

Health Communication and Parasocial Relationships on Social Media: Systematic Review of Opinion Leader-Follower Interactions

Komunikasi Kesihatan dan Hubungan Parasosial di Media Sosial: Kajian Sistematis Interaksi antara Pemimpin Pendapat – Pengikut

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ABSTRACT

Social media has transformed communication and reshaped health discourse by enabling direct interactions between health professionals, known as social media opinion leaders, and their followers. These digital opinion leaders exert strong persuasive influence due to their perceived accessibility, authenticity, and medical expertise. Social media platforms further strengthen these connections through interactive features such as comment sections, direct messaging, and video content, thereby reducing the psychological distance between influencers and audiences. As a result, followers often develop parasocial relationships that influence their attitudes, emotions, and health-related decisions. Despite growing interest in this area, previous systematic reviews examining parasocial relationships in health communication remain limited and inconclusive. Therefore, this article presents a systematic literature review on parasocial relationships between health opinion leaders and social media users. Using PRISMA guidelines, 28 studies were screened, and 12 articles were selected for analysis. The findings highlight how parasocial relationships shape followers' health behaviours through source attributes such as perceived attractiveness, authenticity, and personalised storytelling. These factors positively influence health outcome expectations, exercise intentions, and health-seeking behaviours. However, the study identifies significant concerns regarding misinformation, commercialisation, and the lack of ethical frameworks and content moderation. Among the findings are that prior studies have failed to address the quality and formation of the relationship. This is important to understand the specific, fundamental factors or elements involved in the health information sharing and discussion by opinion leaders. This review emphasises the need for future exploration of the development of parasocial relationships between health opinion leaders and social media users.

Keywords: Parasocial opinion leadership; Opinion leadership; Parasocial relationship; Health communication; Social media

ABSTRAK

Media sosial telah mengubah komunikasi dan membentuk semula wacana kesihatan melalui interaksi langsung antara profesional kesihatan, yang dikenali sebagai pemimpin pendapat media sosial, dengan para pengikut mereka. Pemimpin pendapat digital ini mempunyai pengaruh persuasif yang kuat berdasarkan persepsi terhadap kebolehcapaian, keaslian dan kepakaran perubatan yang dimiliki. Selain itu, platform media sosial mengukuhkan hubungan tersebut melalui ciri interaktif seperti ruangan komen, mesej langsung dan kandungan video yang mengurangkan jarak psikologi antara pempengaruh dan pengikut. Keadaan ini mendorong pembentukan hubungan parasosial yang mempengaruhi sikap, emosi dan keputusan berkaitan kesihatan dalam kalangan pengguna media sosial. Walaupun kajian berkaitan hubungan parasosial dalam komunikasi kesihatan semakin berkembang, ulasan sistematik terdahulu masih terhad dan tidak konklusif. Oleh itu, artikel ini membentangkan ulasan literatur sistematik mengenai hubungan parasosial antara pemimpin pendapat kesihatan dan pengguna media sosial. Kajian ini menggunakan garis panduan PRISMA dengan melibatkan proses saringan terhadap 28 kajian, 12 artikel dipilih untuk dianalisis. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa hubungan parasosial mempengaruhi tingkah laku kesihatan pengikut melalui atribut sumber seperti daya tarikan, keaslian dan gaya penceritaan yang diperibadikan. Faktor-faktor ini memberi kesan positif terhadap jangkaan hasil kesihatan, niat untuk bersenam dan tingkah laku mendapatkan rawatan kesihatan. Walau bagaimanapun, kajian ini turut mengenal pasti isu berkaitan penyebaran maklumat palsu, pengkomersialan, serta kekurangan kerangka etika dan pemantauan kandungan. Selain itu, kajian

terdahulu juga didapati kurang meneliti aspek kualiti dan pembentukan hubungan parasosial. Justeru, ulasan ini menekankan keperluan kajian lanjutan bagi memahami perkembangan hubungan parasosial antara pemimpin pendapat kesihatan dan pengguna media sosial.

Kata kunci: Pemimpin pendapat parasosial; Pemimpin pendapat; Hubungan parasosial; Komunikasi kesihatan; Media sosial

INTRODUCTION

Social media has revolutionised the way information is disseminated and consumed, making it a powerful tool for health communication (Saw et al., 2022; Sharan et al., 2022). It has also increased the role of opinion leaders in health communication (Joyce & Azlina, 2021; Saw et al., 2019, 2021, 2022). Opinion leaders are potential communicators whose goal of communication is to influence people's behaviour (Kinanggi et al., 2022). Their ability to shape public perspectives and promote health awareness will eventually result in behaviour changes among their followers (Joyce & Azlina, 2021; Sa'idah et al., 2024). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are becoming increasingly popular, transforming into relational repositories where health information is exchanged directly between experts and the public (Rothfischer, 2021). Consequently, patient opinions become more easily accessible and actionable (Rothfischer, 2021). The platforms bridge the gap between social network users and medical expertise, thereby becoming a reliable source of health information (Rothfischer, 2021).

In health communication, the responsibility of opinion leaders is to educate their followers (Limilia et al., 2022). They are typically perceived to possess greater knowledge and experience regarding a particular disease. They utilise various strategies to effectively communicate health information, such as simplifying complex concepts, promoting a health-oriented mindset, stimulating interest in health topics, correcting misinformation and misconceptions, and maintaining a professional and ethical image (Joyce & Azlina, 2021; Saw et al. 2022). In addition, they incorporate religious or educational approaches to discuss phenomena to convey messages effectively, such as delivering information on COVID-19 during religious activities (Limilia et al., 2022). Moreover, some opinion leaders utilise diverse languages and presentation styles to reach broader audiences and enhance understanding (Limilia et al., 2022; Pöyry et al., 2022). Meanwhile, others share general guidelines and examples to respond to any health concern (Pöyry et al., 2022). Crucially, social media opinion leaders leverage their digital influence to reshape health narratives, disseminate positive health information, and cultivate favourable public sentiment during health crises (Žák & Hasprová, 2021).

Followers' cognitive aspect mediates their health literacy and is further strengthened by their parasocial relationships, particularly their emotional bonds, with social media health opinion leaders. Kim et al. (2024) found that increased YouTube views improve followers' health understanding, digital health literacy, and intention to exercise. This finding sheds light on the importance of motivating mechanisms in digital health communication strategies to maintain users' positive health behaviours. According to Chung, Wang, and Meng (2024), psychological factors can influence individuals' willingness to prevent liver cancer. The factors are: (i) perceived severity, (ii) parasocial relationship, and (iii) response efficacy. The study found that the reduction of unrealistic optimism mediates these relationships. Additionally, the positive influence of experience with health-related exercise content and the development of digital health literacy on behavioural intention was stronger among groups with highly established parasocial relationships

(Chung, Wang, & Meng, 2024). From these studies, practical insights are provided for health authorities and experts to develop more effective health campaign strategies and use of media platforms.

On parasocial relationships, Sa'idah et al. (2024) revealed that parasocial relationships with celebrities positively predict retweeting and replying behaviours. As a result, they receive higher perceived affective motivation, which, in return, boosts their affective motivation in their effort to share health information. Additionally, affective motivation mediates the relationship between parasocial relationships and these behaviours. For example, the use of high fear frames to create awareness on climate issues generated more reactions, including the sharing of information, than using low fear frames (Sa'idah et al., 2024). Despite the increasing number of studies on parasocial relationships in health communication, significant gaps in understanding remain. Most studies have focused on the impact of these relationships on health behaviours, but less is known about the psychological mechanisms that underpin these effects. Therefore, investigations into leveraging these relationships, particularly in social media health communication, are vital.

To bridge this gap, a cohesive systematic literature review is required to synthesise how these digital bonds alter contemporary health discourse. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to execute a systematic review of empirical research mapping the intersections of parasocial interaction and social media opinion leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE DEVELOPMENT AND CORE CHARACTERISTICS OF PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Horton and Wohl (1956) initiated studies on media and communication back in 1956. The study established how mass communication created a parasocial relationship environment with the audience through television and radio. Thus, the discussion on media and communication had begun long before the advent of mass media, with psychologists first studying relationships between political figures and certain members and their followers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This concept started to get noticed in the 1970s after the universal use of the uses and gratifications theory that examines how and why people use media (Marmor-Lavie, 2017).

In the study in which Horton and Wohl explored users' interactions with mass media, they discovered that users were in a parasocial relationship. They claimed that electronic media's unique characteristics, particularly television, encouraged a relationship with the audience. The audience is media users and entertainers, such as actors, presenters, hosts, and politicians, are personas who repeatedly appear in media. Media users in this relationship will create a sense of intimacy, reality, and affinity towards personas in the communication media (Marmor-Lavie, 2017). In general, parasocial interaction provides an image of a face-to-face relationship or interpersonal exchange with characters or personalities involving both parties (Gregg & Schiappa, 2017). Even though it is a social interaction, it is a one-sided communication because media users observe an individual's social actions, but their responses can only be anticipated and do not involve direct observation by the individual concerned (Horton & Strauss 1957). Therefore, parasocial interaction is similar to symmetrical forms of interaction in interpersonal communication (Schramm & Hartmann 2008).

To fully understand how these interactions solidify into long-term psychological bonds, early research established that Horton and Strauss (1957) explained that long-term exposure to

media figures can lead to parasocial relationships that go beyond mere media consumption and resemble ongoing interaction or feedback. These parasocial relationships are comparable to social ones (Tukachinsky, 2014). Tukachinsky states that parasocial relationships arise from interpersonal attraction, making individuals more likely to engage in relationships. These parasocial relationships can potentially contribute to the general media effects in two ways. Firstly, they may serve as a motivating and guiding factor in shaping media consumption. Secondly, they may act as an intermediary variable that mediates the effects of media exposure (Tukachinsky, 2014).

Parasocial relationships primarily encompass audience interactions that reflect either acceptance or rejection of media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). According to Horton and Wohl (1956), individuals engage in direct communication through media as a means to establish a sense of intimacy with their audience. These relationships arise when audiences perceive media personalities as personal acquaintances. Notably, the perception of friendship plays a more critical role in the development of parasocial relationships than physical attraction. Through repeated exposure to media figures, audiences cultivate a sense of familiarity and emotional closeness, akin to interpersonal relationships (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Gregg & Schiappa, 2017; Marmor-Lavie, 2017). Furthermore, the structural features of delivery dictate this attachment, as the extent of parasocial experiences is largely contingent on the manner in which media entertainers address and communicate with their audience (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), while on a personal level, self-disclosure is a fundamental factor in the formation of parasocial relationships, as it directly influences the depth of the audience's perceived connection with media figures (Chung & Cho, 2014).

MECHANISMS OF INFLUENCE IN SHIFTING SOCIAL MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS

While classical frameworks focused on linear broadcasting, the structural mechanics of parasocial relationships have transformed alongside modern digital channels. However, with the changing communication patterns in the new media era, parasocial relationships also exist on social media, which aligns with changes in opinion leaders. The existence of social media can be said to have changed the existing communication ways (Mehta & Dixit 2015; Ressler & Glazer 2010) and created a new communication environment, where social media is a two-way communication that provides an opportunity for social media users to interact and share opinions and views with each other (Dam et al. 2008; Mehta & Dixit 2015). As the media landscape continues to evolve, audiences persist in developing parasocial relationships with their preferred figures (Brunick et al., 2016).

The proliferation of social media has further reinforced these connections, enabling opinion leaders to engage more directly with their followers. Social networking platforms such as Twitter and Facebook facilitate a heightened sense of proximity, allowing fans to feel more involved in the lives of media personalities they admire (Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2013). Gregg and Schiappa (2017) further assert that individuals actively follow and interact with media personas via social media as a means of strengthening their parasocial relationships. In certain instances, audiences may attempt to interact with media personas through social media, assuming specific roles within these relationships that resemble real-life interpersonal dynamics. Such engagement offers audiences the opportunity to gain new perspectives or experience unfamiliar situations (Gregg & Schiappa, 2017). Beyond conventional media interactions, engagement with opinion leaders serves as an alternative mechanism for shaping audience perceptions within mass media (Stehr et

al., 2015). Media personalities who have an influence on a particular discussion topic with a large amount of information have a significant influence on opinion formation. However, the concept of opinion leaders as an explanation of information effects and persuasion in media cannot be clearly linked.

To explicitly evaluate how these digital relationships are managed and sustained by the user over time, contemporary researchers apply relational and cognitive frameworks. Rubin and McHugh (1987) utilised the principles in the uncertainty reduction theory to explain the development of parasocial relationships. The development of parasocial relationships is related to social and task attraction, parasocial interaction, and the importance of relationships (Rubin & McHugh 1987). In addition, perceived threat has a positive relationship with parasocial relationships as it influences users' belief in their capacity to disengage. Farivar et al. (2024) found that followers with high sense of self-efficacy to disengage from parasocial relationships feel less threatened, while followers with low self-efficacy to disengage feel more threatened. Nonetheless, gaps in the impacts of followers' self-efficacy to disengage on threat assessments within parasocial relationships with social media opinion leaders still exist.

A NEW TERM: PARASOCIAL OPINION LEADER IN HEALTH COMMUNICATION

Media users experience parasocial relationships with their favourite characters in an ever-changing media landscape. These relationships strengthen when individuals follow and connect with media personas, leading to the formulation of a specific dynamic: the concept of parasocial relationships with specialised influencers (Hanief et al., 2019; Shupey Yuan & Chen Lou, 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). The concept enhances traditional persuasion models by emphasising the distinctive dynamics of parasocial relationships. It explores how specific traits of communicators can influence some media users while not affecting others, emphasising the importance of recognising the attributes viewers assign to media personalities and how these perceived qualities can shape opinions and attitudes (Stehr et al., 2015).

This convergence of influence and relational bonding gives rise to a new term: the parasocial opinion leader. Parasocial opinion leadership involves media personalities influencing audience opinions and attitudes through parasocial relationships. In these relationships, viewers perceive media figures as a trusted source of information and advice, which leads to forming their opinions and attitudes based on this perceived bond (Stehr et al., 2015). As a result, attempts to build and maintain parasocial relationships by opinion leaders can positively influence and enhance followers' health literacy. However, while emotional stimulation is utilised to strengthen relationships, its impact on the quality of parasocial relationships is limited (Saw et al., 2022). Stehr et al. (2015) developed the parasocial opinion leadership theory in political communication. The roles of parasocial opinion leadership identified in the study include providing information, reducing complexity, offering social orientation, and arousing interest (Stehr et al., 2015).

Recognising the high persuasive capacity of this dynamic, contemporary literature has successfully applied this political framework directly to health discourse and behaviour modification. As a result, attempts by opinion leaders to build and maintain parasocial relationships can positively influence followers' health literacy. However, while emotional stimulation is utilised to strengthen relationships, its impact on the quality of parasocial relationships is limited (Saw et al., 2022). Saw et al. (2021, 2022) expanded the same theoretical development by Stehr et al. (2015) in health communication. The study explains how opinion leaders provide, clarify, and validate health information. Media users often contact the opinion

leaders they follow on social media to enquire about important health topics. In return, they were provided with clear, straightforward, and tailored health information (Saw et al., 2021). This indicated a two-step flow communication process (Saw et al., 2021). Also, the study found four ways parasocial opinion leaders communicate health information. They are by (i) reducing information and complexity, (ii) promoting health orientation, (iii) stimulating interest, and (iv) enhancing professionalism. This study summarises the role of opinion leaders and the communication strategies they opted to deliver health information that can influence their followers' health perceptions in the digital age.

Stehr et al. (2015) formulated a parasocial opinion leader process model for political communication. In general, it describes the role of opinion leaders and their relationship with followers. Using the results from this model as the basis of a study, Saw et al. (2021, 2022) then expanded the model into the field of health communication, as shown in Figure 1. The new model is suitable to understand the strategies opted by health opinion leaders to communicate health issues on social media. To specify, the current study added examining followers' acceptance of health information in the model.

MODEL OF HEALTH PARASOCIAL OPINION LEADERSHIP AND FOLLOWERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The process model developed by Saw et al. (2022) (see Figure 1) explains the delivery strategies used by opinion leaders. It begins with followers' acceptance of health information (Saw et al., 2022). In return for being influenced, they are then drawn to follow the opinion leaders. Furthermore, the model has two directions. The first direction explores the influence of opinion leaders, while the second direction focuses on the strategies employed by these opinion leaders when communicating health issues via social media (Saw et al., 2022). This model, which highlights the importance of opinion leaders in health information delivery and healthy behaviour shaping, provides a suitable conceptual framework for the current study. Saw et al. (2022) study found that the following:

There are three prerequisites in the process model of parasocial health opinion leadership on social media. The first is the characteristics of opinion leaders. The second prerequisite is a delivery strategy inherent in information processing and complexity reduction (i.e., information and health literacy, information presentation style, sharing information, correction of information and mythical perceptions, and a description), health orientation, interest stimulation, strengthening the image and ethics of professionalism. The third prerequisite is the reason to refer to the parasocial opinion leaders.

(p. 122)

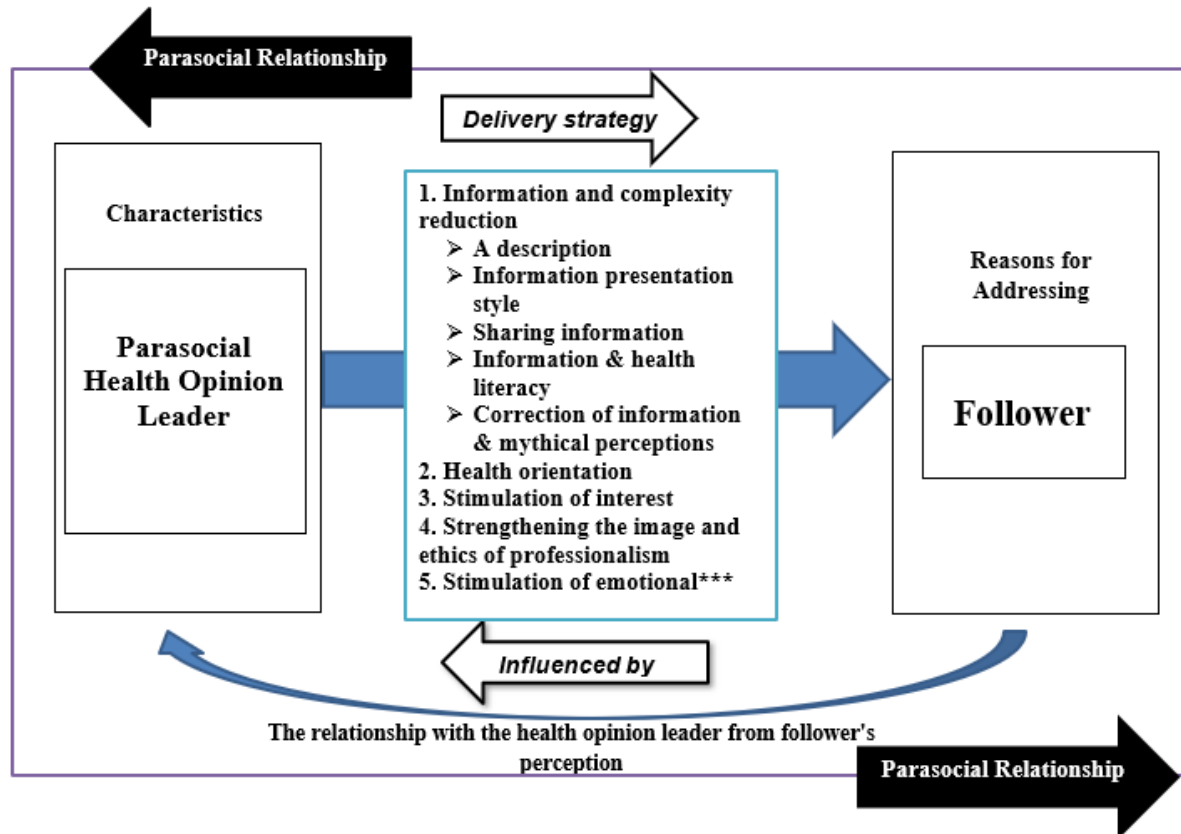


FIGURE 1. A process model of parasocial health opinion leadership on social media
 Source: Saw et al., 2022

Health opinion leaders on social media are health parasocial opinion leaders (Saw et al, 2022). They are able to form parasocial relationships with their followers through information sharing and delivery. In the study, emotional stimulation is found to be a strategy utilised by social media health opinion leaders to share health information and effectively improve the quality of parasocial relationships with their followers (Saw et al., 2022). However, the study was not conducted from the perspective of social media users. Therefore, the model lacks the emotional stimulation strategy, despite that it presents all strategies that improve the quality of parasocial relationships

Social media users voluntarily follow and interact with health opinion leaders they favour. Their interaction with opinion leaders fosters a relationship akin to that of mentors, relatives, friends, and idols. Also, followers are inclined to obtain information from their preferred opinion leaders, despite the presence of multiple opinion leaders on social media (Saw et al., 2021, 2022). This trend reveals that followers' perception of the opinion leaders build parasocial relationship. As a result, health information from opinion leaders with whom users and followers have bonded will strongly influence them (Saw et al., 2021).

Followers perceive doctors as sources of confidence through their information-sharing and narration endeavours. They keep updated with doctors because of their expertise and specialisation. This emphasises the role of medical doctors to share correct health information on social media platforms that improves their followers' comprehension and knowledge. The active presence of these doctors on social media, coupled with their prominence, attracts certain

followers. However, the characteristics of health opinion leaders are the reasons for engaging with these leaders and are contingent upon followers' motivations. Nonetheless, Saw et al. (2022) argue against rigidly adhering to characteristics from previous studies, advocating instead for a tailored approach based on the specific domain and followership. According to their findings, followers are drawn to opinion leaders based on individual reasons, with attributes such as expertise, activity, popularity, confidence, extensive knowledge, and accuracy of information being paramount. Nonetheless, previous studies failed to examine aspects such as demographics, socioeconomics, general attitudes, lifestyle, social activities, and risk-taking propensity. Most studies concentrated on the factors influencing followers' attachment to some health opinion leaders, which are mainly rooted in their personal preferences and volition. While the characteristics of health opinion leaders may diverge, they align with the broader concept advocated by Katz (1957, 1960). The concept categorises health opinion leaders' characteristics into three, namely i) the embodiment of specific values (who they are), ii) efficiency (what they know), and iii) social location strategy (who they know). The study also found that the relationship with the doctor, from followers' perception, is that mentor, family members, friends, and fans.

METHODOLOGY

SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS

A systematic review was conducted to summarise prior studies on parasocial opinion leaders on social media in health communication and to explore prior investigations of this issue in the literature. The current study conducted a detailed review of existing literature (literature review), with close reference to the steps outlined in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) checklist (Moher et al., 2015). A total of two databases were utilised: Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus. Though so, the current review's protocol was not recorded in a systematic review database.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

To begin with, some criteria were set to determine the eligibility of articles to be included in this review. This review concentrated on the search date up to 30 April 2024 rather than the year of publication. The inclusion criteria were restricted to empirical research papers, thereby excluding review articles, editorials, notes, and book chapters. As a result, this review included journal articles and excluded conference proceedings, books, or book series. These criteria were implemented to guarantee that the chosen articles were of superior quality in order to provide sufficient detail for effective evaluation by the reviewers (Moher et al., 2015). Also, publications covering the fields of social sciences, arts and humanities, and natural sciences were included. The essential criterion for inclusion was the articles that emphasised parasocial relationships within the context of health communication or health-related issues on social media. In addition, the main discussion articles must be on (i) social media parasocial relationships and (ii) health issues. Table 1 outlines the criteria for including and excluding studies from the database search.

TABLE 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Eligibility	Exclusion
Document Type	Journal article (empirical research)	Review, letter, conference paper, book, book chapter, note, editorial
Source Type	Journal and conference proceeding	Book, book series
Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	No limit Year	-
Index	Listed in Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases	-

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW PROCESS

The study's systematic review process included several stages. First, a literature search was performed on Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases. The restriction to these two specific databases was chosen intentionally to maintain high methodological rigour and broad cross-disciplinary coverage; because research on social media health opinion leaders intersects public health, medicine, and communication studies, Scopus and WoS provide the most comprehensive indexing of peer-reviewed literature across these fields while filtering out unvetted grey literature (Wanyama et al., 2022). Keywords related to parasocial relationships, social media, health, care, sport, and medical were generated in order to build search strings aimed at identifying articles with the specific keywords in their titles or abstracts.

The retrieved articles were stored in a .csv file to facilitate screening in Microsoft Excel. Then, the title and abstract of the retrieved articles were further screened. To address methodological transparency and minimise the risk of bias, all selected articles underwent a rigorous critical appraisal process aligned with PRISMA guidelines, using a standardised appraisal framework (Liberati et al., 2009; Shaheen et al., 2023). Two investigators independently reviewed and evaluated each study across four primary domains: objective clarity, methodological rigour, sample validity, and analytical integrity. Inter-rater reliability was strictly maintained, and any discrepancies in scoring between the two coders were resolved through collaborative discussion until 100% consensus was achieved. Table 2 displays the keyword search strings employed in the current review.

TABLE 2. Keywords search string

Database	Keywords	Results
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("parasocial relationship" AND "Social Media" AND "Health" OR "Care" OR "Sport" OR "Medical")	21
Web of Science (WoS)	TS ("parasocial relationship" AND "Social Media" AND "Health" OR "Care" OR "Sport" OR "Medical")	7

A total of 7 articles were retrieved from the Web of Science (WoS) database and 21 from the Scopus database, resulting in 28 records identified. During the title and abstract screening process, 5 duplicate articles were removed, leaving 23 articles for further assessment. The quality assessment process employed a peer-review approach involving all authors, whereby the titles and abstracts of the articles were evaluated before proceeding to the full-text screening stage.

During the full-text screening stage, 23 articles were carefully examined. Following reviewer evaluation and extensive full-text reading, 12 articles were found eligible for qualitative synthesis, while 11 articles were excluded due to being non-empirical studies (e.g., reviews or reports) or unrelated to parasocial relationships.

Figure 2 displays the procedural flow of the current systematic review.

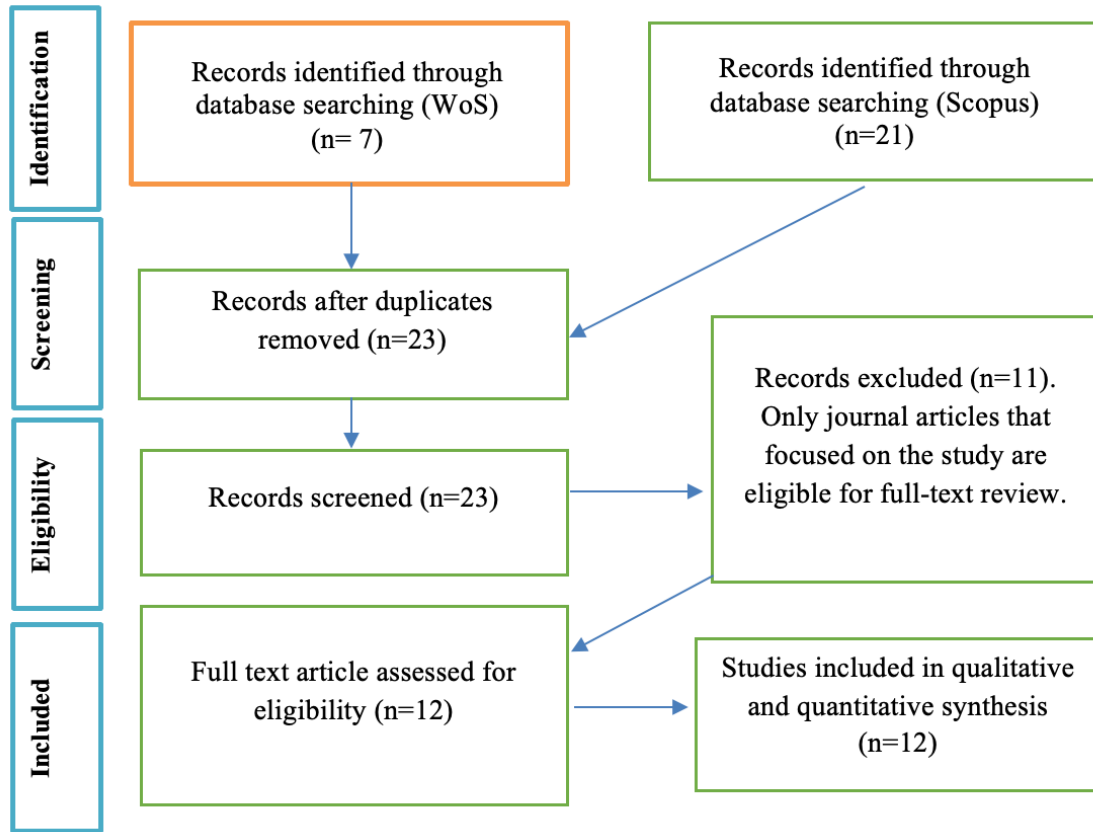


FIGURE 2. PRISMA flow diagram of the study

TABLE 3. Studies Related to Parasocial Relationship on Social Media in Health Communication or Health Issues

Author	Methodology	Result
Moran, Swan, and Agajanian (2024)	Observation	The study results showed that Instagram's structure facilitates easy monetisation of user-generated content, prioritising engagement and enabling social media health opinion leaders to establish lucrative brands. However, without a robust content moderation framework, this monetisation avenue remains open to all, including opinion leaders disseminating vaccine misinformation.
Reed (2023)	Survey	The study found no interaction effects between prior experience and follower involvement but did reveal direct effects of the quantity and positivity of previous experience on therapy outcome expectations. Additionally, the treatment outcome of social media opinion leaders significantly influenced followers' expectations. Those with more therapy experience showed greater expectations and intentions to seek therapy.
Kim, Kim, and Cho (2023)	Survey	The study results showed that perceived physical attractiveness bolstered viewers' exercise intentions, whereas perceived social attractiveness did not yield a significant effect. Parasocial relationships emerged as influential in shaping positive outcome expectations, subsequently impacting viewers' sustained intentions to engage with Fitness YouTubers for workouts. Moreover, wishful identification exerted a notable influence on positive outcome expectations and the enduring commitment to exercise.

Li et al. (2023)	Survey	The study results highlighted the significance of acknowledging the impact of fitness opinion leaders and parasocial relationships when analysing exercise behaviours, particularly within the realm of social media platforms. The study offers valuable insights into how individuals can find motivation and support to sustain or enhance their fitness regimens, especially in times of adversity such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
Su et al. (2023)	Data Analysis & In-depth Interview	The study's quantitative data revealed that portraying an athletic persona on social media elevates the opinion leader's trustworthiness and boosts consumer inclination to purchase endorsed products. On the other hand, qualitative insights from the study suggested that a mutual school affiliation serves as the primary catalyst for the connection between the social media opinion leader and the consumer, influencing subsequent purchasing behaviours. This study offers actionable insights for educational institutions, brands, and sponsors navigating sponsorships in the contemporary era of name, image, and likeness.
Liu (2023)	Survey & In-depth Interview	The study found that the development of parasocial connections with Nanshan Zhong served as a mediating factor in the relationship between digital media exposure and both COVID-19-related political trust and general political trust. Additionally, these indirect effects were moderated by the influence of collectivist values. Specifically, individuals with stronger collectivist tendencies showed a greater inclination to form parasocial bonds with Nanshan Zhong through repeated exposure to news across various digital platforms. Consequently, this heightened political trust underscores the intricate interplay between media exposure, parasocial relationships, cultural values, and trust within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic among young Chinese adults.
Saw et al. (2022)	In-depth Interview	The study showed the significance of effectively nurturing parasocial relationships between leaders and followers to convey health information. By implementing the strategies, leaders can positively influence followers and enhance health awareness and literacy on social media platforms.
Lotun et al. (2022)	Experiment	The research findings suggested that creating parasocial relationships on YouTube, particularly through disclosure videos by creators sharing personal experiences, can effectively reduce explicit prejudice and intergroup anxiety towards mental health issues. Participants exposed to the disclosure video showed lower levels of explicit prejudice and intergroup anxiety compared to those who were not exposed. While there were no significant differences in implicit prejudice or behavioural measures immediately after watching the video, the sustained lower prejudice levels over time indicate the potential for long-term impact. These results support the idea that parasocial interventions can passively reduce prejudice on a larger scale, offering a promising avenue for promoting understanding and acceptance of mental health issues.
Bérail and Bungener (2022)	Survey	The research emphasised the importance of favorite YouTubers as trusted sources of health information during a global health crisis and suggested collaboration with health professionals to enhance the quality of information disseminated to viewers
Saw et al. (2021)	In-depth Interview	These findings highlighted the significant influence of parasocial opinion leaders on Twitter in shaping health messages and engaging followers in health communication.
Hoffner (2020)	Survey	The result showed that parasocial relationships with Fisher, parasocial grief, and exposure to mental health-related media coverage contributed to greater social sharing about mental health.
Parrott et al. (2020)	Content analysis	The findings indicated that most social media responses were supportive, with common themes including encouragement, personal experiences, inspiration, gratitude, advice, and strength.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Social media has changed how individuals connect with other individuals and retrieve information. Among the most influential figures in this digital landscape are social media health opinion leaders, who leverage their platforms to build robust parasocial relationships with their followers. These one-sided yet emotionally significant connections allow opinion leaders to wield considerable power over their audience's attitudes and behaviours. This review explored the elements of parasocial relationships between social media opinion leaders and their followers and how they impact community building, narrative strategies, and economic profit. The review examined recent studies to illuminate opinion leaders' multifaceted roles in contemporary society. The following analysis and discussion synthesise the key findings from prior studies and their implications. Crucially, these external findings are mapped onto the Process Model of Parasocial Health Opinion Leadership on Social Media (Saw et al., 2022), demonstrating how contemporary research validates, expands, or intersects with the model's core directions, prerequisites, and communication strategies.

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

The concept of parasocial relationships emerges as a central theme across several studies. In many studies, social media opinion leaders are found to use emotions to foster a sense of community within their parasocial relationships with their followers. For example, Moran et al. (2024) highlighted how wellness opinion leaders effectively utilise social media platforms, particularly Instagram, to forge emotional and relational connections with their followers. This process that fosters strong parasocial relationships creates a sense of community, but the engagement methods employed by opinion leaders are instrumental in cultivating these relationships, which can be both beneficial and potentially harmful. While, the sense of community can provide followers with a supportive environment, it can also serve as a conduit for spreading misinformation, particularly concerning health-related topics like vaccine opposition (Moran et al., 2024). This reinforces the model's assertion that the pathway of influence is highly contingent on the ethical execution of the opinion leader's role, as the emotional closeness built in these digital spaces lowers followers' cognitive barriers to critical thinking. In addition, Reed (2023) underscores the significance of these parasocial relationships in influencing followers' expectations and behaviours. In the context of therapy, social media opinion leaders' personal experiences and outcomes can directly shape followers' attitudes towards seeking therapy, highlighting the potent influence these relationships can have on individual health decisions. This alignment between an opinion leader's disclosure and a follower's subsequent behaviour underscores the model's baseline premise: that the process initiated by the leader ultimately culminates in the followers' active acceptance of health information.

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND INFLUENCE ON BEHAVIOUR

Narratives are a communication strategy to increase engagement. Narratives are found convincing as they resonate with their followers' values and historical context. For example, Moran et al. (2024) shared how narrative was utilised by opinion leaders to share content against vaccines. This approach can significantly challenge traditional sources of trust and credibility, illustrating the influential power of narrative in shaping public opinion and behaviour. Within the framework of

the process model, narrative acts as a primary vehicle for the "information presentation style" strategy. A compelling narrative structure transforms dry medical concepts into relatable, humanised stories, successfully executing the "description" and "interest stimulation" strategies outlined in the model's second direction. However, Kim et al. (2023) and Li et al. (2023) found attributes like physical attractiveness, content quality, and the development of parasocial relationships motivate individuals to engage in regular exercise routines. The study revealed how opinion leaders influence their followers' fitness behaviours. Both studies emphasise how social media health opinion leaders can effectively blend attributes to encourage positive health behaviours among their followers. When analysed along the second dimension of the Saw et al. (2022) model—which dictates the specific delivery strategies used by leaders—narrative techniques and content quality are key facets of the information presentation style. Furthermore, Kim et al.'s (2023) emphasis on physical attractiveness extends the model's first prerequisite by highlighting the specific characteristics of individual opinion leaders that draw followers in. This blending of relational closeness and personal attributes perfectly aligns with Katz's (1957, 1960) concept of "who they are" (the embodiment of specific values like fitness and vitality), which serves as the foundational hook for the parasocial bond.

ECONOMIC PROFIT AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

Prior studies highlighted the ethical dilemmas inherent in the practices of social media health opinion leaders. By promoting wellness products and health claims primarily for profit, opinion leaders risk endorsing unsafe products and perpetuating misinformation (Moran et al., 2024). This commercialisation of influence could jeopardise public health and normalise misleading content. It underscores the urgency for enhanced regulatory measures to safeguard consumers from potential harm (Moran et al., 2024). Prior research also shed light on ethical challenges faced by mental health opinion leaders. These commercial risks and ethical dilemmas underscore why Saw et al. (2022) explicitly integrated the "strengthening of the image and ethics of professionalism" as a mandatory prerequisite for the delivery strategy within the process model. The framework highlights that without strict adherence to an ethical "health orientation," the credibility of the leader's "efficiency" (what they know) becomes compromised by profit-driven motives. In addition, shared identity is the primary catalyst for fostering the bond between the social media opinion leader and the consumer, influencing consumer purchasing decisions. For example, in the era of name, image, and likeness, a shared identity enables strong scholarship among schools, colleges, and brands (Su et al., 2023). Therefore, using an athletic image improves trust towards opinion leaders and probability of product purchases. Consequently, exercising caution when endorsing or sharing opinions on health products by opinion leaders is vital.

INFLUENCE ON POLITICAL AND HEALTH TRUST

Liu (2023) explored the broader implications of parasocial relationships in the political domain within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic among young Chinese adults. The study found that repeated exposure to digital media and strong parasocial relationships increase political trust, especially in cultures that value community. Consequently, this heightened political trust underscores the intricate interplay between media exposure, parasocial relationships, cultural values, and trust (Liu, 2023). This indicates that social media opinion leaders are crucial in shaping political attitudes and trust through consistent and relatable content. On the other hand, Saw et al.

(2022) and Saw et al. (2021) focused on health communication strategies employed by health opinion leaders on Twitter. These studies found that effective communication strategies, such as reducing information complexity and maintaining professionalism, can significantly enhance health literacy and positively influence followers' health behaviours. For example, Bérail and Bungener (2022) emphasise how, in tough times, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, followers' trust in their favourite YouTubers for health information increases. This phenomenon validates the third prerequisite of the Saw et al. (2022) framework: the explicit "reasons to refer to parasocial opinion leaders." During global crises, a follower's critical need for reassurance and reliable direction provides a powerful reason to return to their preferred digital figures.

IMPACT ON PREJUDICE AND SOCIAL SHARING

Parasocial relationships may reduce bias and encourage information sharing. A study conducted by Lotun et al. (2022) found reduced negative emotions and concerns about mental health issues among media users following parasocial interventions on YouTube. This highlights how opinion leaders enhance media users' understanding and reduce the stigma associated with a particular health issue. In addition, Hoffner (2020) found that parasocial grief positively influenced social sharing about mental health, and this effect was mediated by prosocial motivations. This indicates that parasocial relationships influence individual behaviours and facilitate broader social conversations and advocacy efforts. Furthermore, this process directly targets and enhances the audience's "information and health literacy" via the model of parasocial health opinion leadership on social media (Saw et al., 2022), reframing stigmatised conditions through an educational lens and moving followers closer to the ultimate stage of healthy behaviour shaping.

ATHLETE SOCIAL MEDIA OPINION LEADERS AND FAN ENGAGEMENT

Previous studies have examined the changes in the relationships between athletes and fans in times of crises, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Parrott et al., 2020). The increased online engagement of athletes (opinion leaders) has strengthened parasocial relationships, transforming the traditional fan-athlete relationship into a more intimate connection. NBA players previously expressed positive feedback on mental health disclosures on social media platforms. This highlights how social media platforms can be leveraged by opinion leaders to advocate for health and social issues. The review of prior studies found the multifaceted influence of social media health opinion leaders through parasocial relationships. These relationships are instrumental in shaping followers' health behaviours, political trust, and social attitudes. However, they also raise significant ethical concerns, particularly regarding the commercialisation of influence and the spread of misinformation. In short, the appropriate use of influence by opinion leaders can be achieved through improved regulatory frameworks and clear ethical guidelines. Besides that, these specialised sports figures fit cleanly within the model's premise that opinion leader characteristics should not be rigidly fixed but rather tailored to specific domains and unique followings. When these athletes share personal vulnerabilities, they engage a highly localised "health orientation" and "interest stimulation" strategy that fits perfectly within the broader scope of Katz's (1957, 1960) value embodiment (who they are) and social location (who they know). By demonstrating an authentic "health orientation" through personal mental health disclosures, these non-traditional leaders effectively stimulate broader public interest, expanding the reach of health information to demographics typically resistant to standard medical communication.

CONCLUSION

Exploring parasocial relationships and the influence of social media health opinion leaders offers profound insights into the evolving dynamics of digital communication and societal influence. Through a synthesis of recent studies, the current review illuminated the multifaceted roles played by social media health opinion leaders in shaping community dynamics, narrative strategies, economic landscapes, and ethical considerations. The current review focused on the role of parasocial relationships in the influencer culture and how social media health opinion leaders can build close relationships with their followers and other media users.

While these relationships can foster community and support, they also carry the potential for misinformation dissemination and ethical dilemmas, particularly in pursuing economic profit. Moreover, in addition to individual actions, these digital or social media opinion leaders actively influence broader public views across political trust levels and health literacy. By employing narrative techniques, they possess considerable influence in shaping societal standards. Therefore, the promotion of this power, particularly in the public and mental health sectors, necessitated a clear understanding of professional boundaries and regulatory protocols to ensure consumer safety. The synthesis offers crucial new information that the promotion of health discourse on social media represents a fundamental shift from centralised institutional health authorities to emotionally driven peer-to-peer trust networks. Thus, future public health governance must move away from passive content regulation and instead focus on actively examining how to ethically integrate scientific expertise within these decentralised, highly emotional communication environments.

Previous studies have extensively examined parasocial relationships between social media health opinion leaders and their followers, with more recent studies revealing the strong relationship between them. However, the studies have yet to address the formation of the relationship. Understanding the factors or elements that nurture the formation of parasocial relationships is important to improve information sharing and dialogue between health opinion leaders and their followers. They are able to transmit and disseminate information and make an impact. The current review discovered several factors that influence parasocial relationships, the dissemination of information, and media users' behaviour with the information. This calls for future studies to explore how parasocial relationships between opinion leaders and their followers are established through social media platforms. Furthermore, future studies can explore ethical considerations, regulatory frameworks, and potential interventions to optimise advantages and mitigate risks for social media users when consuming information from social media health opinion leaders. Longitudinal studies examining the impact of parasocial relationships on media users' health attitudes and behaviours over time are also important to identify evidence-based strategies that can then be employed by opinion leaders to improve health communication in the digital age.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors affirm that no conflicts of interest are associated with this study.

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