

COMMENTARY

Prescription for Influence - Pharmacy's Digital Trailblazers

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ABSTRACT

The realm of social media has seen a remarkable surge in influencers spanning various domains, from fashion and beauty to fitness and lifestyle. Pharmacy influencers hailing from backgrounds in healthcare and pharmaceuticals, utilize platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter to share their expertise and connect with online audiences. The adoption of these effective tools for sharing disseminating health information has gained significant traction. However, it is essential to emphasize that employing online methods also demands a commitment to e-professionalism and ethical responsibility.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the world of social media has witnessed a surge in influencers across various niches, from fashion and beauty to fitness and lifestyle. One emerging niche that deserves recognition is pharmacy influencers. These individuals leverage their expertise in pharmaceuticals and healthcare to educate, inspire, and connect with audiences online. Pharmacy influencers are healthcare professionals, pharmacists, pharmacy technicians, or individuals with a strong background in pharmaceuticals who utilize social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and Twitter. Instagram predominantly attracts a younger audience, seems ideally situated for imparting knowledge on infectious diseases and drug information with its visually engaging and interactive platform. While Twitter currently boasts a larger network of professional accounts by health and drug experts compared to YouTube, the latter platform holds the potential for the broadest reach due to its frequent usage and diverse demographic makeup among its audience(1). TikTok is primarily focused on short-form video content, typically ranging from 15 seconds to one minute, and relies heavily on its recommendation algorithm to curate content for individual user preferences using the "For You Page"(2). Healthcare professionals, including pharmacists, are actively

engaging online via these platforms with the public to share knowledge, provide health tips, and promote informed choices regarding medication and overall well-being. These influencers are not only passionate about their field but are also adept at translating complex medical information into accessible, relatable content for their followers.

THE MANY ROLES OF PHARMACY INFLUENCERS

Social media platforms provide a unique opportunity for individuals to ask questions and seek advice from pharmacy influencers. Pharmacists play a crucial role in informing the public about medications, including their uses, potential side effects, and proper dosage. They dispel myths, provide valuable insights into over-the-counter products, and empower individuals to make informed decisions about their health. In an era marked by an increasing prevalence of self-diagnosis and reliance on online health information, the guidance provided by pharmacists has become even more essential. This significance was particularly evident through the exemplary efforts of community pharmacists during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research conducted in Spain by Romo and collaborators showcased that pharmacy influencers on Instagram had been actively contributing to disseminating valuable information regarding COVID-19 prevention and risks to their followers throughout the pandemic (3). In addition, these influencers go beyond medication to focus on holistic health and wellness. They share tips on maintaining a healthy lifestyle, managing chronic conditions, and

preventing illness through diet, exercise, and other lifestyle choices. Their content often addresses common health concerns and provides practical advice for healthier living. Pharmacy influencers are also strong advocates of responsible medication use. Typically, emphasis is placed on the importance of following healthcare professionals' recommendations, adhering to prescription instructions, and avoiding self-medication, thus reducing the risks associated with the misuse or abuse of medications. Al-Samydai and colleagues found that a significant number of consumers in Jordan concurred that social media had a noteworthy impact on their choices when purchasing herbal cosmetics (4). This influence, they noted, was largely attributed to the active role played by influencers. On the other hand, these influencers serve as approachable intermediaries, helping bridge the gap between patients and healthcare providers by offering guidance on medication-related concerns. Another critical role of pharmacy influencers is to counteract falsehoods and misconceptions about healthcare which are rampant in the internet age, where misinformation can spread rapidly (5). This ensures that their followers have access to accurate and up-to-date knowledge from pharmacists as valuable sources of reliable, evidence-based information.

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES AGAINST MISINFORMATION

The prevalence of misinformation is not a recent occurrence. However, what has evolved is the ease with which information, whether accurate or not, can be disseminated on a grand scale. Social media platforms empower virtually anyone to express their opinions or propagate stories to a global audience. While pharmacy influencers can offer valuable insights and information to their audiences, there are potential drawbacks or negatives associated with this role. The challenge arises when individuals fail to verify the credibility of the content they encounter online before sharing it. This oversight contributes to the rapid spread or even viral dissemination of misinformation. It was demonstrated that the approval and endorsement of a large group can serve as a collective gauge of reliability and activate the bandwagon heuristic (6). These influencers may face conflicts of interest when promoting specific products or services. If they receive compensation or incentives from pharmaceutical companies or other entities, their recommendations may be biased or not in the best interest of their followers. Prioritizing engagement and popularity over professionalism will lead to the dissemination of sensationalized or unprofessional content and undermine the credibility of the pharmacy profession as a whole. There is also a significant impact on vulnerable populations, such as those with chronic illnesses or mental health issues. This influence can be positive if used responsibly, but it also carries the risk of exploitation or manipulation. Countering health misinformation spread on social media requires a multi-

faceted approach involving individuals, communities, social media platforms, and healthcare professionals. The government has worked towards developing and enforcing regulations related to health information on social media platforms, as well as launching public awareness campaigns to educate people about the risks of misinformation and how to verify health information. Pharmacists can collaborate with other health professionals by actively participating in online discussions to provide accurate health information and promote the use of verified information sources. Nonetheless, verifying whether misinformation is true or false is not a straightforward process. Lee et al. conducted two studies employing different bandwagon heuristic cues (quantitative and qualitative) in online comments sections, and it was highlighted that the qualitative cues play pivotal role in shaping individual perspectives within online environments (7). Thus, evaluating the trustworthiness of pharmacy health influencers on social media is crucial for any individual to ensure that they receive accurate and reliable information. Trustworthy pharmacy influencers must be transparent about their qualifications, experiences, and potential conflicts of interest. People should verify whether the influencer cites credible sources for their health information including peer-reviewed journal articles, government health agencies (e.g. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, World Health Organization), professional medical associations (e.g. World Medical Association, British Medical Associations) and academic or research institutions (e.g. John Hopkins Medicine, Mayo Clinic). People should also be cautious if the influencer promotes ideas or practices that go against mainstream understanding, especially when she or he has any partnerships, sponsorships, or financial relationships that could influence their content. Any health information provided should be fact-checked to see whether it aligns with the current scientific consensus.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND ETHICS

Pharmacy is a highly regulated profession, and pharmacists have a legal and ethical responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of their patients. While pharmacy influencers have a positive impact on healthcare awareness, they also face certain setbacks. When pharmacy professionals become influencers or share healthcare-related content on social media, they should be particularly mindful of various legal and ethical aspects. This is in line with the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) Statement on Use of Social Media by Pharmacy Professionals, that serves as a set of guidelines and recommendations designed to help pharmacy professionals navigate the ethical and professional aspects of using social media platforms in their practice (8). Given the ever-evolving nature of healthcare, pharmacy influencers must continuously educate themselves and stay updated on the latest research, guidelines, and regulatory changes to provide

accurate and reliable information. It is essential for them to always maintain and uphold ethical standards. If pharmacy influencers endorse specific products or services, they must do so ethically and transparently. They should disclose any conflicts of interest and avoid promoting products that may be harmful or unproven. E-professionalism offers pharmacists the tools and opportunities to enhance patient care, stay current in their field, collaborate with colleagues, and streamline their workflow while maintaining ethical and professional standards in the digital age (9). Pharmacists who are also influencers should be aware of and comply with the regulations and guidelines set forth by their licensing and regulatory bodies. Failure to do so can result in disciplinary actions, including the revocation of their pharmacy license. It is common knowledge that pharmacists should always prioritize evidence-based information and disclose any potential conflicts of interest. Pharmacy educators play a crucial role in promoting e-professionalism among pharmacy students and future pharmacists by integrating e-professionalism topics into the pharmacy curriculum to ensure that students are exposed to the concepts from the beginning of their education. Additionally, the pharmacy school can designate specific courses or modules that focus on digital communication, social media, and online ethics in healthcare (10).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, pharmacy's presence on social media is essential for promoting public health, providing reliable healthcare information, and empowering individuals to make informed decisions about their well-being. Pharmacy influencers are making a significant impact on social media by using their expertise to educate, inform, and inspire their audiences. They serve as a vital bridge between the complex world of healthcare and the public. The role of pharmacy influencers in promoting informed decision-making and responsible healthcare practices will only become more crucial as the healthcare landscape continues to evolve.

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