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## The attitude of Kurdistan health professionals about the role of SM and messaging apps in public health awareness and promotion

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### Abstract

**Background and objective:** The emergence of social media (SM) and social networking services to communicate in real time and on the go by patients and health professionals was recognized as an important public health development more than a decade ago. Nowadays using social media and messaging apps for communicating health issues is increasing. This study aimed to assess the attitude of Kurdistan health professionals regarding the role of social media and messaging apps in public health awareness and promotion.

**Methods:** 311 health professionals of different medical and paramedical specialties were required to participate in an online survey during July 2022. Data were collected through a questionnaire format in Google form which was made by researchers and included socio-demographic data of the study sample and questions regarding social media and messaging apps and their role in health promotions. Frequency, percentage and chi-square was used for analyzing of the data.

**Results:** 93.2% of the study participants believed that social media and messaging apps can play a role in the awareness and promotion of public health. 81.4% mentioned it can be through Facebook. 41.5% used them for increasing the health awareness and promotion of the public but only 23.8% actively commented on posts related to health in social media and messaging apps. Only 14.8% were satisfied with local posts in social media and messaging apps (Kurdistan) on health subjects. There was a significant association between sex, workplace and field of education of the participants with their belief in the promotion of public health, actively commenting on social media posts on health subjects, playing the role of social media in improving public health, and actively using social media for health promotion.

**Conclusions:** Kurdistan healthcare providers believe in using social media and messaging apps for public health awareness and promotion; therefore, they need encouragement to use social media and messaging apps effectively to promote the health of individuals.

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## Introduction

The integration of social media (SM) into the health sector has sparked considerable interest among medical professionals. As platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram become increasingly influential in disseminating health information, understanding healthcare providers' attitudes toward these tools is crucial for optimizing their use.

### Positive Attitudes Toward SM

Many studies highlight the positive perceptions of SM among medical personnel. A significant number of healthcare providers view SM as an effective means for:

1. **Patient Education and Engagement:** Research indicates that medical professionals recognize the value of SM in educating patients about health conditions, treatment options, and preventive measures. <sup>1</sup>SM can help bridge information gaps, especially for younger demographics who are more likely to seek health information online.
2. **Professional Networking:** SM facilitates networking among healthcare professionals, enabling them to share knowledge, experiences, and best practices. <sup>2</sup> This connectivity fosters collaboration and can enhance professional development.
3. **Public Health Campaigns:** Studies demonstrate that SM can amplify public health messages and campaigns, reaching larger audiences more quickly than traditional media. <sup>3</sup> This capability is particularly important during health crises,

such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where rapid communication is essential.

### Concerns and Challenges

Despite the acknowledged benefits, several studies have documented concerns among medical personnel regarding SM use:

1. **Misinformation and Credibility:** One of the most significant challenges is the prevalence of misinformation on SM platforms. Healthcare providers often express concerns about the difficulty in verifying the accuracy of information shared online, which can undermine patient trust and health outcomes. <sup>4</sup>
2. **Ethical and Professional Boundaries:** Medical professionals frequently worry about maintaining professionalism and ethical standards while engaging on SM. Issues such as patient confidentiality, the appropriateness of sharing personal experiences, and potential conflicts of interest are common concerns. <sup>5</sup>
3. **Time Constraints and Digital Literacy:** Many healthcare providers report feeling overwhelmed by the demands of SM engagement. Limited time, coupled with varying levels of digital literacy among professionals, can hinder effective use. <sup>6</sup>

There are many institutes for which the issue of SM use by health professionals became a strategic area of study. They've made guidelines, recommendations in addition to determination of factors of influence. In

Kurdistan region of Iraq there is little efforts in this direction. However, health professionals are using SM for public health promotion.

Aim: to evaluate the attitude of Kurdistan health care providers about the role of SM and massaging apps in public health awareness and promotion.

### Methods

In a survey study, Three hundred eleven (311) health professionals of different medical and paramedical specialties were participated in an online survey during July 2022.

Data were collected though a questionnaire format in Google form which was made by

researchers. The form included sociodemographic data of the study sample and questions regarding SM and messaging apps and their role in health promotions.

Frequency, percentage and chi-square was used for analyzing of the data.

### Results

Total of 309 medical personnel has responded. Out of which 137 (44.3%) were female and 172 (55.7%) males. The distribution by age was as follow: less than 30 years were 85 (27.5%); from 30-40 years 121 (39%); more than 40 years 104 (33.5%). The working experience of participants was as follow: less than 5 years of experience 54

(17.4%), from 5-10 years were 79 (25.5%), more than 10 years were 167 (54%) and not working 9 (3%).

As profession, 96 (31%) were dentists, 59 (19%) physicians, 93 (30%) nurses, 17 (5.5%) midwifery, 25 (8%) laboratory and 19 (6.5 %) others.

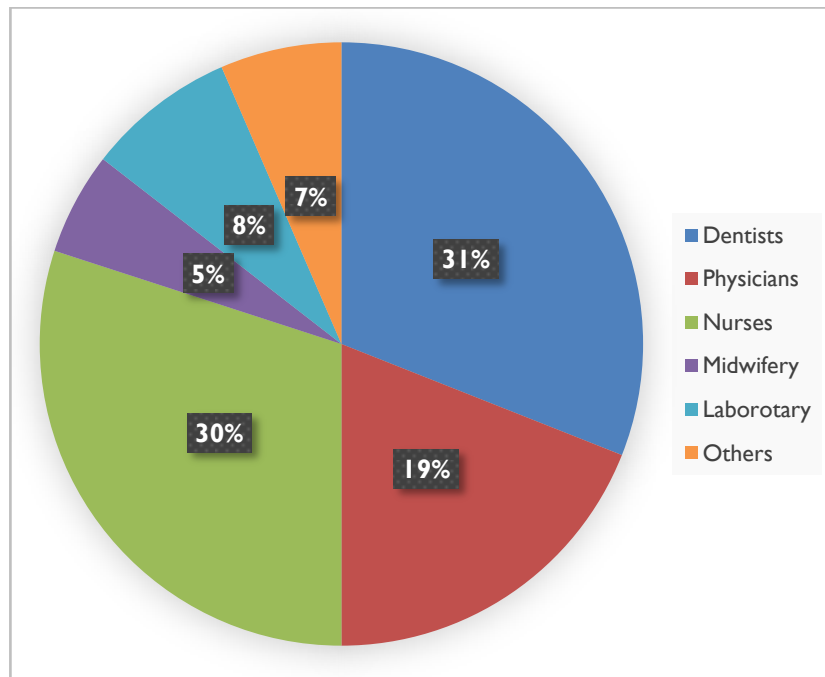


Figure 1: Profession of participants

In current study, 287 ( 93%) of the study participant believed that SM and messaging apps can play role in awareness and promotion of public health. Only 22 (7%) not believing in such role.

Which SM platform/app may be used as a tool,68 (22%) mentioned it can be through Facebook alone, while the res 241 (78%) responded as it can be combined with others like Instagram, TikTok, Viber, WhatsApp, Telegram and Twitter.

Do they use SM for health promotion 128(41.5%) answered as yes and 181 (58.5%) as no.

Do they commenting on SM posts related to health promotion73 (23.8%) answered as yes and 236 (76.2%).

What they are sharing on these platforms, 45

(14.5 %) answered as experience, 55 (17.8%) experience and information, 116(38%) information from textbooks and guidelines, and, 92 (29.7%) no answer

Do the participants satisfied with local posts, 46 (14.8 %) responded as yes and 263 (85.2%) as no.

About what if the information posted was wrong what they going to do, 142 (46%) answered as they become angry but they don't care, 167 (54%) were responded as they try to correct by sharing information.

About the point of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with published posts, 119 (39%) answered as the information content, 62((20%) as the language of presentation and 127(41%) no answer.

## Discussion

The role of SM in community awareness is increasing day by the day. Health promotion as a part of the system should get enough attention. The whole health team should play a role in this process. However not always health professionals are engaging in the process. Understanding characteristics of this problem may help health decision makers to put a plan in a way that may help in increasing awareness over short period of time.

As current study showed majority of participants are from 30-40 years old. These information highlights the facts that for the generations of 80s (of last century) and above, internet and SM is part of their life. These categories of people are old enough to have a carrier and their own experience. Engagement of this group in the awareness may make it successful and productive.

There were nearly equal participation of both male and female with slight higher number of male. Two points are worthy to mention here, first, in Iraq, both genders are involved equally in health system, second, both genders are active users of internet and SM. So, it was expected to see close number of participants from both genders. However, out 18 person who do not believe in role of SM in health care awareness, there were only 5 (27.7%) females, while in the group of those who answered as yes for this question there were 133 (45.5%) females which is close to the percentage of both gender

participation. A study done by (20) got 63% female participation. If the parameters of gender participation in both studies should be interpreted, it may show that female is more active in using SM than male.

Nowadays all health and none health professionals are active users of SM platforms. In the current survey dentists and nurses comprises 61% of total responses. However it doesn't mean that others are not active users, but possibly it is simply the effect of interpersonal relationship: one of the researchers is dentist and the other is nurse. May be it was the effect of accessibility and some sorts of commitment. Nevertheless, a study carried out by Khan et al (2021) showed that nurses are more likely to use SM than doctors.<sup>7</sup>

The internet is a very good ground for misinformation related to health. The best correctors of such misinformation are health professionals. There was a plan by WHO and UN to make line of volunteers who are dealing with misinformation by making right posts and correct the wrong one during COVID 19.<sup>8-11</sup> However, it is better to be a plan of all times. Believing in role of SM in public health issues supported by 93% of participants of this study. This is a good indicator for using such platforms in the right way. On the other hand not responding to health misinformation (46% of participants) is a point of concern. There should be plans by ministry of health and higher education to

increase awareness and enthusiasm of health professionals to respond in active way to make them a tool for control of media sphere in the field of their specialty.

There are too many platforms of SM. To understand which one is preferable, a question was included in survey. The study showed that 22% of participants believe that Facebook may serve a good platform to do so. But using of multiple platforms is a better option, since not all people use Facebook. The last opinion get support of 78% of participants. According to Jeffrey Gottfried (<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/01/31/americans-social-media-use/>) in a report published at 31 January 2024, about America's most used SM platform in 2023, the YouTube holds first place followed by Facebook, But all other platforms has popularity too. The author highlighted the age, gender, and ethnicity. Some may argue what is the picture in USA, it is not necessary the same in our society. However, the globalization and its tool (internet) has kept no barriers that may lead to variations. Many schools in Kurdistan celebrating Halloween, despite the fact that this event has no any

roots in this society.

The study highlighted the positive attitude of health personnel to use SM platforms for promotion issues. It goes with international tendencies in the same direction. However, the source of information and the language to be used were two points of interest by professionals. In this way, health authorities should try to use such platforms in a way to be the source of trusted information and accessible to all.

#### Evolving Perspectives and Recommendations

The attitudes of medical personnel toward SM are evolving as they become more familiar with its benefits and challenges. Ongoing education and training in digital literacy, as well as clear guidelines from professional organizations, can help address some of the concerns associated with SM use.<sup>12</sup>

Encouragingly, some studies suggest that as healthcare providers gain more experience with SM, their attitudes tend to become more positive, recognizing its role in enhancing patient care and public health initiatives.<sup>13</sup>.

## Conclusions

The literature indicates that while medical personnel generally appreciate the potential of SM in the health sector, significant concerns persist regarding misinformation, ethical boundaries, and the challenges of engagement. As SM continues to evolve, ongoing research and professional discourse

are essential to harness its benefits while addressing its drawbacks effectively.

#### Limitation of the study

The sample size is small and has limited geographic coverage.

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## Conflict of interest

There is no funding and no conflict of interest to be mentioned

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