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Exploring Health Advice Adoption in Digital Spaces: A Dual-Theory Approach

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ABSTRACT

Digital health platforms, including social media sites like TikTok and Facebook, have become important spaces for health communication, offering opportunities for peer support and information sharing. However, these platforms also pose significant risks, including misinformation, privacy violations, and a lack of professional oversight. This scoping review investigated the coping mechanisms used by patients and healthcare providers in digital health environments, with a focus on navigating misinformation and unregulated content on social media. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify dominant coping strategies and recurring challenges. The most common coping strategies included cross-checking health information with verified sources, avoiding unverified accounts, and seeking direct consultation with qualified professionals. Despite these strategies, users remain vulnerable due to inconsistent regulation, limited digital health literacy, and the lack of mechanisms for verifying professional credentials online. Digital health ecosystems must be supported by more robust and enforceable regulatory frameworks. Strengthening privacy protocols and issuing platform-specific guidelines for ethical conduct can further protect users and improve trust in digital health communication. This study advances understanding of coping mechanisms in digital health by synthesizing how users manage misinformation, privacy, and oversight challenges on social media, offering insights to improve safety and accountability and to inform future policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid digitalization of healthcare has fundamentally transformed how patients and healthcare providers interact, introducing new forms of virtual engagement. Telemedicine platforms, mobile health applications, and health-related content on social media have become increasingly embedded in everyday life, making medical advice more accessible than ever [38]. This digital shift aligns with global health objectives, including the pursuit of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) as promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO) [75].

However, while digital technologies have democratized access to health information, they have simultaneously created new ethical and regulatory dilemmas. A critical issue lies in the uneven quality of information disseminated through these platforms. Unlike traditional clinical settings, where data is filtered through professional standards, digital platforms often operate without sufficient oversight. The resulting information overload, coupled with the rise of health “influencers” and unregulated content creators, raises significant concerns about misinformation, misdiagnosis, and patient safety [15].

Moreover, the evolution of digital health has introduced a paradox: the same technologies that promote access may inadvertently undermine the reliability and trustworthiness of care. Platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp, while fostering peer support and health advocacy, also serve as vectors for unverified or harmful health advice. This duality points to an urgent need for regulatory interventions that can keep pace with the dynamic nature of digital health communication.

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The implications of this shift are particularly profound in low-resource contexts. In regions with limited physical infrastructure, digital health tools can help close service delivery gaps. For example, mobile apps and virtual consultations can help circumvent geographical barriers and human resource shortages. Nonetheless, without standardized clinical guidelines or regulatory frameworks, such tools risk perpetuating inequities and compromising care quality. Success of digital health in sub-Saharan Africa hinges on context-sensitive governance mechanisms that ensure both safety and cultural relevance [7].

The legal and institutional vacuum surrounding digital health is further compounded by technological fragmentation and the decentralized nature of the internet. Many platforms operate outside the jurisdiction of national regulatory bodies, making it difficult to assign liability or enforce ethical standards [59]. This regulatory ambiguity exacerbates patient vulnerability, especially in transnational contexts where jurisdictional clarity is lacking.

In response to these challenges, scholars have called for more inclusive, participatory approaches to digital health governance. [47][49] emphasize the importance of involving diverse stakeholders, investing in infrastructure, and adapting interventions to local cultural and institutional realities. These recommendations are particularly relevant as health systems worldwide continue to navigate the tension between innovation and accountability.

This study contributes to this evolving discourse by examining how both patients and healthcare professionals cope with the uncertainties and complexities of digital health transformation. Specifically, it explores the strategies they use to adapt to unregulated environments, assess the credibility of online medical advice, and maintain trust in virtual interactions.

1.1. Problem Statement

The regulatory landscape for digital health platforms is fragmented and inconsistent across countries, particularly regarding informal health advice shared through blogs and social media [60]. Existing telemedicine policies primarily focus on formal healthcare delivery and do not adequately address the challenges posed by unqualified individuals offering health advice in informal digital settings [68]. This gap raises concerns about misinformation, privacy violations, and compromised patient safety, especially during health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where misinformation has had severe consequences [27]. In South Africa, while telehealth is regulated under the Health Professions Act 56 of 1974 and the National Health Act 61 of 2003, and ethical guidelines have been issued by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) [33], there remains a significant lack of oversight for unqualified individuals providing digital health advice [16]. This regulatory gap undermines the potential benefits of digital health platforms and jeopardizes patient safety.

1.2. Study Aim

This study aimed to examine the coping mechanisms adopted by patients and healthcare providers within digital health environments, emphasising the risks and challenges posed by social media platforms such as TikTok. The review sought to explore how these stakeholders navigate issues related to misinformation, data privacy, and the absence of professional oversight, and to identify strategies that promote resilience, safety, and accountability in digitally mediated health interactions.

1.3. Literature Review

Digital platforms have significantly expanded access to healthcare by enabling more timely communication between patients and providers, contributing to more flexible and patient-centred care models. However, alongside these benefits, new ethical challenges have emerged, particularly related to the quality, credibility, and governance of health information shared online. Research consistently highlights that the largely unregulated nature of digital health interactions, especially on social media platforms, raises serious concerns regarding patient safety, professional accountability, and the spread of misinformation [70].

The concept of “eHealth,” introduced by Eysenbach, marked a pivotal shift in how internet-based technologies were envisioned to transform healthcare delivery [24]. This vision was accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, which propelled telemedicine into mainstream healthcare practice [53]. While formal digital consultations are subject to clinical and ethical standards, informal digital health interactions on platforms like TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp remain largely outside regulatory frameworks. These informal spaces are often the first point of contact for health-related queries, especially among younger or underserved populations.

The quality of health information in such informal digital environments is inconsistent and frequently misleading. User-generated content tends to be anecdotal and lacks scientific validation or contextual accuracy, an issue that became particularly pronounced during public health emergencies like COVID-19 [4][30]. This regulatory vacuum allows misinformation to spread unchecked and often faster than formal health authorities can respond.

Despite ongoing concerns about misinformation in digital health spaces, initiatives like YouTube's health worker verification program help users identify credible sources [42][44]. A key finding from [44] shows that 84.7% of users make health decisions based on YouTube content, despite weak correlations between perceived usefulness and socio-demographic factors. This highlights the need for stronger oversight and digital literacy efforts to ensure that health decisions are based on accurate, evidence-based information [73][64]. Similarly, the WHO's Health Alert service on WhatsApp disseminates verified, real-time public health information directly to users, demonstrating effective collaboration between global health authorities and digital platforms [72][74]. These case studies highlight the potential for combining technology with governance to enhance the reliability of online health information.

Beyond health and technology perspectives, interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate media studies and digital psychology provide crucial insights into user behavior and the dissemination of information. Factors such as emotions, cognitive biases, and algorithm-driven content curation significantly shape how health information is consumed and shared [57][43]. Additionally, research highlights social media's impact on young people's mental health by addressing challenges related to identity development, social interaction, bullying, digital literacy, and governance, culminating in the development of a five-factor Comprehensive Digital Influence Model to guide future research and policy [43]. Algorithms tend to amplify sensational or emotionally charged content, thereby exacerbating misinformation [71]. Online community dynamics, including peer validation and social identity, further shape user trust and engagement with health advice [18]. Integrating these perspectives enriches the understanding of digital health communication beyond clinical or technological considerations [62].

The regulatory environment for digital health remains fragmented and often inadequate. While this is widely acknowledged, detailed comparisons of country-specific regulations are limited. Contrasting regulatory approaches can clarify the global policy context: for example, the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) imposes rigorous privacy and data protection standards impacting digital health platforms within its jurisdiction [3]. In contrast, the United States primarily relies on the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which governs formal healthcare entities but provides limited oversight over informal digital interactions [22]. Such differences illustrate the complexity of establishing harmonised global governance for digital health, particularly given jurisdictional challenges posed by cross-border digital communication.

The literature reveals a fundamental tension within digital health: while platforms enable greater access, support self-management, and foster emotional well-being [60], they also risk facilitating misinformation, information overload, privacy violations, and the normalization of unsafe practices. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive strategies that include robust regulation, interdisciplinary research, active stakeholder engagement, and context-sensitive interventions.

Building on these insights, this study aims to address key gaps by analysing best practices in online medical advice delivery, assessing practical challenges faced by patients and providers, critically reviewing regulatory and policy frameworks across different contexts, and proposing recommendations to enhance the safety, reliability, and ethical standards of digital health advisory services. Understanding how digital health information shapes health-seeking behaviour and addressing digital inequities, especially among marginalised or rural populations, remains essential for fostering trustworthy and inclusive healthcare ecosystems in the digital age [10] [6].

1.4. Theoretical Framework

This study draws primarily on the Health Belief Model (HBM) and the Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) theory to explore digital health user behaviour. The HBM offers a framework for understanding how individuals perceive and respond to health advice online by focusing on key factors such as perceived severity of a health issue, susceptibility to it, perceived benefits of acting, and barriers to doing so [5]. This model helps explain why some users might accept or reject health advice from informal digital sources rather than licensed professionals.

Complementing this, the Diffusion of Innovations theory [56] examines how new ideas and behaviours, such as health practices or advice, spread across social networks. In the context of digital health, DOI elucidates how health-related content, whether accurate or misleading, can rapidly gain popularity and become normalized through mechanisms such as social endorsement, influencer influence, and viral sharing. This process influences individual perceptions by shaping what users consider socially accepted or trusted information, thereby interacting with HBM constructs such as perceived susceptibility and perceived benefits. Together, these theories offer a more comprehensive understanding of digital health behaviours by linking individual risk perception with the social dynamics of information diffusion. For instance, an individual's assessment of health risks (HBM) may be significantly influenced by the popularity and perceived credibility of content circulating within their social networks (DOI), highlighting the interplay between personal cognition and collective influence.

While the HBM and DOI theories offer foundational insights into health-related behaviour and the spread of innovation, additional frameworks enrich understanding of digital health adoption. Notably, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) highlights perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use as key predictors of technology acceptance [20][69]. Similarly, the Uses and Gratifications Theory focuses on individuals' psychological and social motivations for engaging with media and technology, emphasizing active user agency and media choice [37][65]. These models provide user-centred perspectives that complement the health- and innovation-focused approaches of HBM and DOI, particularly in contexts where media interaction and technology usability are critical.

2. METHODS

This study employed a scoping review to systematically map the existing literature on coping mechanisms in digital health environments. A scoping review was chosen because it allows for a broad exploration of complex and heterogeneous evidence, making it well-suited to capture diverse research on coping strategies across multiple disciplines and study designs [2][55]. This approach is instrumental in emerging fields like digital health, where the literature is varied and evolving, enabling comprehensive identification of key concepts, gaps, and available types of evidence [41].

The review specifically focused on challenges faced by healthcare professionals and patients when using social media platforms such as TikTok. It addressed psychological, ethical, and practical concerns related to misinformation, data privacy, and the absence of professional oversight in these digital spaces [48][7][35]. The primary objective was to synthesize findings to understand how stakeholders navigate digital health risks and what strategies they adopt in response.

A structured search was conducted across three major academic databases: PubMed, Google Scholar, and Scopus. The search strategy used a combination of keywords, including: "digital health," "coping mechanisms," "social media platforms," "misinformation," and "data privacy." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were applied to refine the results and ensure comprehensiveness.

Figure 1 below illustrates the temporal distribution of sources included in the study. The majority of references (64.0%) were published between 2020 and 2024, reflecting the rapidly evolving nature of digital health, telemedicine, data governance, and health misinformation research.

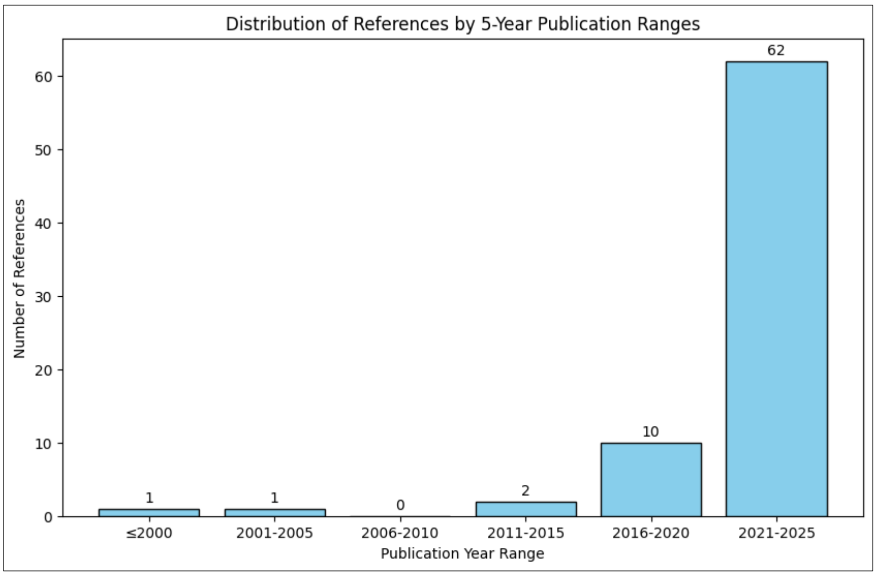


Figure 1. Distribution of references by publication year range

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

- Focused on coping strategies within digital health or social media contexts.
- Addressed psychological or behavioural responses of healthcare professionals or patients.
- They were peer-reviewed, methodologically rigorous, and contributed to the research topic.

Exclusion criteria were:

- Articles lacking methodological detail.
- Studies not directly relevant to coping in digital health environments.
- Opinion pieces or publications with no empirical foundation.

Each article was assessed for methodological soundness and relevance. A coding framework was developed to categorise emerging themes, allowing for comparative analysis across sources.

Studies that failed to meet quality or relevance thresholds were excluded to maintain methodological integrity. Particular care was taken to eliminate studies with insufficient context or weak designs. However, this introduced limitations, notably publication bias, as studies with negative or inconclusive outcomes were less likely to be published and included [68][35].

The heterogeneity of study designs posed challenges to generalisability. The predominance of qualitative and exploratory studies also made it difficult to quantify the prevalence of coping mechanisms. Despite these challenges, the synthesis allowed for the identification of recurring themes and informed a set of evidence-based recommendations.

The review produced key insights into the multifaceted coping strategies adopted by users of digital health platforms. It provided recommendations to enhance patient safety, ensure data privacy, and improve professional accountability online [59]. These findings provide a foundation for future policy interventions to make digital health ecosystems more secure and supportive for both patients and healthcare professionals.

2.1. The Role of Digital Platforms in Healthcare Support and Information Sharing

Digital platforms, such as TikTok, have become pivotal in facilitating the exchange of health-related information, allowing patients to share experiences and receive peer support. These platforms foster a sense of community, especially in support groups where individuals with similar conditions can provide mutual encouragement and advice [14]. Emphasise the transformative role of social media and online communities in healthcare, improving patient education, empowerment, and support while also highlighting challenges such as misinformation and privacy risks [58]. They recommend that healthcare providers and policymakers prioritise the ethical use of digital health technologies, focusing on privacy protection, combating misinformation, and ensuring accountability.

2.1.1. Verification and Professional Accountability

Verification mechanisms for healthcare professionals on digital platforms are often inconsistent. Healthcare professionals' growing use of social media, noting concerns about unprofessional behaviour, blurred professional identities, and patient privacy violations [32]. The study underscores the need for consistent verification mechanisms. It emphasises the importance of developing clear guidelines and educational programs to uphold digital professionalism and help healthcare professionals and students navigate the boundaries between personal and professional identities in the digital era. While some platforms may allow professionals to provide valuable insights, the absence of robust systems to authenticate their qualifications increases the risk of unauthorised individuals dispensing potentially harmful advice [14]. The lack of oversight means unverified sources may mislead patients, leading to misinformation, incorrect self-diagnosis, or unproven treatments. This highlights the need for a more stringent regulatory framework to ensure that only qualified professionals offer medical guidance in these spaces [68].

2.1.2. Privacy and Data Protection

As digital technologies increasingly integrate into healthcare systems, enhancing patient care, quality monitoring, and clinical support, privacy and data protection have become critical concerns. Both the benefits and the substantial challenges related to privacy and security [54]. They also address significant privacy and security challenges associated with these advancements. Privacy and data security are major concerns for digital health platforms [76]. Platforms like TikTok often lack adequate measures to protect sensitive health information, raising concerns about data protection and user privacy [59]. The importance of protecting personal information on social and digital platforms cannot be overstated, as many users freely share their health experiences without fully understanding the risks, including unauthorized data access and breaches [28]. These gaps in data security not only expose individuals to privacy violations but also raise concerns about non-compliance with critical privacy regulations, such as the General Data Protection Regulation [23] and the Protection of Personal Information Act [66][63].

2.1.3. Legal Jurisdiction and Liability

The increasing reliance on digital platforms for health-related content raises complex legal liability concerns. Although digital health technologies hold significant promise for enhancing healthcare systems, existing regulatory frameworks in the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) lack sufficient provisions for ensuring trust, data privacy, clinical validation, and oversight. This highlights a pressing need for more robust and adaptive legal structures to support the implementation of value-based care [26]. There is a lack of clear legal frameworks to address situations in which misdiagnosis, incorrect treatment advice, or patient harm result from interactions on these platforms. The challenge is further compounded by the global nature of social media and digital health spaces, as cross-border consultations or advice may make it challenging to enforce jurisdictional laws [60][13].

This absence of clarity poses a significant challenge in holding individuals accountable for medical advice provided in online spaces [39]. Key findings indicate that social media has been widely utilised for diverse health purposes. New applications have emerged since 2013, such as advancing health research, facilitating social mobilization, and supporting offline health-related services. However, gaps remain in evaluating its strategic use and impact on health interventions [14]. Building on these key findings, the following section explores the challenges associated with misinformation on social media and its impact on health literacy, highlighting the need for effective strategies to address these issues in digital health spaces.

2.1.4. Misinformation and Health Literacy

The rapid spread of unverified and potentially misleading health information on digital platforms is a pressing issue [61]. Users, often lacking health literacy, may struggle to discern between credible medical advice and harmful misinformation. This challenge is particularly evident on social media platforms like TikTok, where viral trends may promote unverified or anecdotal health claims, contributing to declining health literacy [45] [9] [29]. Misinformation can lead patients to make poor health decisions or to forgo necessary medical care, ultimately exacerbating health risks [14]. Therefore, platforms must be more active in monitoring and curating health-related content to ensure that users are exposed to credible, scientifically backed information.

2.1.5. Self-Disclosure of Health Status on Digital Platforms and Regulatory Gaps

The self-disclosure of health status on digital platforms presents significant challenges, particularly given the insufficient regulatory frameworks intended to safeguard patient data. In South Africa, privacy and data protection in healthcare are governed by a complex legal framework, including the Constitution, Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), the National Health Act, and the Health Professions Council's guidelines, all aiming to balance the need for patient data sharing with the responsibility of safeguarding it to maintain trust and ensure ethical, secure healthcare practices [52][66][40][1].

However, the Act's provisions are generally broad and may not fully address the specific challenges posed by digital health consultations, potentially creating gaps in patient data protection. Additionally, patients increasingly turn to peers for medical advice based on personal experiences rather than consulting qualified healthcare professionals. This reliance on anecdotal advice raises the risk of misinformation, as the qualifications of those providing guidance are often unverified. The absence of clear, sector-specific regulations governing informal health consultations on digital platforms further exacerbates these risks, leaving patients vulnerable to unqualified advice. While regulatory bodies such as the HPCSA and the National Health Act have established guidelines for professional healthcare providers, there are no explicit frameworks in place to regulate informal online health interactions [21][33] [16].

As a result, patients may inadvertently receive misleading or harmful advice, which can seriously affect their health. The table (Table 1) below summarizes the key advantages and disadvantages of disclosing health status on digital platforms. While self-disclosure can offer benefits such as emotional support, increased awareness, and access to diverse health information, it also presents risks, including misinformation, privacy breaches, regulatory gaps, and potential exploitation. These challenges underscore the need for a more structured regulatory framework to safeguard patient interests while facilitating informed, secure health discussions.

Table 1: Advantages and Disadvantages of Disclosing Health Status on Digital Platforms

Advantages	Disadvantages
Peer Support: Encourages community and emotional support.	Misinformation: Risk of harmful, unverified advice from peers.
Awareness: Reduces stigma and promotes health discussions.	Privacy Risks: Potential breaches of confidentiality.
Access to Information: Broadens knowledge through shared experiences.	Lack of Regulation: Exposure to unqualified or misleading advice.
Empowerment: Encourages personal health advocacy and control.	Exploitation: Vulnerable users may be targeted by fraudulent services.
Expert Connection: Enables interaction with healthcare professionals.	Legal/Ethical Issues: Risks related to consent and inappropriate disclosures.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the coping mechanisms used by patients and healthcare providers in digital health environments, particularly on social media platforms. While these platforms offer opportunities for peer support, information sharing, and community-building, they also present significant challenges, including exposure to unregulated health advice, misinformation, and privacy breaches. A key concern identified in this review is the fragmented and reactive nature of current digital health governance, particularly regarding informal interactions on platforms like TikTok and Facebook. Regulatory frameworks such as South Africa's Health Professions Act 56 of 1974 and the National Health Act 61 of 2003, while applicable to formal telemedicine, do not adequately address the risks posed by unqualified individuals disseminating health information in informal digital spaces [33][16].

One root cause of this regulatory gap is the rapid pace of digital innovation, which often surpasses the speed at which laws and policies can adapt [19]. Barriers include limited digital proficiency among regulators, political reluctance to impose restrictions on global tech platforms, and jurisdictional uncertainty, mainly when misinformation originates from users outside national borders [31][34]. Furthermore, enforcement is hampered by the lack of a clear mandate for health authorities to moderate informal, peer-to-peer content [17].

Comparative international experiences offer valuable insights. The UK's National Health Service (NHS) curates a verified digital health content library and collaborates with platforms to improve the reliability of content [50]. Germany's Digital Healthcare Act (Digitale-Versorgung-Gesetz, DVG) supports the certification and reimbursement of trusted digital health applications [25], while Canada promotes digital literacy campaigns and clearer accreditation for healthcare professionals operating online [12]. These examples demonstrate how regulatory clarity, platform accountability, and public education can mitigate digital health risks.

For South Africa, this suggests an urgent need to extend existing legislation and professional guidelines to include informal digital health interactions. This could involve implementing verification badges for registered professionals, requiring user consent for health disclosures, and establishing partnerships between regulators and platforms to audit health-related content. Importantly, social media should be recognized as a dual-use tool that empowers users with peer support but also exposes them to potential harm when misused.

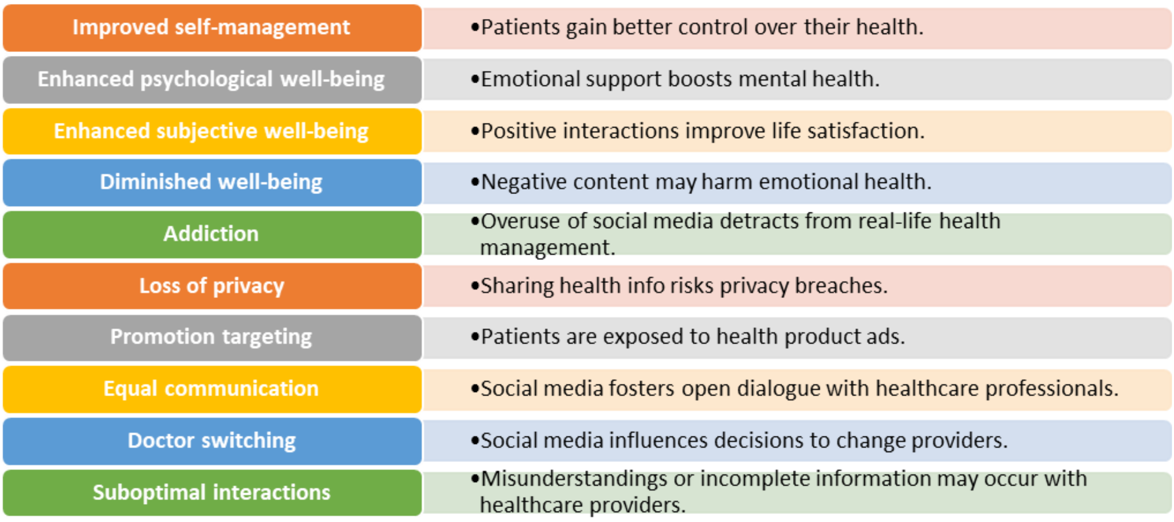
This study offers a conceptual basis for reform by identifying policy blind spots, analysing systemic constraints, and incorporating global comparisons. Without timely intervention, the continued proliferation of unregulated digital health advice may deepen health misinformation, weaken public trust in health systems, and exacerbate health disparities. A coordinated, forward-looking regulatory strategy is essential to ensure that digital health platforms evolve in ways that protect users while supporting equitable and evidence-based healthcare.

3.1. Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and the absence of primary empirical data. Future research should incorporate interviews, platform analyses, and patient feedback for comprehensive insights. Another limitation is the variability of digital health regulations across jurisdictions, which restricts the generalizability of findings. Comparative studies may provide deeper insights into regional differences and effective models. Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms means that findings may quickly become outdated. Continuous monitoring and updates to research frameworks are needed to maintain relevance. The scope of this paper did not cover specialised domains such as mental health apps or AI-driven diagnostics, which may present unique challenges. Future work should examine these niches in greater detail.

3.2. Contribution of the study

This study contributes to understanding coping mechanisms in digital health environments by synthesizing diverse research on how healthcare professionals and patients manage challenges such as misinformation, privacy concerns, and limited oversight on social media platforms like TikTok. It offers a holistic view that integrates psychological, ethical, and practical perspectives, providing actionable insights for improving patient safety, professional accountability, and data privacy. Additionally, the study highlights gaps and biases in the existing literature, paving the way for future research and informing policy development to ensure safer, more trustworthy digital health ecosystems. Figure 2 elaborates these categories, illustrating the positive and negative impacts of social media on patient experiences. This research further contributes novel insights by highlighting the urgent need for regulation that balances the benefits of digital health platforms with safeguards against their misuse. It underscores the importance of expanding regulatory frameworks to cover informal digital health advice, thereby better protecting patients and improving trust in digital health ecosystems.



Improved self-management	•Patients gain better control over their health.
Enhanced psychological well-being	•Emotional support boosts mental health.
Enhanced subjective well-being	•Positive interactions improve life satisfaction.
Diminished well-being	•Negative content may harm emotional health.
Addiction	•Overuse of social media detracts from real-life health management.
Loss of privacy	•Sharing health info risks privacy breaches.
Promotion targeting	•Patients are exposed to health product ads.
Equal communication	•Social media fosters open dialogue with healthcare professionals.
Doctor switching	•Social media influences decisions to change providers.
Suboptimal interactions	•Misunderstandings or incomplete information may occur with healthcare providers.

Figure 2: Expanded categories of social media use by patients

Data privacy and security concerns are also central in the digital healthcare space. Many platforms, including social media, lack adequate safeguards to protect sensitive health information, increasing the risk of privacy breaches and the misuse of personal data [60][59]. As digital health solutions expand, it becomes increasingly essential for platforms to adopt stronger encryption and data protection protocols to ensure patient confidentiality [28]. Additionally, policy frameworks such as the Protection of Personal Information Act [66] need to be rigorously enforced to ensure the security of patient data and prevent unauthorised access.

3.3. Policy and Practice Recommendations

To address the challenges posed by unverified health advice and privacy risks on digital platforms, this review highlights the urgent need for regulatory and practical interventions. While digital health tools offer opportunities for increased access and patient engagement, their benefits must be balanced with safeguards to prevent harm. A multi-stakeholder approach involving regulators, digital service providers, healthcare professionals, and the public is necessary. Concrete policy recommendations include:

- Implementation of verification systems for healthcare professionals on digital platforms, such as visible credentials or verified badges.

- Independent auditing of health-related content by qualified authorities to identify and reduce misinformation.
- Creation of a dedicated, accredited platform for trusted health information, particularly for sensitive or complex conditions.
- Mandatory informed consent protocols for users sharing personal health information online.
- National accreditation frameworks for digital health platforms to ensure accountability and compliance with health communication standards.
- Ongoing professional development in digital ethics for healthcare providers active on social media.
- Public health literacy campaigns to improve users' ability to assess online medical advice critically.

These measures would not only mitigate risks associated with misinformation and privacy violations but also promote safer, more ethical, and more trustworthy digital health ecosystems.

4. CONCLUSION

This review underscores the complex challenges posed by digital health platforms, particularly the widespread sharing of unverified medical advice, privacy breaches, and limited professional oversight. While digital spaces offer new avenues for health communication, the unchecked dissemination of misinformation by unqualified individuals presents clear risks to public health. Digital platforms themselves, such as TikTok, Facebook, and online health forums must assume greater responsibility by implementing content moderation tools, prioritizing credible sources through algorithms, and verifying healthcare professionals to ensure the reliability of shared information. Without timely regulatory and practical interventions, the digital health landscape may face significant long-term consequences. These include declining public trust in healthcare professionals, the entrenchment of health misinformation, and deepening inequalities in health literacy and access to healthcare. Strengthening digital governance, enhancing public awareness, and fostering ethical engagement by health professionals are critical to safeguarding the future of digital health ecosystems. Urgent, coordinated action from policymakers, platform developers, and the healthcare community is essential to ensure these spaces remain safe, inclusive, and beneficial to all users.

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