

Ethical Social Media Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores the ethical dimensions of social media communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on its dual role in disseminating both accurate health information and misinformation. As the pandemic escalated, many turned to social platforms for updates, resulting in widespread misinformation that generated public confusion, anxiety, and vaccine hesitancy. The study highlights the critical responsibilities of health professionals, social media platforms, and public health organizations in ensuring accurate information dissemination while actively combating misinformation. It emphasizes the need for ethical communication strategies focused on integrity, transparency, and accountability. Additionally, it proposes practical solutions, such as automated fact-checking through artificial intelligence algorithms, human monitoring, and collaborative educational campaigns, to enhance the reliability of health information shared on social media. The findings aim to inform best practices for ethical digital communication in future health crises, fostering public trust and improving health outcomes.

Keywords: ethics, communication, pandemic, case study

INTRODUCTION

During the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), social media was used by most of the population to consume rapidly changing infection information. In recent years, there has been a rapid rise and adoption of social media, which has created growth in researching the use and impacts of social media platforms.^[1] The population looked toward social media platforms to receive news on COVID-19. The limited restrictions on content published on social media platforms caused issues surrounding misinformation. The COVID-19 pandemic transformed access to healthcare and negatively impacted mental and physical well-being, while also significantly altering teens' relationships with social media.^[2] Consequences created from the social media during the COVID-19 pandemic include

misinformation, leading to public confusion, increased anxiety, and vaccine hesitancy. Conversely, accurate information can empower individuals to make informed health decisions and enhance overall public health outcomes. Individuals can post content claiming to be fact when the information is not valid.

Social media played an increasingly important role in spreading accurate and inaccurate information during the COVID-19 pandemic, which can be used by healthcare systems to prepare for future subsequent pandemics in promoting accurate ethical digital communications.^[3] Reflecting on the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic can generate takeaways for effectively and ethically communicating accurate information to inform the public and reduce digital chaos. The ethical issue

identified involves the responsibility of health professionals and social media platforms to provide accurate information while combating misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation emphasizes the importance of ethical communication in public health crises, where the stakes are high for individual and community well-being.

During unprecedented times, individuals look toward digital means to find new information. For health-related topics, the population seek the opinions of professionals in the field. Scientists and healthcare professionals are expected to communicate honestly and transparently when providing expert or clinical advice.^[4] Stakeholders are individuals with diverse backgrounds that are impacted by a decision or scenario.^[5] Key stakeholders, otherwise known as individuals or parties affected using social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, include health professionals, social media platforms, public health organizations, researchers, policymakers, and the public. Each group is affected by the communication dynamics during the pandemic, with varying degrees of influence and responsibility. Health professionals have a recognized duty to care for both individual patients and public health, which requires effectively communicating the safety and efficacy of immunization through digital media, an area not typically covered in medical training.^[6] Health professionals have the ethical obligation to provide unbiased, relevant, and accurate information to the public.

Ensuring accurate information is present on social media platforms influences the rights of the public to access accurate health information, as well as the right to free speech. Health professionals have the obligation to communicate truthfully and transparently. Health institutions that enable social media policy can promote ethical standards that guide staff in disseminating factual information transparently. In addition, the public has the obligation to not spread information or claim authenticity to

increase social media presence, views, or chaotic discourse. Social media platforms have the responsibility to monitor and manage misinformation while not infringing upon freedom of speech.

Ethics in healthcare is multifaceted because it can consider both theoretical and practical applications.^[7] The notion of ethics within the healthcare setting is dynamic due to the complex and critical setting of rendering critical services. Ethics shape society by influencing social norms and behaviours among the population by promoting just and fair action.^[8] Many healthcare professionals, such as nurses, subscribe to a code of conduct to maintain ethical behaviours. Within the healthcare setting, the provider-patient relationship must emphasize respect for individual freedom, truth-telling, promise-keeping, avoidance of disparities, and the preservation of patient unique perspectives.^[9] Relationships among stakeholders are essential, particularly the provider-patient dynamic, which relies on trust and open communication. Additionally, the relationship between health institutions and the public is vital for effective outreach and education during health crises. Healthcare related topics can be complex, which require effective communication to present information in an easy-to-understand manner for patient comprehension.

Virtues are key qualities that influence behaviour, with integrity, compassion, respect, and accountability being essential for ethical medical professionalism throughout a physician's career.^[10] Key virtues for ethical digital communications during the COVID-19 pandemic include integrity, courage, compassion, and fairness. These virtues guide stakeholders in their communications and actions, developing a culture of ethical responsibility and accountability to enhance trust among the public.

Ethics communication is a pedagogical approach that fosters ethical competence among professionals, including nursing students, and encourages the development

of virtues through group discussions in their background and education.^[11] In essence, communication ethics argue the importance of formalizing public engagement efforts around complex scientific topics, which improves the conveyance of information to nonexperts.^[12] Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, social media emerged as a primary source of information, leading to significant misinformation and anxiety. Individuals frequently sought updates on COVID-19, often encountering misleading content. Trust in health information diminished as conflicting messages proliferated, particularly concerning vaccine safety and efficacy.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, several challenges emerged in social media communications, including misinformation, trust issues, information overload, and censorship. The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic created feelings of anxiety, which was intensified by the chaotic manner of information presented on social media.^[13] The communication challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of clinical ethics committees to improve guidance in supporting the information needs of the public.^[14] Misinformation was increased by lockdowns, as people eagerly sought updates on the infection, leading them to frequently turn to social media for information. This created an environment where clickbait content thrived, with creators making false claims about new information that was often either outdated or inaccurate. The unprecedented nature of the pandemic also contributed to trust and accountability issues, as many individuals found it difficult to trust the credibility of the information sources. Vaccine hesitancy and refusal are driven by COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation spread on social media, alongside the rise of fake news about the virus and the initially subdued response from the scientific community to address this misinformation.^[15] Additionally, the constant discussions about COVID-19

during lockdowns resulted in an overwhelming amount of speculation and content, causing significant information overload.

Amid COVID-19-related uncertainty and fears, Americans are increasingly relying on the internet and social media for updates on the pandemic, including confirmed cases, government policies, and health information, which have been shown to enhance public health strategies against the disease.^[16] Concerns about censorship also arose, as various platforms and institutions attempted to combat misinformation. Addressing misinformation on social media has become increasingly urgent with the emergence of COVID-19, causing the World Health Organization to develop information to debunk myths about the infection.^[17] Accurate and reliable information shared on social media is vital for combating infodemics, misinformation, and rumours during COVID-19, while real-time surveillance of social media can serve as a valuable tool for public health agencies and organizations.^[17] Underlying values in context of the COVID-19 pandemic include truthfulness, public health transparency, trust, and accountability. These values are crucial for maintaining public confidence and ensuring that accurate health information reaches social media outlets.

MATERIALS & METHODS

This case study reviews existing literature on the use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study followed a 12-step approach that strived to address several key ethical considerations. Initially, the nature of the ethical issue was identified as the spread of misinformation on social media during the pandemic. Relevant facts were gathered through qualitative analysis of social media content and quantitative surveys, focusing on the dissemination of both accurate and inaccurate information. Stakeholders were identified, including health professionals, social media platforms, public health organizations, researchers, policymakers, and the public. The study

clarified underlying values such as truthfulness, public health transparency, trust, and accountability. It considered the consequences of misinformation, including public confusion, increased anxiety, and vaccine hesitancy, as well as the benefits of accurate information in empowering informed health decisions. Relevant rights and duties were examined, emphasizing the obligations of health professionals to provide accurate information and the responsibilities of social media platforms to monitor and manage misinformation. The virtues of integrity, courage, compassion, and fairness were identified as essential for ethical digital communications. The study considered relevant relationships, particularly the provider-patient dynamic and the relationship between health institutions and the public. Potential responses to address misinformation were developed, including automated monitoring, health education campaigns, and clear content moderation guidelines. Each option was evaluated using moral imagination, considering the above factors, to choose the best approach. Finally, the study reflected on future preventive measures, such as investing in artificial intelligence tools, for real-time misinformation detection and providing ongoing training for health professionals on effective digital communication strategies.

RESULT

To address misinformation on digital platforms, health institutions and social media platforms must enable actions. First, social media platforms could implement automated monitoring of information, through artificial intelligence, to enable fact-checking and verification of information on platform feeds. In addition, social media platforms could designate human monitors to help facilitate manual review of more complex, nuanced content that could be seen as misinformative. Social media platforms use innovative technologies to collect, monitor, and revoke content through various methods of surveillance.^[18] Second,

healthcare institutions and social media platforms can collaborate to help identify strategic health education campaigns that reach a wide audience with credible, accurate, and transparent information. Third, health institutions can develop comprehensive and clear guidelines to inform social media platforms on developing policy surrounding misinformation presented on their platforms, which can improve their ability to censor incorrect information and not mistakenly remove acceptable content. Social media guidelines emphasize both the risks and benefits of usage, highlighting the importance of engaging with patients and networking with colleagues while providing limited practical advice for health professionals on effectively leveraging these platforms in healthcare education and practice.^[19]

Each potential solution to address social media misinformation during pandemics can be assessed for feasibility and impact. Providing social media monitoring through fact-checking requires resources, with artificial intelligence technology alongside human workers. The use of social media monitoring can significantly improve platform information accuracy. Educational campaigns are effective to enable the public to make informed decisions, yet the reach of such campaigns comes with limited visibility. Clear content moderation guidelines promote accountability but risk censorship concerns. Censorship on major social media platforms, such as Facebook, X, and YouTube, involves the removal of content deemed objectionable based on broad and vague policy categories, which often exceed the exceptions to free speech in democratic legislation and can reflect political bias in moderation practices.^[20] Among the potential solutions, enabling fact-checking mechanisms on social media and establishing collaboration between health institutions and social media platforms appears to be the most optimal. During similar pandemics, social media platforms can develop task forces and

implement technologies to diminish inaccurate content quickly and efficiently, with input from healthcare institutions that have industry and medical knowledge to guide actions. This approach is resource intensive, but the improved accuracy and content could also drive the use of the platform due to enhanced trust among the public.

DISCUSSION

The ethical issue identified involves the responsibility of health professionals and social media platforms to provide accurate information while combating misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflecting on the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic can generate takeaways for effectively and ethically communicating accurate information to inform the public and reduce digital chaos. Health professionals have the ethical obligation to provide unbiased, relevant, and accurate information to the public. Ensuring accurate information on social media platforms influences the rights of the public to access accurate health information and the right to free speech. Social media platforms have the responsibility to monitor and manage misinformation while not infringing upon freedom of speech.

CONCLUSION

To prevent similar issues in future health crises, it is crucial for health institutions to establish comprehensive ethical guidelines for social media communication. Investing in artificial intelligence tools for real-time misinformation detection, providing ongoing training for health professionals on effective digital communication strategies and policies, and promoting public health campaigns can significantly enhance communication effectiveness and public trust.

Declaration by Author

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