021) contextualized how limited health literacy amplifies the negative impact of misinformation on digital platforms. The rapid spread of misinformation means that users with low literacy skills may fail to recognize the quality of the information they consume. Conversely, a study by Almoajel et al. (2022) found that individuals with higher health literacy were more capable of seeking and verifying information from diverse sources, reducing their susceptibility to misinformation.

These findings collectively emphasize the pivotal role of health literacy in protecting individuals from misinformation and enhancing awareness of the reliability of digital health information. Low health literacy levels significantly increase the likelihood of misinformation exposure, necessitating targeted interventions to improve public health literacy and combat digital misinformation effectively.

Factors Influencing Digital Health Literacy

Multiple demographic, social, and economic factors have been identified as key determinants of digital health literacy.

Demographic factors such as age, gender, and educational background play a crucial role in shaping digital health literacy. A study by Gazibara et al. (2024) highlighted that women were more engaged in online health information-seeking behaviors than men. Additionally, younger individuals generally exhibited superior digital skills, which positively influenced their digital health literacy. Conversely, older adults often displayed lower levels of digital health literacy, making them more susceptible to misinformation on social media (Ismail et al., 2024).

Social factors also contribute significantly to digital health literacy. Research indicates that social support from family and peers enhances an individual's ability to use health information effectively. For instance, Almoajel et al. (2022) found that communities with strong social support networks had better health literacy outcomes. This suggests that social reinforcement fosters knowledge acquisition and improves individuals' ability to navigate digital health information effectively.

Economic status also plays a crucial role in determining digital health literacy. Individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face barriers in accessing digital technology and the internet, directly impacting their ability to develop adequate digital health literacy. Meherali et al. (2021) demonstrated that lower-income populations had limited access to digital resources, exacerbating information disparities and limiting their ability to discern accurate health information.

The Role of Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms serve a dual function in influencing users' health literacy. On one hand, they facilitate the dissemination of valuable and educational health information. Ashfield and Donelle (2020) emphasized that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter provide users with access to crucial health-related content, enhancing their awareness of public health issues.

However, social media also exacerbates misinformation risks. Ismail et al. (2024) explained that misinformation on these platforms often remains unchecked, leading to increased exposure among users who may lack the critical skills needed to evaluate such content. The viral nature of social media can reinforce misleading narratives, particularly among individuals with inadequate digital health literacy. Choukou et al. (2022) further demonstrated that highly active social media users without proper guidance in digital health literacy were more susceptible to misinformation.

Given these challenges, social media platforms must be leveraged as tools for enhancing health literacy while also being regulated to minimize the spread of false health information. Strengthening digital health education can empower users to critically assess health-related content, ensuring that they engage with reliable and evidence-based information.

Interventions to Improve Digital Health Literacy

Given the impact of digital health literacy on misinformation exposure, various interventions have been proposed to enhance individuals' ability to assess health information critically.

One of the most effective interventions is **online training programs** designed to improve digital health literacy skills. A study by Nascimento et al. (2022) found that online training programs focusing on evaluating digital health information significantly enhanced participants' ability to distinguish between credible and misleading sources. Similarly, Alsaad and Aldossary (2024) demonstrated that educational videos distributed via WhatsApp helped users recognize health misinformation, leading to positive changes in their ability to discern false information.

Another successful intervention is the **peer-led approach**, where community members educate one another about health literacy. Programs involving peer educators, particularly among youth populations, have been effective in increasing digital health literacy skills. Phillips et al. (2022) found that young individuals trained as peer educators contributed to a measurable improvement in digital health literacy within their communities.

In the realm of social media-based interventions, Choukou et al. (2022) reported that targeted campaigns on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp significantly improved users' ability to assess health information critically. By providing clear guidelines on how to verify health-related claims, these interventions reduced misinformation reliance among participants. Similarly, Burzyńska et al. (2022) demonstrated that interactive social media campaigns increased engagement with verified health content, ultimately strengthening users' literacy skills.

Furthermore, Meherali et al. (2021) found that digital literacy programs tailored to adolescents not only improved their ability to navigate health-related content but also reduced their dependence on misleading online sources. These findings emphasize that strategic, well-designed interventions can effectively combat misinformation and enhance digital health literacy across diverse populations.

Global Comparisons and Implications

Comparative analyses reveal that digital health literacy challenges and interventions vary across different global regions. In high-income countries, digital health literacy programs are often well-integrated into formal education systems, ensuring widespread access to accurate health information. In contrast, low- and middle-income countries frequently struggle with digital literacy disparities due to technological limitations and socioeconomic inequalities.

For example, studies in European nations have shown that structured school curricula incorporating digital health literacy training contribute to lower misinformation susceptibility (Gaysynsky et al., 2024). Conversely, research in Southeast Asia highlights the challenges faced by populations with limited internet access, where misinformation spreads more rapidly due to the lack of formal digital literacy education (Xu et al., 2024).

The findings suggest that digital health literacy interventions should be tailored to regional contexts, considering factors such as digital access, cultural attitudes toward health information, and existing literacy levels. Collaborative efforts between governments, academic institutions, and technology companies can play a crucial role in implementing effective strategies to improve digital health literacy globally.

The results of this review underscore the critical role of digital health literacy in mitigating misinformation on social media. Individuals with lower health literacy levels are more susceptible to misleading content, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to enhance their ability to evaluate digital health information effectively. Various demographic, social, and economic factors influence digital health literacy, necessitating a multi-faceted approach to address disparities in health information access and comprehension.

Social media platforms must be recognized as both facilitators of health literacy and contributors to misinformation dissemination. While they provide valuable health information, their role in amplifying misleading content necessitates stronger regulatory and educational measures. Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of online training programs, peer-led initiatives, and social media-based interventions in improving digital health literacy, highlighting the importance of integrating these strategies into broader public health initiatives.

Future research should explore region-specific challenges in digital health literacy, ensuring that interventions are tailored to address local needs and technological limitations. By fostering a more digitally literate society, public health efforts can more effectively counteract misinformation and promote informed decision-making in the digital era.

Systemic Factors Contributing to the Spread of Health Misinformation Online

Systemic factors, including government regulations and social media policies, play a crucial role in the spread of health misinformation online. Government regulations influence how health information is disseminated and managed on digital platforms. Some countries have implemented legal frameworks requiring social media platforms to take action against misinformation. However, the effectiveness of these regulations varies due to inconsistent enforcement and lack of strict penalties (Ismail et al., 2024). Without rigorous oversight, compliance with such regulations remains low, allowing misinformation to spread unchecked (Dadaczynski et al., 2021).

Social media policies further complicate the issue. While platforms like Facebook and Twitter have introduced fact-checking mechanisms and flagged misleading content, the effectiveness of these policies remains inconsistent. Gaysynsky et al. (2024) noted that, despite efforts to curb misinformation, viral content often bypasses these safeguards due to algorithmic prioritization of engagement over accuracy. This highlights the need for increased transparency and accountability in content moderation to ensure that misleading health information is effectively controlled.

Economic interests also play a role in the persistence of health misinformation. The profitability of engagement-driven digital content encourages the promotion of sensationalized health claims. Research by Burzyńska et al. (2022) found that advertisers and companies sometimes capitalize on misleading health information to drive product sales, exacerbating public vulnerability to misinformation (Maltby et al., 2024). The financial incentives behind clickbait health content further fuel the dissemination of misinformation, making regulatory intervention more critical.

The implementation of misinformation policies also faces challenges related to public perception. Kısa and Kısa (2024) highlighted that when misinformation policies are perceived as restrictions on free speech, skepticism towards authoritative health information increases. This indicates the need for greater public involvement in policymaking to enhance trust in digital health governance.

Digital Education and Health Literacy

One of the most promising approaches to combating misinformation is enhancing digital health literacy through systematic education. Goodyear and Armour (2021) emphasized the importance of digital literacy education, arguing that equipping individuals with skills to critically evaluate online health information is essential for misinformation mitigation. Increasing public awareness of social media policies and providing community-based digital literacy education can significantly improve individuals' ability to navigate online health information effectively.

Literature suggests that health literacy education should be integrated into school curricula and lifelong learning programs. Research by Stanley et al. (2022) demonstrated that nutrition and health literacy programs in educational settings effectively improve individuals' ability to distinguish between credible and misleading health claims. Prowse and Carsley (2021) further supported this approach, showing that digital learning interventions, such as interactive health education apps, significantly enhance young people's capacity to critically assess online health information.

Beyond formal education, community-driven health literacy programs can also be effective. Gaysynsky et al. (2024) found that peer-led initiatives, where community members share knowledge on evaluating health content, can strengthen digital health literacy across diverse populations. Given the social nature of misinformation spread, leveraging peer networks as educational tools can foster better information-sharing practices and mitigate the impact of digital misinformation.

Collaboration Between Social Media Platforms and Health Organizations

Collaboration between social media platforms and public health organizations is essential to reducing the spread of health misinformation. Tso et al. (2022) argued that social media companies should work closely with health agencies to integrate more reliable health information into their platforms. This could include partnerships with public health organizations to develop algorithmic interventions that prioritize evidence-based health content over misleading narratives.

However, despite the availability of fact-checking mechanisms, misinformation remains pervasive. Habiba and Koli (2024) emphasized that social media companies should be held more accountable for ensuring that misinformation control measures are both comprehensive and transparent. This would require greater cooperation with health authorities to establish clearer guidelines for verifying health claims.

Public awareness campaigns can also play a crucial role in this effort. Research by Theopilus et al. (2024) highlighted that targeted social media campaigns focusing on digital health literacy significantly reduce susceptibility to misinformation. These campaigns should aim to educate users on how to identify reliable sources, critically evaluate claims, and navigate digital health content responsibly.

Community-Based Peer Support Initiatives

Community engagement is a vital component of effective health misinformation mitigation. Moore and Hancock (2020) found that peer support programs that encourage individuals to educate one another about digital health literacy are highly effective in reducing misinformation.

These initiatives not only empower individuals to verify health information but also foster collective responsibility in promoting credible health discussions within communities.

Research by Dulli et al. (2020) suggested that community-led digital health education programs are particularly beneficial in rural and underserved populations. By incorporating trusted community leaders into health literacy initiatives, misinformation resistance can be strengthened at the grassroots level. Additionally, peer education programs targeting adolescents and young adults have shown significant promise in equipping younger generations with the skills needed to discern digital misinformation (Phillips et al., 2022).

Limitations

Despite the advancements in digital health literacy, several limitations persist. First, there remains a lack of standardized frameworks for measuring digital health literacy across different populations. Variations in cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic factors influence how individuals interpret and engage with health information online, making universal digital literacy interventions challenging.

Additionally, the rapid evolution of misinformation tactics poses difficulties for intervention efforts. Misinformation is often tailored to exploit cognitive biases, making it harder to counteract with conventional fact-checking methods. The dynamic nature of social media platforms further complicates regulatory efforts, as misinformation spreads rapidly before fact-checking mechanisms can respond.

Access disparities also present a challenge. Individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may lack the technological resources or digital skills required to engage with health literacy interventions. Addressing these disparities requires targeted outreach and accessible educational resources tailored to vulnerable communities.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should explore the long-term effectiveness of digital health literacy interventions in mitigating misinformation. Longitudinal studies assessing behavioral changes following digital literacy training could provide deeper insights into the sustainability of these initiatives.

Another area for further investigation is the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in misinformation detection. AI-driven algorithms could be leveraged to identify and flag misleading health information in real-time, reducing user exposure to misinformation. Research into ethical AI implementation for misinformation control would be particularly valuable in ensuring that such technologies are deployed effectively and fairly.

Additionally, interdisciplinary research combining public health, psychology, and media studies could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how misinformation influences decision-making. Exploring cognitive biases and emotional drivers that contribute to misinformation spread could inform more targeted intervention strategies.

Efforts should also focus on global comparisons of digital health literacy programs. Understanding how different countries address misinformation through policy and education could offer valuable

insights into best practices and transferable strategies. Comparative studies examining regulatory frameworks, literacy education models, and public engagement strategies could inform more effective global health communication efforts.

Strengthening public-private partnerships between governments, academia, and technology companies is another key research priority. Collaboration on data-sharing initiatives, misinformation tracking, and the development of educational resources could facilitate a more cohesive approach to digital health literacy promotion.

Ultimately, advancing digital health literacy requires a multi-faceted approach that integrates education, technology, policy, and community engagement. Future research should continue to refine these strategies to build a more resilient and informed digital health ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

This narrative review has highlighted the critical role of digital health literacy in addressing the pervasive spread of health misinformation on social media platforms. The findings emphasize that individuals with limited digital health literacy are more vulnerable to misinformation, often resulting in adverse health outcomes. Key determinants such as age, socioeconomic status, and digital access significantly shape individuals' ability to critically engage with online health content.

While the review provides insights into policy and educational interventions—such as peer led initiatives, school based programs, and algorithmic reforms—it is essential to recognize the limitations of this study. First, the review is constrained by the availability of empirical studies primarily from high and middle income countries, limiting its generalizability to low resource settings. Second, the reliance on secondary literature and the absence of longitudinal evaluations reduce the ability to draw conclusions about the long term effectiveness of the interventions discussed. Furthermore, the rapidly evolving nature of social media platforms and misinformation tactics presents ongoing methodological challenges.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the academic discourse by synthesizing a wide range of interdisciplinary findings from public health, communication, education, and media studies. It underscores the need to move beyond individual level interventions and toward systemic strategies that integrate health literacy into broader digital governance and public health infrastructures.

Future research should expand into underrepresented regions and populations, develop standardized assessment tools for digital health literacy, and explore the ethical deployment of AI based misinformation detection systems. Longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to evaluate the sustained impact of literacy interventions and to understand how digital health competencies evolve over time.

In sum, strengthening digital health literacy is not only a matter of public education but a strategic imperative for public health resilience. A multidimensional approach—combining community

engagement, regulatory reform, and evidence based education—will be crucial to building societies that are better equipped to navigate health information in the digital age.

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