

The Potential of Key Diabetes-related Social Media Influencers in Health Communication

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Abstract : Health communication is essential in promoting healthy lifestyles, preventing unhealthy behaviours, managing disease conditions, and eventually reducing health disparities. Nowadays, social media provides unprecedented opportunities for enhancing health communication for both healthcare providers and people with health conditions, including self-management of chronic conditions such as diabetes. Meanwhile, a special group of active social media users have started playing a pivotal role in providing health 'solutions'. Such individuals are often referred to as 'influencers' because of their 'central' position in the online communication system and the persuasive effect their actions and advice may have on audiences' health-related knowledge, attitudes, confidence and behaviours. Work on social media influencers (SMIs) has gained much attention in a specific research field of "influencer marketing", which mainly focuses on emphasising the use of SMIs to promote or endorse brands' products and services in the business. Yet to date, a lack of well-studied and empirical evidence has been conducted to guide the exploration of health-related social media influencers. The failure to investigate health-related SMIs can significantly limit the effectiveness of communicating health on social media. Therefore, this article presents a study to identify key diabetes-related SMIs in the UK and the potential implications of information provided by identified social media influencers on their audiences' diabetes-related knowledge, attitudes and behaviours to bridge the research gap that exists in linking work on influencers in marketing to health communication. The multidisciplinary theories and methods in social media, communication, marketing and diabetes have been adopted, seeking to provide a more practical and promising approach to investigate the potential of social media influencers in health communication. Twitter was chosen as the social media platform to initially identify health influencers and the Twitter API academic was used to extract all the qualitative data. Health-related Influencer Identification Model was developed based on social network analysis, analytic hierarchy process and other screening criteria. Meanwhile, a two-section English-version online questionnaire has been developed to explore the potential implications of social media influencers' (SMI's) diabetes-related narratives on the health-related knowledge, attitudes and behaviours (KAB) of their audience. The paper is organised as follows: first, the theoretical and research background of health communication and social media influencers was discussed. Second, the methodology was described by illustrating the model for the identification of health-related SMIs and the development process of the SMIKAB instrument, followed by the results and discussions. The limitations and contributions of this study were highlighted in the summary.

Keywords : health communication, Interdisciplinary research, social media influencers, diabetes management

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