

Users Adoption of Hospital's WeChat Official Account: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed the media landscape, with platforms e.g., WeChat, Weibo, TikTok, and online platforms are gaining popularity for healthcare services and information dissemination platform in China. Traditional media e.g., newspapers, television, and radio, once dominant, now face challenges and transitions, leading to insufficient healthcare communication. As one of the major alternatives, WeChat offers official accounts for hospitals to enhance their healthcare quality and promote their medical services. Hospitals now must rely on diverse and content-rich digital media to enhance their reputation. Addressing privacy concerns and user preferences will enhance the adoption and utilization of digital healthcare services, meet users' ever evolving needs, and promote the sustainable development of healthcare quality. User interactions and social engagement are crucial in shaping brand trust within the scope of doctor-patient relationships. Building trust and addressing privacy concerns are essential for successful adoption of digital healthcare services. Perceived ease of use and usefulness are among critical factors in technology adoption by the respective society. Future research should explore the adoption of digital branding platforms in different healthcare settings and cultures to provide a more comprehensive digital branding strategies for healthcare providers. The adoption of hospital WeChat Official Accounts as digital branding platforms is influenced by user interactions, trust, ease of use, and perceived usefulness. Addressing privacy concerns and focusing on usability and relevance are key for successful implementation.

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INTRODUCTION

The proliferation and continuous evolution of mobile healthcare technologies have ushered in a new era in which both medical service accessibility and quality have been enhanced. The digital age has paved the way for information dissemination. Healthcare organizations worldwide are leveraging social media platforms to disseminate information, foster better communication between healthcare providers and patients, and ultimately elevate patient satisfaction. According to the 50th Statistical Report on the Development of the Internet in China (2023), China owns a remarkable 1.079 billion internet users as of August 2023, with the internet usage rate of 76.4%. This represents an increase of 11.09 million compared to December 2022. This dramatic increase is a result of strategic significant contemporary current in China is the strategic investment in WeChat Official Accounts, which have held the attention of diverse industries. WeChat, a multifaceted instant messaging, and social networking application developed by Tencent has risen as a dominant force within China's digital landscape. This platform introduced a distinctive user account category known as the WeChat Official Account, which has gained widespread adoption within the country's healthcare sector. A multitude of healthcare institutions utilize it to disseminate crucial information, improve doctor-patient communication, and enhance overall patient satisfaction. So far it has demonstrated remarkable efficacy in bolstering hospitals' brand equity and amplifying their service promotions.

In the contemporary milieu characterized by globalization and rapid information technology advancement, social media has solidified its role as a cornerstone of information exchange and social interaction. Chinese healthcare institutions are increasingly harnessing the power of social-driven digital media to establish meaningful connections with patients, thereby optimizing healthcare service delivery (Plantin & De Seta, 2019). Yet, within this dynamic landscape, notable gaps in research persist, particularly in understanding the determinants that sway users' adoption of digital healthcare information platforms through WeChat official accounts. This study endeavours to bridge these research gaps and illuminate the influential factors shaping users' inclination towards digital healthcare information platforms within China's unique context. The ensuing insights promise to enrich understanding of the complex interplay between technology adoption and healthcare in China.

The impact of WeChat official accounts on hospital management and medical services in China has been well-documented. WeChat has emerged as a popular tool for promoting hospital services and improving the doctor-patient relationship (Yan & Schroeder, 2020). Its convenience, diverse service functions, and timely push (Montag et al., 2018) notifications align with the communication habits of WeChat users, enhancing hospitals' propaganda efforts and service quality. However, current research on hospital WeChat official accounts has some limitations. One of them is the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the use of WeChat in the hospital industry. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the factors that impact the utilization of WeChat within the healthcare sector among its user bases.

RELATED STUDIES

WeChat has garnered attention as an effective means of managing chronic diseases (X. Chen et al., 2020). Its potential as a healthcare platform necessitates collaborative efforts from various stakeholders to enhance public health outcomes. The utilization of WeChat has been found to strengthen patient-provider relationships, particularly valuable in a Chinese healthcare landscape, which often lacks psychological support (Ding et al., 2019). This success can be attributed to its unique platformization and infrastructuralization model, setting it apart from Western digital media services (Plantin & De Seta, 2019). WeChat has become integral to daily life, especially for older adults who engage in health-related activities like sharing, consulting, and posting content (W. Wang et al., 2020). The merging of personal and professional aspects on WeChat aligns with the collective socio-economic practices prevalent in Chinese culture (Pandey & Chen, 2021). In summary, WeChat's potential for managing chronic diseases and its role

in patient-provider relationships have gained recognition. WeChat's cultural significance extends to blurring personal and professional boundaries and aligning with the social and economic fabric of Chinese society.

While numerous studies have acclaimed the use of WeChat official accounts in hospital brand building, several scholars have revealed its limitations. Li, Sun & Zhu (2022) and Wu, Zhang & Phang (2019) emphasize the importance of audience-focused strategies and improving user satisfaction for hospital official accounts. Wu (2021) suggests prioritizing public welfare and leadership in public hospitals' brand construction. Li, Zhu, & Wang (2022) call for utilizing WeChat to enhance hospital development and medical resource efficiency. Further research is needed to address these concerns comprehensively. WeChat's role in promoting and disseminating health information in China has also been studied. Wang and Wu (Wang & Wu, 2020) compared the effectiveness of health communication strategies employed by two traditional Chinese medicine hospitals on their WeChat official accounts. Shen et al. (Shen et al., 2019) examined the factors that influence the communication index of WeChat official accounts used by top tertiary hospitals in China. Bian et al. (2021) investigated the influencing factors of nutrition and diet health knowledge dissemination through WeChat official accounts in health promotion.

Despite progress, research on hospital WeChat official accounts has limitations. Understanding factors influencing WeChat's use in the hospital industry remains incomplete. Research has mainly focused on utilization rates and decision-making, lacking emphasis on user-perceived brand value. In-depth research is needed to align hospital WeChat official accounts with user preferences and needs.

METHODS

We opted for a narrative review in this study due to its capacity to provide a concise overview of previous research without being heavily reliant on statistical significance. Enhancing the quality of a narrative review (NR) can involve incorporating methodologies from systematic reviews, which strive to minimize bias in article selection and employ effective bibliographic research strategies. The typical structure for presenting a narrative review involves the IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion) format (Hadi et al., 2023). Narrative reviews primarily involve describing and evaluating published articles. However, the selection process for these articles may not always be explicitly outlined. Instead, the approach often involves an examination of existing research, identification of current knowledge gaps, rationale for future research directions, and even speculation about novel intervention approaches.

For our literature search, we utilized both Google Scholars and the Chinese Knowledge Network Infrastructure (CNKI). We opt to utilize the Chinese Knowledge Network Infrastructure (CNKI) for our literature searches as it allows us to gain insights into the specific context of my research within China. Given that our study involves aspects that are intricately tied to the Chinese research landscape, CNKI provides access to a rich collection of Chinese literature and research materials. Our search was conducted using specific keywords "WeChat official account," "digital healthcare," and "hospital image". Initially, we aimed to include studies from the inception of WeChat official accounts; however, the search revealed a scarcity of papers published before 2014. Therefore, we adjusted the start dates to 2020, in subsequent searches to ensure a more extensive inclusion of relevant literature. Furthermore, our research expands its scope beyond China, aiming to provide insights into the global adoption of digital healthcare platforms. Through further literature research, it was found that the existing research on hospital brand image communication mainly focuses on the optimization of marketing strategies, strategic positioning, and hospital branding, but there is limited countermeasure research on hospital information services. We analyzed the findings using thematic analysis and reported it accordingly.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on our literature research, various themes surfaced as the foundational elements shaping users' acceptance of digital healthcare information services. These include engagement with fellow users, confidence in healthcare providers, the perceived simplicity of use, and the perceived value of the services.

Interaction with Others

The digital age has evolved to encompass not only users' perception of brand value but also their interactions with other users in the online and globalized space (Zhang et al., 2022). This trend highlights the importance of user interactions and social engagement in shaping brand trust. Establishing a good doctor-patient interaction is essential for building a harmonious doctor-patient relationship and improving patient compliance (Yan & Schroeder, 2020). Effective communication and interaction between healthcare professionals and patients contribute to positive patient outcomes and satisfaction. The use of digital tools enables healthcare professionals to interact with patients and empowers patients to be more engaged in their own care, involving various dimensions of engagement (Granström et al., 2020). Such as opting to address health-related matters with doctors through online discussions (Linn et al., 2023). The integration of emerging information technologies, such as electronic medical records, health cloud, data analytics, and Internet-enabled devices, has transformed the healthcare landscape, creating conditions for the global offering of interoperable healthcare services (Stephanie & Sharma, 2020).

Interactions extend to engaging with fellow users as well. The phenomenon of Word of Mouth, particularly when it originates from trustworthy sources such as patients' relatives, close family members, and friends, significantly influenced the decision-making process regarding healthcare provider selection. (Chatterjee & Kulkarni, 2021). These studies emphasize the significance of user interactions, electronic word-of-mouth, and the adoption of digital tools in shaping brand trust, fostering doctor-patient relationships, and promoting engagement in the healthcare context.

Table 2 Determinants from precedent studies

Author (Year)	DETERMINANTS STUDIED			
	Interaction	Trust	Perceived ease of use	Perceived usefulness
Chatterjee & Kulkarni, (2021)	/	/		/
Linn et al., (2023)	/			
Zhang et al., (2022)	/			
Yan & Schroeder, (2020)	/			
Granström et al., (2020)	/			
Stephanie & Sharma, (2020)	/			
Alharbi, (2021)		/		
Safi et al., (2018)		/		
Mikesell & Bontempo (2023)		/		
Neeragati et al.,(2022)		/		
Falter et al., (2021)			/	
Dhagarra et al., (2020)			/	
Le et al., (2022)			/	
Chen et al., (2022)			/	/
Sharma et al., (2022)			/	
Goyal et al., (2021)				/
Dou et al., (2017)				/
Khan et al., (2019)				/
Hao et al., (2022)				/
Akhtar et al., (2022)				/

Trust in providers

Several studies have explored the role of perceived trust and security in the adoption of new media technologies, particularly in the healthcare context. Safi et al. (Safi et al., 2018) found that perceived trust and security were significant factors, which influencing the adoption of mobile health services, digital health appointment systems, and online consultation platforms in Germany. These findings emphasize the importance of trust and security considerations in the acceptance and utilization of digital healthcare technologies.

Furthermore, Alharbi (2021) emphasized the significance of facilitating conditions and trust factors for healthcare consumers using digital healthcare platforms, particularly during the pandemic. Trust plays a crucial role in promoting the adoption and effective use of digital healthcare services, and creating a supportive and trustworthy environment is essential to enhance consumer confidence and engagement. Individuals within the age brackets of 18-27, 28-37, and 38-47 predominantly exhibited a preference for renowned hospitals. This inclination was rooted in their confidence in the healthcare services delivered by these establishments. Around a quarter of participants aged 18-27 and 28-37 expressed a preference for consulting family physicians, particularly in urgent situations, owing to their perception of receiving superior care and treatment. The element of trust also held significant influence in this scenario (Chatterjee & Kulkarni, 2021).

While less commonly mentioned, participants also underscored the importance of healthcare providers as enablers of care, echoing the significance of trust and its interconnectedness for individuals dealing with patients (Mikesell & Bontempo, 2023). While less commonly mentioned, participants also underscored the importance of healthcare providers as enablers of care, echoing the significance of trust and its interconnectedness for individuals dealing with patients (Neeragatti et al., 2023). Collectively, these studies highlight the importance of perceived trust, security, and privacy in the adoption of new media technologies and digital healthcare platforms. Addressing privacy and security concerns, fostering trust, and providing a supportive environment are crucial for promoting the successful adoption and utilization of digital healthcare services.

Perceived ease of use

The concept of perceived ease of use, as defined by Davis (1989) (Davis, 1989), refers to the belief that using a particular system would require minimal effort. The technology acceptance model (TAM) outlines the causal relationships between system design features, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, attitude toward usage, and actual usage behaviour (Davis, 1993). TAM provides valuable insights into how design choices impact user acceptance of information technology, making it useful for predicting and evaluating user acceptance in practical settings. Moreover, perceived ease of use has been identified as a determinant of online platform adoption. Digital technology's potential to revolutionize healthcare lies in its ability to provide high-quality, affordable, and personalized services with a patient-centred approach, but its acceptance for accessing healthcare is influenced by perceived usefulness, ease of use, trust, and privacy concerns (Dhagarra et al., 2020; Falter et al., 2021). It means, perceived ease of use and other factors like usefulness, trust, and security shape technology acceptance in healthcare. The adoption of digital healthcare, particularly among the younger generation, is influenced by the concept of affordance (Le et al., 2022). Meanwhile, in regions with more advanced internet and digital infrastructure facilitate the extensive implementation of smart healthcare services. Conversely, in areas lacking robust infrastructure, the diffusion of smart healthcare services remains limited (Chen et al., 2022). While preferences for technological adoption may vary among individuals, there is a consensus that dependability, affordability, and convenience are the three pivotal criteria impacting people's intentions to utilize technology (Sharma et al., 2022). As a result, residents will obtain information and healthcare services at relatively higher cost, which is not conducive to health improvements.

Perceived usefulness

Perceived usefulness plays a crucial role in determining the trust users place in digital service platforms, ultimately leading to their adoption (Goyal et al., 2021). As highlighted by some academia find, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and privacy concerns significantly influence individuals' intentions to use e-Health technologies (Dou et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2019). Literature emphasizes the impact of user perception, particularly perceived usefulness and ease of use, on the adoption and utilization of online digital platforms. The substantial influence of digitization on consumers, prompting them to desire advanced technological integration by healthcare providers for more accurate diagnoses. Consumers were of the opinion that a comprehensive digital transformation of the current healthcare infrastructure is imperative at all levels and aspects. (Chatterjee & Kulkarni, 2021). The comprehensive and uninterrupted integration of nursing services through the interactive WeChat official account, this approach can enhance their quality of life and facilitate their journey towards self-health recovery (Hao et al., 2022). Digital tools enhance accessibility for addressing minor health concerns (Akhtar et al., 2022). Electronic health record systems now effectively maintain patients' medical histories. These systems play a vital role in contemporary healthcare. Resident health experiences a notably positive enhancement through the implementation of smart healthcare services. The establishment of localized smart healthcare services, including telemedicine, proves beneficial in addressing the scarcity and uneven allocation of healthcare resources. This initiative further amplifies the service capabilities of healthcare institutions situated in China (Y. Chen et al., 2022). While China's healthcare system faces unique challenges, such as the need for improved brand building and the integration of online and offline services, understanding user perceptions and addressing factors like content relevance and privacy concerns are crucial for successful implementation of digital healthcare solutions.

Discussion

The above studies emphasize the importance of user interaction and engagement on digital platforms, as well as the importance of promoting trust and the doctor-patient relationship. However, addressing privacy and security concerns is critical to the successful adoption of digital platforms. This trust in healthcare providers plays a crucial role in the adoption of such platforms and influences the acceptance of digital healthcare technologies. In addition to building trust and a supportive environment is critical for successful use, perceptions of ease of use and utility are also drivers of adoption. Perceptions of usability and relevance are key factors.

Key insights into the adoption of hospital WeChat official accounts as digital branding platforms include the crucial role of user interactions, social engagement in shaping brand trust and doctor-patient relationships. Building trust and addressing privacy and security concerns are essential for successful adoption of digital healthcare services. Perceived ease of use and usefulness are critical factors in technology acceptance. It is worth noting that the studies reviewed primarily focused on the adoption of WeChat official accounts in the Chinese healthcare context. The cultural and regulatory environment of China, along with the widespread popularity of WeChat, may influence the findings and their application to other contexts. Future research should explore the adoption of digital branding platforms in different healthcare settings and cultures to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing adoption.

DISCUSSION

In conclusion, the adoption of hospital WeChat official accounts as digital branding platforms is influenced by user interactions, trust, ease of use, and perceived usefulness. Addressing privacy concerns and focusing on usability and relevance are key for successful implementation. Further research in varied contexts is needed to gain comprehensive insights into fostering the adoption of digital healthcare solutions. Hospitals need to meet various patient needs while providing quality content (Shen et al., 2019) to enhance satisfaction.

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