

Professional Versus Personal Identities of Young Health Communicators: The Social Media Connection

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Abstract: The proliferation of social media in the 21st century has redefined health communication, facilitating a participatory culture where individuals play a pivotal role in shaping health-related behaviors. Social networking sites have also become platforms for individuals to express their identity through self-perception and expression. This project thus investigates the relationship between social media and preventive health experts' professional and personal identities. The study will pay particular attention to exploring how health experts and communicators balance their sense of self in their online interactions. Therefore, this project aims to unravel the ambiguity of health communicators' online roles, making social media a safer space for them and their audiences. These individuals carry the responsibility of preserving the health and safety of others, founded in their promotion of health advice, professional guidance, and personal lifestyle demonstrations. The study targets students and experts in nutrition, mental health, and fitness and exercise based in Norway. The scope of the project is restricted to Instagram due to the platform's visual and adaptive affordances for self-expression. The research project is thus divided into three studies: The first study will apply the survey method to explore how content consumed by health students from selected universities and colleges in Norway may impact the formation of their professional identity. The second study will use interviews and content analysis to investigate the impact of the content posted and consumed by a select number of preventive health students in forming their ideal professional and personal identities. These students should be active on Instagram and have garnered over 1000 followers. Lastly, the third study will rely on a combination of interviews and content analysis to research online strategies applied by nutrition, mental health, and exercise and fitness experts to express their professional and personal identities. These individuals will be required to have over 4000 followers on Instagram.

Keywords: Social media, Instagram, Professional identity, Personal identity, Opinion leaders, Health

1. Introduction

The 21st century has seen social media emerge as a key arena for health promotion and communication, with scholars noting its role in shaping a participatory culture (Stark et al., 2022). Consequently, individual health decisions are no longer solely based on a doctor's advice but are often informed by individuals who are considered trustworthy (Dubois et al., 2020). In the context of social networking sites (SNS), these individuals are often referred to as "opinion leaders." This shift in roles comes with a moral responsibility of those health opinion leaders towards their online community, peers, and themselves.

Scholars say that social media has served as a means of identity expression (Andrews et al., 2017). This is meaningful since the significant debate in the research of self-presentation in social media is whether online self-expression is an idealized version of individuals' selves or merely an extension of images drawn in real-life contexts (SOLMAZ, 2017).

There is a noticeable gap in research concerning how individuals creating health-related content on social media perceive and shape their professional and personal identities. By identity, we refer to an individual's traits, attitudes, self-representations, and social roles. More precisely, there is a lack of investigation into the duality of identity and social media.

Considering this gap, our project aims to address the following critical research questions:

- What role does social media content play in shaping the ideal professional identity of students in preventive health fields?
- Which social media strategies are employed by health opinion leaders to express their professional and personal identities?

By exploring these questions, we aim to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship between social media, health promotion, and the construction of professional and personal identities of health opinion leaders. The study will focus on three pervasive topics within preventive health fields: nutrition, mental health, and fitness and exercise.

2. Health Opinion Leaders on Social Media

The development of internet technology has spawned a large number of opinion leaders (Luqiu et al., 2019), constituting worldwide experts in their fields (Savolainen, 2021), such as health. Their followers consider them knowledgeable educators who provide helpful advice (Lynn-Sze and Kamaruddin, 2021). However insightful, available studies tend to address health opinion leaders from the lens of their audience rather than from the content creator's point of view.

3. Identity Through Ervin Goffman

For Goffman, identity is not a natural or genetic state but a series of idealized performances that people present, which are unconscious and conscious (Hurley, 2019). And the mediated nature of social media platforms offers a virtual space for individuals to perform who they are (Bouvier, 2012), and to carefully create an image for themselves (VanBogart, 2014). Goffman has thus proposed an analysis of interpersonal interaction and how individuals perform to project a desirable image.

4. Professional Identity and Social Media

According to Davis (2012), online media technologies play a central part in enabling a multiplicity of identity representations. One of those representations is the professional self. Professional identity represents who you are and how you act as an individual and in groups within the confines of a particular profession (Fredriksson and Johansson, 2014). Wiik (2010) regards it as a social construct that affects how a professional might present themselves and how they might conform to certain behaviours and values. In turn, this leads others to acknowledge and trust in their behaviours as professionals. Thus, this professional identity might be what garners an opinion leader's credibility in online health promotion.

5. Personal Identity and Social Media

Personal identity refers to self-categories that define the individual as unique (Turner, 1999). O'Neil et al. (2022) suggest that personal identity is a somewhat neglected base of identity relative to social roles and identities. Thus, in the context of social media and their affordances related to self-representation, we believe that exploring the personal identity of health opinion leaders would contribute valuable insight into the distinct experiences of an individual (Peter J. Burke 2009). This investigation could further shed light on why some content creators succeed in garnering an extensive following compared to others. For instance, sharing individual values might make opinion leaders more relatable to an audience than the professional identity could achieve alone.

6. Algorithms and Identity

Social media algorithms have often been linked to identity work, such as personal values, self-perceived identity, and identity development (Karizat et al., 2021). They have been defined as computational models for transforming data into personalized content that populates a user's social feeds (Bucher, 2020). According to Bishop (2019), content creators benefit from understanding how algorithms can aid visibility, thus gaining more public attention. This idea is referred to as "Algorithm gossip" and emphasizes the role of perceived affordances of social media platforms in self-presentation choices.

7. Instagram Affordances

Studies into opinion leadership on visually-driven SNS are scarce (Casaló et al., 2020). Instagram offers numerous affordances, including its technical functions such as pinning a post; its conceptual symbolism through linguistic and visual signaling of identities, e.g. sharing images of food; and through aesthetic manipulation of image, identity, and self-presentation. Therefore, the multimodal affordances of Instagram enable users to draw upon social semiotic resources of identity, shifting representations as ideational, idealized, and imaginative affordances (Hurley, 2019).

8. Methodology

Since the impact of online self-presentation on visual platforms and how it influences individuals' self-perceived identities remains an underexplored area, we have opted for Instagram as the focal SNS of our project. Furthermore, most self-presentation research has been so far concentrated on Facebook (SOLMAZ, 2017). In the context of Norway, whose 84.7% of the population is active on social media (We are Social and Meltwater), Instagram comes second after Facebook as the most used platform (Statcounter).

For our research, we have opted for a mixed methods approach. The quantitative data will be administered as a survey targeting preventive health students in Norway. The qualitative data will offer an in-depth understanding of how health opinion leaders express their identities on social networks.

To examine the impact of Instagram content, we will employ content analysis of posts created, curated, and consumed on health opinion leaders' pages. The selection criteria are established prior to the selection process:

- The opinion leader is a student or professional of nutrition, psychology, or exercise and fitness.
- The opinion leader is an active Instagram user with a minimum following on Instagram of 1000 (for students) and 4000 (for established professionals).

In addition to the content analysis, the study will use semi-structured interviews to discuss self-presentation strategies applied by opinion leaders on Instagram. The interviews will take the forms of "a trace interview" and "a scroll back interview."

9. Conclusion

The transformative role of social media in health promotion is a research-worthy topic. Individuals deemed reliable, known as "opinion leaders," significantly influence health attitudes and behaviors. While ethical concerns in this area have been extensively researched, a significant gap exists in understanding how these leaders perceive and shape their identities on social media. Through a nuanced investigation, we hypothesize that the self-presentation processes occur outside the individual's awareness and thus might carry a much more significant impact than we currently assume.

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