

Health Misinformation in the Age of Reels: A Growing Public Health Challenge

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The rapid growth of social media has transformed the way people access health information, particularly through short-video platforms such as Instagram reels and YouTube shorts. These platforms offer opportunities for widespread dissemination of health-related content but also facilitate the rapid spread of misinformation. Health misinformation presented in brief, visually appealing formats often lacks adequate scientific context, making it difficult for users to distinguish evidence-based information from unverified claims. This issue is particularly concerning among adolescents and young adults, who are among the most active consumers of short-video content. In India, increasing digital connectivity and social media use have further amplified the reach and influence of online health information. The growing presence of health influencers without formal medical training raises additional concerns regarding the accuracy and reliability of shared content. Exposure to misleading health information may influence health behaviors, promote self-medication, encourage inappropriate healthcare decisions, and contribute to misunderstanding of medical conditions and treatments. Addressing this challenge requires coordinated efforts involving healthcare professionals, public health institutions, policymakers, social media companies, and users themselves. Strengthening digital health literacy and promoting evidence-based communication on social media platforms are essential to counter misinformation and protect public health in the digital age.

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Introduction

The increasing use of social media has fundamentally changed the way individuals access health information. Digital platforms are now widely used for obtaining advice regarding disease prevention, treatment options, and lifestyle practices. Among these platforms, short-video formats such as Instagram reels and YouTube shorts have gained immense popularity, particularly among adolescents and young adults. While these platforms offer new opportunities for disseminating health information to large audiences, they also present significant challenges due to the rapid circulation of inaccurate or misleading health content.^{1,2}

Social media platforms enable rapid sharing of information across large populations with minimal barriers to content creation. Although this facilitates the dissemination of useful public health messages, it also allows unverified or misleading information to spread widely. Health misinformation circulating through social

media has been recognized as a growing concern for public health communication, especially during periods when individuals actively seek health information online. The viral nature of these platforms allows inaccurate health claims to reach large audiences quickly, often before they can be corrected by credible sources.³

Short-video platforms present additional challenges because complex medical concepts are often simplified into brief and visually appealing messages. Such content may lack adequate scientific context or supporting evidence. Health-related content on these platforms has increased substantially in recent years, indicating their growing influence in shaping public understanding of health issues.⁴ The behavioral impact of such content is noteworthy. Many individuals encounter health advice through online videos and may attempt self-treatment or home remedies based on the information presented. In some instances, users report trying remedies suggested in social media videos, despite uncertainty regarding their effectiveness or safety.⁵

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India has witnessed several instances where health misinformation circulating through social media has influenced public health practices. During the COVID-19 pandemic, misleading information regarding miracle cures, vaccine safety, herbal remedies, and preventive practices spread rapidly through WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, and other platforms, often reaching millions before correction by health authorities.⁶ Similar misinformation has also been observed regarding dengue management, antibiotic use, diabetes reversal, cancer cures, and reproductive health.⁷ Given that India has over 900 million internet users and one of the world's largest populations of social media users, the public health impact of digital misinformation is particularly substantial. These observations emphasize the urgent need for evidence-based digital health communication and improved health literacy among the Indian population.⁸

The public health implications of health misinformation extend far beyond self-treatment and inappropriate health behaviours. False or misleading information can contribute to vaccine hesitancy, delayed healthcare seeking, poor adherence to prescribed treatment, inappropriate antibiotic use leading to antimicrobial resistance, increased demand for unnecessary investigations, and the promotion of unproven or potentially harmful therapies. Such misinformation may also undermine trust in healthcare professionals and public health institutions, making it more difficult to implement evidence-based public health interventions during disease outbreaks and health emergencies. These consequences collectively threaten individual patient safety as well as population health.⁹

Addressing health misinformation requires coordinated action from multiple stakeholders. Healthcare professionals should actively engage with the public through digital platforms by creating accessible, evidence-based content and promptly correcting misinformation. Public health institutions should establish dedicated digital communication strategies, collaborate with trusted influencers, and conduct regular public awareness campaigns to improve digital health literacy. Educational institutions should incorporate media and health literacy into school and university curricula to equip young people with critical appraisal skills. Policymakers should strengthen regulations related to misleading health claims and support national fact-checking initiatives. Social media companies

should improve algorithm transparency, strengthen content moderation, label unverified health information, and promote credible sources such as government agencies and recognized public health organizations. Collaborative efforts across these sectors are essential to foster a reliable digital health information ecosystem.

Short-video platforms have become influential channels for health communication in the digital era. While they provide unprecedented opportunities for disseminating health information, they also facilitate the rapid spread of misinformation. Combating this challenge requires evidence-based communication, stronger digital health literacy, responsible platform governance, and sustained collaboration among healthcare professionals, policymakers, educators, researchers, and technology companies. Such coordinated efforts are essential to safeguard public trust and protect population health.

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Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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