

A Policy Framework for Leveraging Social Media to Improve Patient Health Literacy in UAE Hospitals

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Abstract

Social media has become an important channel for healthcare communication, providing new opportunities for hospitals to improve patient access to health information and support health literacy. However, the increasing availability of online health information also creates challenges related to information quality, misinformation, professional communication, and the absence of structured approaches for integrating social media into patient education strategies. This policy paper proposes a framework for leveraging social media to improve patient health literacy in United Arab Emirates (UAE) hospitals. The framework was developed based on evidence from a case study conducted at Shaam Hospital, Ras Al Khaimah, UAE, which examined the role of social media in supporting patient education, knowledge development, and health-related outcomes. The proposed framework identifies five interconnected policy enablers: hospital social media governance and accountability, evidence-based health communication, healthcare professional digital competency, patient digital health literacy empowerment, and monitoring and evaluation. Together, these components provide an evidence-informed approach for transforming social media from a general communication platform into a structured patient education resource. The framework offers practical guidance for healthcare policymakers, hospital administrators, and healthcare professionals seeking to integrate social media into patient-centred healthcare strategies while maintaining quality, safety, and accountability. Future research should evaluate the

implementation of this framework across diverse healthcare settings to determine its effectiveness in improving patient health literacy and engagement.

Keywords: social media, health literacy, digital health, patient education, healthcare policy, UAE hospitals, patient engagement

1. Introduction

Healthcare systems worldwide are experiencing a major transformation driven by digital technologies, changing patient expectations, and increasing demand for accessible health information. Patients are no longer dependent solely on traditional healthcare encounters to obtain information about diseases, treatments, prevention, and healthy lifestyles. Instead, digital platforms have enabled individuals to actively search for health information and participate in discussions related to their health (Giustini et al., 2018; Smailhodzic et al., 2016).

Among these digital platforms, social media has emerged as an important channel for healthcare communication. Social media enables healthcare organizations to share educational content, communicate public health messages, and engage directly with patients and communities. For patients, these platforms provide convenient access to health-related information and opportunities to exchange experiences with others (Moorhead et al., 2013; Antheunis et al., 2013). Social media has also created new opportunities for healthcare providers to support patient education, health promotion, and communication beyond traditional healthcare settings (Korda & Itani, 2013; Giustini et al., 2018).

However, increased access to online health information does not automatically lead to improved health literacy. Health information available through social media varies in quality, accuracy, and reliability. Patients may encounter misinformation, incomplete explanations, or unverified health recommendations, which may influence healthcare decision-making and patient behaviours (George et al., 2013; Suarez-Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021). Therefore, healthcare institutions need structured approaches to ensure that social media supports evidence-based health education rather than increasing confusion or misinformation (Moorhead et al., 2013; Ventola, 2014).

Patient health literacy has become an important priority in modern healthcare systems. Individuals with adequate health literacy are better able to understand health information, make informed decisions, communicate with healthcare providers, and manage their health conditions effectively. Patient empowerment and health literacy are closely connected with active participation in healthcare decisions and improved patient-centred care (Anderson & Funnell, 2010). Digital health interventions that provide accessible and meaningful information can further support patient empowerment and engagement (Kuijpers et al., 2013).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has experienced rapid digital development, including significant growth in digital healthcare services and online communication. The widespread adoption of digital platforms within Gulf countries has created new opportunities for organizations to engage communities through online channels (Al-Badi, 2015; Alqudsi-Ghabra et al., 2011). In healthcare, social media provides organizations with an opportunity to expand patient education beyond traditional clinical settings. Hospitals can use social media platforms to provide preventive health information, improve patient awareness, and support continuous communication with healthcare users (Moorhead et al., 2013; Korda & Itani, 2013).

Despite these opportunities, many healthcare organizations lack comprehensive policies that define how social media should be integrated into patient education strategies. Current social media use in healthcare is often focused on institutional announcements, awareness campaigns, or promotional communication rather than systematic health literacy improvement. Effective integration requires appropriate governance mechanisms, professional guidance, and strategies to ensure responsible digital communication (Ventola, 2014; Pirraglia & Kravitz, 2018).

This policy paper addresses this gap by proposing a framework for UAE hospitals to strategically leverage social media as a patient health literacy tool. The framework is informed by evidence from Shaam Hospital, Ras Al Khaimah, where research examined the role of social media in improving patient knowledge and health outcomes.

2. Policy Problem and Rationale

The increasing use of social media in healthcare presents both opportunities and challenges for improving patient health literacy. While digital platforms provide new methods for delivering health information and engaging patients, healthcare organizations require clear policies to ensure that social media is used effectively, responsibly, and in alignment with patient-centred care principles (Moorhead et al., 2013; Smailhodzic et al., 2016).

Patient health literacy is a critical component of healthcare quality because patients need the ability to access, understand, and apply health information when making decisions about prevention, treatment, and self-management. Health literacy is closely associated with patient empowerment, active participation in healthcare decisions, and improved patient-provider relationships (Anderson & Funnell, 2010). Traditional healthcare education approaches, although important, may not always provide continuous access to information outside clinical encounters. Social media has the potential to extend patient education beyond hospitals by providing accessible and timely health information (Korda & Itani, 2013; Kuijpers et al., 2013).

However, the uncontrolled growth of health-related content on social media has created several policy concerns. The first concern relates to the quality and reliability of online health information. Patients may encounter inaccurate information, misleading claims, or advice that is not supported by medical evidence. Without trusted institutional sources, patients may have difficulty distinguishing reliable health information from misinformation (George et al., 2013; Suarez-Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021). Therefore, healthcare organizations have an important role in providing evidence-based digital health information and reducing the potential harms associated with unreliable online content (Moorhead et al., 2013).

The second concern relates to the limited availability of structured approaches for managing social media-based patient education. Although many hospitals use social media for announcements, awareness campaigns, and general communication, fewer organizations have developed comprehensive strategies that integrate social media into patient health literacy improvement. Effective use of social media requires healthcare institutions to move beyond communication activities and establish planned approaches for digital health education,

patient engagement, and information management (Giustini et al., 2018; Korda & Itani, 2013).

The third concern involves the role of healthcare professionals in digital communication. Online interactions with patients create important considerations related to professionalism, privacy, confidentiality, and the appropriate boundaries of healthcare advice. Healthcare professionals require clear guidance and training to participate effectively in social media while maintaining ethical standards and public trust (Ventola, 2014; Rolls et al., 2017; Pirraglia & Kravitz, 2018).

The fourth concern relates to evaluating the effectiveness of social media initiatives. The number of followers, views, or online interactions does not necessarily indicate improvement in patient understanding, health literacy, or health-related decision-making. Healthcare institutions require evaluation approaches that examine whether digital communication contributes to meaningful patient education outcomes and improved patient engagement (Smailhodzic et al., 2016; Laranjo et al., 2015).

These challenges are particularly relevant in the UAE healthcare context. The UAE has experienced rapid digital transformation, with increasing adoption of internet-based services and social media platforms. Within the Gulf region, digital technologies have become important tools for communication, public engagement, and information exchange (Al-Badi, 2015; Alqudsi-Ghabra et al., 2011). This environment creates significant opportunities for healthcare organizations to use social media as a platform for health promotion, disease prevention, and patient education. However, maximizing these benefits requires a transition from informal digital communication toward structured and evidence-informed policy approaches.

The rationale for developing this policy framework is supported by evidence from Shaam Hospital, Ras Al Khaimah. The study conducted at the hospital examined the role of social media in enhancing patient knowledge and health outcomes. The findings indicated that social media can support patient education by improving access to health information, encouraging patient engagement, and contributing to improved understanding of health-related issues.

Therefore, this policy paper argues that social media should be considered a strategic healthcare education resource rather than simply a communication tool. A comprehensive policy framework can assist UAE hospitals in providing reliable and accessible health information, strengthening patient engagement, supporting healthcare professionals in digital communication, improving patients' ability to evaluate health information, and establishing mechanisms for assessing the impact of social media initiatives.

3. Evidence Base: Insights from Shaam Hospital UAE Case Study

3.1 Study Context

The proposed policy framework is informed by evidence from a study conducted at Shaam Hospital, Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates. The study examined the role of social

media in supporting patient education, improving access to health information, and enhancing patient knowledge and health-related outcomes within a hospital setting. The study was conducted within the context of increasing patient reliance on digital platforms for accessing health information. Social media has become an important source of health-related communication, providing opportunities for healthcare organizations to extend patient education beyond traditional clinical interactions. However, effective use of these platforms requires appropriate strategies to ensure that digital health information is accurate, accessible, and aligned with patient needs (Moorhead et al., 2013; Giustini et al., 2018). The Shaam Hospital case provides an important example of how social media can support patient-centred healthcare communication in the UAE context. Rather than viewing social media only as a communication channel, the findings highlight its potential role as a tool for improving patient health literacy and engagement.

3.2 Evidence Collection and Scope

The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional design and collected data from patients at Shaam Hospital using a structured questionnaire. A total of 586 questionnaires were distributed, 511 responses were received, and after data screening, 423 valid responses were included in the analysis. The study examined key aspects related to social media use in healthcare, including patients' access to health information, the role of social media in patient education, patient motivation and engagement, patient knowledge, and perceived health outcomes. These areas reflect key themes identified in previous research regarding the use of social media for healthcare communication, patient participation, and health behaviour support (Antheunis et al., 2013; Smailhodzic et al., 2016).

3.3 Evidence-Informed Policy Implications

The findings from the Shaam Hospital study provide several implications for healthcare policy development. The evidence suggests that social media can contribute to patient education by improving access to health information, supporting patient engagement, and enhancing patients' understanding of health-related issues. The translation of these findings into policy priorities is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Evidence from Shaam Hospital Case Study and Policy Implications

Evidence from Shaam Hospital Study	Policy Implication
Social media provides patients with access to health-related information	Hospitals should develop official social media channels to provide reliable and accessible health education
Social media supports patient education and engagement	Digital communication should be integrated into structured patient education strategies
Health information contributes to patient knowledge development	Hospitals should prioritize accurate, understandable, and evidence-based health communication
Patient knowledge supports better health-related decisions	Improving health literacy should be considered an objective of digital health initiatives
Social media creates opportunities for interaction between patients and healthcare providers	Healthcare professionals should receive guidance and training for effective digital communication

These implications are consistent with previous research demonstrating that social media can support health communication, patient empowerment, and engagement when implemented within appropriate organizational structures (Korda & Itani, 2013; Laranjo et al., 2015).

3.4 Translation of Evidence into Policy Framework

The Shaam Hospital case study demonstrates the potential of social media as a healthcare education resource. However, maximizing this potential requires structured policies that address information quality, professional responsibility, patient empowerment, and evaluation mechanisms. Based on the evidence, this policy paper proposes five interconnected components for leveraging social media to improve patient health literacy in UAE hospitals as in Table 2.

Table 2. Proposed Policy Components Derived from Evidence

Policy Component	Policy Objective	Key Policy Actions
Governance and Accountability	Ensure responsible and ethical management of social media activities	Establish governance procedures, oversee health information quality, and protect patient privacy
Evidence-Based Health Communication	Provide reliable and understandable health information	Develop medically reviewed content and reduce exposure to inaccurate online information
Healthcare Professional Digital Competency	Support appropriate professional engagement online	Provide training on digital communication, ethics, and responsible information sharing
Patient Digital Health Literacy Empowerment	Improve patients' ability to use health information effectively	Support patients in evaluating online health information and making informed decisions
Monitoring and Evaluation	Assess the effectiveness of social media initiatives	Measure contributions to patient education, health literacy, and healthcare improvement

Together, these policy components provide an evidence-informed pathway for transforming social media from a general communication platform into a structured patient education resource. The framework serves as a practical guide for UAE hospitals seeking to integrate digital communication into patient-centred healthcare strategies.

4. Proposed Policy Framework for Leveraging Social Media to Improve Patient Health Literacy in UAE Hospitals

Based on the evidence from Shaam Hospital and the challenges associated with healthcare social media communication, this paper proposes a policy framework to guide UAE hospitals in strategically integrating social media into patient health literacy initiatives. The framework is based on the premise that social media should move beyond its traditional role as a general communication platform and become an organized component of patient education, engagement, and patient-centred care.

Previous research has demonstrated that social media can improve access to health information, facilitate communication between healthcare providers and patients, and support patient engagement. However, achieving these benefits requires structured governance, reliable information management, professional digital practices, and mechanisms for evaluating outcomes (Moorhead et al., 2013; Smailhodzic et al., 2016; Giustini et al., 2018).

Effective implementation requires a coordinated approach that combines institutional governance, evidence-based health communication, healthcare professional capability, patient empowerment, and continuous evaluation. Accordingly, the proposed framework consists of five interconnected policy enablers that support effective hospital social media implementation and contribute to improved patient health literacy and health outcomes.

Table 3. Proposed Policy Framework for Leveraging Social Media to Improve Patient Health Literacy in UAE Hospitals

Policy Enabler	Policy Objective	Recommended Actions	Expected Impact
Hospital Social Media Governance and Accountability	Ensure responsible and ethical management of hospital social media activities	Develop institutional social media policies, define responsibilities for content management, and ensure patient privacy and ethical communication standards	Consistent, safe, and trustworthy digital health communication
Evidence-Based Health Communication	Ensure patients receive accurate, accessible, and understandable health information	Establish official hospital health channels, provide medically reviewed content, and use patient-centred communication approaches	Improved access to reliable health information and reduced exposure to misinformation
Healthcare Professional Digital Competency	Strengthen healthcare professionals' ability to communicate effectively through digital platforms	Provide training in digital professionalism, online patient communication, and responsible health information sharing	Increased patient confidence and effective healthcare engagement
Patient Digital Health Literacy Empowerment	Improve patients' ability to access, evaluate, and use online health information	Develop patient education initiatives that support evaluation of online health sources and safe use of digital health resources	Greater patient knowledge, engagement, and informed decision-making
Monitoring and Evaluation	Ensure social media initiatives achieve meaningful healthcare objectives	Establish indicators to assess engagement, patient knowledge, satisfaction, and health-related outcomes	Continuous improvement of digital health strategies

4.1 Hospital Social Media Governance and Accountability

Healthcare organizations should establish clear governance mechanisms to ensure that social media activities align with healthcare quality, patient safety, and ethical standards. Unlike general public communication, healthcare communication has direct implications for patient decisions and therefore requires appropriate oversight. The rapid expansion of health-related information online has created concerns regarding privacy, misinformation, and professional responsibility. Therefore, hospitals should develop formal social media policies that define responsibilities for content approval, establish professional communication standards, protect patient confidentiality, and provide procedures for managing patient interactions (Ventola, 2014; Pirraglia & Kravitz, 2018). Effective governance provides the foundation for trustworthy and sustainable digital health communication by ensuring that social media activities are consistent with healthcare values and patient safety principles.

4.2 Evidence-Based Health Communication

Hospitals should use social media platforms as channels for delivering reliable, accessible, and evidence-based health information. Previous research has demonstrated that social media can support health promotion, disease prevention, and patient education when information is accurate, understandable, and appropriately managed (Moorhead et al., 2013; Giustini et al., 2018). Content should address patient needs, including health promotion, disease awareness, treatment understanding, and self-management. Health-related information should undergo appropriate clinical review and be presented in formats suitable for diverse patient populations. This approach can strengthen patient trust and reduce dependence on unreliable online health information. Given the increasing prevalence of health misinformation on social media platforms, healthcare institutions have an important role in providing credible and evidence-based digital health resources (Suarez-Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021).

4.3 Healthcare Professional Digital Competency

Healthcare professionals represent an important source of credible health information within digital environments. Their involvement in social media can strengthen communication between healthcare providers and patients and support the development of online health communities (Rolls et al., 2017). However, effective participation requires appropriate knowledge of professional responsibilities and ethical considerations. Hospitals should support healthcare professionals through digital competency development, including training in professional online communication, patient confidentiality, misinformation management, and appropriate boundaries between professional and personal online activities. Developing digital competency enables healthcare professionals to contribute effectively to patient education while maintaining professional standards and public trust (Ventola, 2014).

4.4 Patient Digital Health Literacy Empowerment

Providing health information through social media is not sufficient unless patients have the ability to understand, evaluate, and apply that information appropriately. Patient empowerment requires individuals to actively participate in healthcare decisions and develop confidence in managing their health information needs (Anderson & Funnell, 2010). Hospitals should incorporate digital health literacy empowerment into their social media strategies by supporting patients in identifying reliable health information sources, understanding online health messages, recognizing misinformation, and determining when professional medical advice is required. Digital interventions and online health resources have demonstrated potential in supporting patient empowerment and engagement, particularly when they are designed around patient needs and accessibility (Kuijpers et al., 2013).

4.5 Monitoring and Evaluation

Healthcare organizations should establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to determine whether social media initiatives contribute to improved patient health literacy and healthcare engagement. Although digital engagement indicators, such as content reach, views, and interactions, provide useful information about communication activity, they do not

necessarily demonstrate improvement in patient knowledge or health behaviours. Therefore, evaluation should include patient-centred outcomes, such as health information understanding, confidence in healthcare decisions, satisfaction with digital resources, and patient engagement (Laranjo et al., 2015; Smailhodzic et al., 2016). Continuous evaluation enables hospitals to refine their digital strategies and ensure that social media investments contribute to meaningful healthcare improvement.

4.6 Policy Framework Pathway

The proposed framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

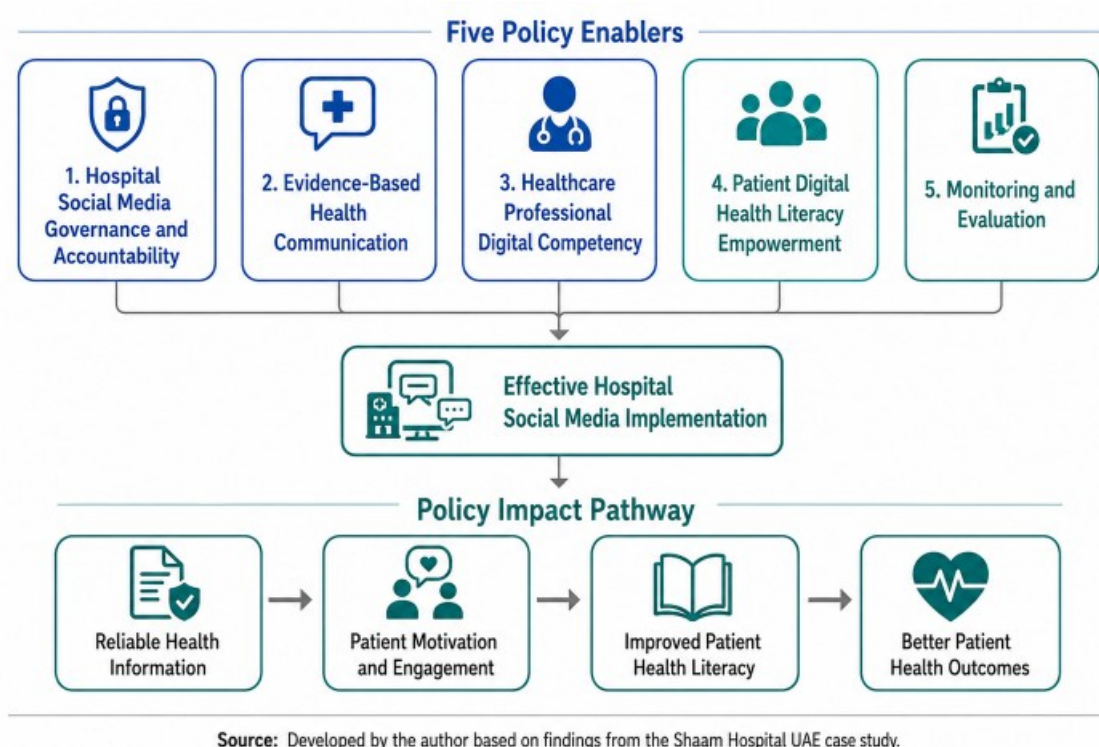


Figure 1. Proposed Policy Framework for Leveraging Social Media to Improve Patient Health Literacy in UAE Hospitals

The framework presents five policy enablers that support effective hospital social media implementation. Through this implementation pathway, hospitals can enhance access to reliable health information, encourage patient motivation and engagement, strengthen patient health literacy, and ultimately contribute to improved patient health outcomes. The framework represents an evidence-informed policy approach derived from the Shaam Hospital UAE case study and supported by existing literature on social media use in healthcare, patient empowerment, and digital health communication. It provides a practical approach for UAE hospitals to integrate social media into patient-centred healthcare strategies while maintaining quality, safety, accountability, and evidence-informed

communication.

5. Policy Recommendations and Implementation Strategy

The proposed framework provides a strategic approach for integrating social media into patient health literacy initiatives within UAE hospitals. Translating this framework into practice requires coordinated actions addressing governance, communication quality, workforce capability, patient empowerment, and evaluation. Previous research highlights that successful healthcare social media implementation depends not only on technological availability but also on organizational readiness, professional responsibility, and mechanisms that ensure information quality and patient safety (Moorhead et al., 2013; Ventola, 2014; Giustini et al., 2018).

5.1 Establish Hospital Social Media Governance Policies

Healthcare organizations should develop formal social media governance policies that define how digital platforms are used for patient education and communication. Governance structures are essential because healthcare-related social media activities involve issues of information accuracy, patient privacy, professional responsibility, and ethical communication (Ventola, 2014; Pirraglia & Kravitz, 2018).

Hospital policies should establish clear responsibilities for content development, approval, publication, and monitoring. A multidisciplinary governance approach involving healthcare professionals, communication specialists, and digital health teams can support effective management of online health communication.

Key implementation considerations include establishing appropriate oversight structures, defining professional responsibilities, developing procedures for reviewing health-related content, and ensuring compliance with patient privacy and confidentiality requirements. Such governance mechanisms can improve consistency, credibility, and accountability in hospital digital health communication.

5.2 Develop Official Health Education Channels

Hospitals should strengthen their social media presence by developing official digital channels dedicated to patient education rather than limiting their use to institutional announcements or promotional activities. Social media platforms can support health promotion, patient education, and communication between healthcare organizations and communities when content is reliable, accessible, and designed around patient needs (Moorhead et al., 2013; Korda & Itani, 2013). Hospital health education channels should provide information related to disease prevention, chronic disease management, medication and treatment guidance, healthy lifestyles, and available healthcare services. Content should be developed using evidence-based sources and reviewed by qualified healthcare professionals to ensure accuracy and relevance. Because patients differ in language, culture, and health literacy levels, digital health communication should adopt patient-centred approaches that improve accessibility and understanding. This is particularly important because exposure to online health information does not necessarily guarantee improved

health literacy or appropriate decision-making (Suarez-Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021).

5.3 Strengthen Healthcare Professionals' Digital Skills

Healthcare professionals play an important role in ensuring that social media-based health communication remains accurate, trustworthy, and professionally appropriate. Evidence suggests that healthcare professionals use social media to create health communities, share knowledge, and engage with patients; however, effective participation requires appropriate digital competencies and ethical guidance (Rolls et al., 2017). Hospitals should provide digital communication training that addresses professional online communication, patient confidentiality, responsible health information sharing, responding to patient questions, and managing misinformation. Clear guidance regarding professional boundaries between personal and professional online activities is also necessary (Ventola, 2014). Developing healthcare professionals' digital competency can enhance patient trust, strengthen communication quality, and improve the credibility of hospital social media initiatives.

5.4 Promote Patient Digital Health Literacy

Hospitals should not only provide health information but also support patients in developing the skills required to evaluate and use online health resources effectively. Patient empowerment requires individuals to actively participate in healthcare decisions and develop confidence in accessing and interpreting health information (Anderson & Funnell, 2010). Patient digital health literacy programmes should support individuals in identifying reliable health information sources, understanding online health messages, recognizing misinformation, and determining when professional medical advice is required. Digital health interventions have demonstrated potential for supporting patient empowerment when they are designed around accessibility, engagement, and patient needs (Kuijpers et al., 2013). Therefore, hospitals should consider digital health literacy as an essential component of patient education strategies.

5.5 Establish Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms

To ensure the effectiveness of social media initiatives, hospitals should establish evaluation systems that assess both communication performance and patient-centred outcomes. Although indicators such as views, followers, and online interactions provide information about digital activity, they do not necessarily demonstrate improvements in patient knowledge or health literacy (Laranjo et al., 2015; Smailhodzic et al., 2016). A comprehensive evaluation framework should therefore include measures related to governance, communication quality, professional capability, patient empowerment, and health literacy outcomes.

Table 4. Implementation and Evaluation Indicators for Hospital Social Media Health Literacy Initiatives

Implementation Area	Key Activities	Suggested Indicators
Governance	Development of social media policies and responsible management structures	Availability of policies, assigned responsibilities, compliance monitoring
Health Communication	Creation and dissemination of evidence-based health content	Number of educational materials, content quality reviews, patient reach
Professional Capacity	Training healthcare professionals in digital communication	Number of trained staff, competency assessments
Patient Empowerment	Delivery of digital health literacy initiatives	Patient participation, knowledge improvement, satisfaction levels
Evaluation	Assessment of social media effectiveness	Engagement measures, patient feedback, health literacy outcomes

5.6 Suggested Implementation Roadmap

A phased implementation strategy can support sustainable adoption of the proposed framework. The initial phase should focus on establishing governance structures and defining institutional responsibilities. The second phase should emphasize workforce preparation and development of content standards. The third phase should involve implementation of structured social media health education programmes, followed by continuous evaluation and improvement.

Table 5. Suggested Implementation Roadmap for UAE Hospitals

Phase	Timeline	Main Actions
Phase 1: Policy Development	0–6 months	Establish governance structures, develop hospital social media policies, and define responsibilities
Phase 2: Capacity Building	6–12 months	Train healthcare professionals and develop digital health content standards
Phase 3: Implementation	12–18 months	Launch structured social media health education programmes
Phase 4: Evaluation and Improvement	Continuous	Monitor outcomes, collect patient feedback, and refine strategies

Successful implementation requires collaboration among healthcare authorities, hospital administrators, healthcare professionals, communication teams, and patients. At the national level, healthcare regulators can support consistency by developing guidance for digital health communication standards, while hospitals can adapt implementation according to their patient populations, available resources, and organizational priorities. Through a coordinated

implementation approach, social media can evolve from a general communication platform into a strategic healthcare resource that supports patient education, improves health literacy, and strengthens patient-centred care in UAE hospitals.

6. Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

The successful implementation of social media-based patient health literacy initiatives requires systematic monitoring and evaluation. Although social media platforms provide useful indicators such as audience reach, views, and engagement levels, these measures alone are insufficient to determine whether digital communication contributes to meaningful improvements in patient understanding, empowerment, and health-related decision-making. Therefore, UAE hospitals should adopt a broader evaluation approach that considers both digital communication performance and patient-centred outcomes (Laranjo et al., 2015; Smailhodzic et al., 2016).

A monitoring and evaluation framework is essential to ensure that hospital social media activities remain aligned with healthcare objectives, maintain appropriate standards of quality and safety, and continuously improve according to patient needs. Previous research has highlighted that the value of social media in healthcare depends not only on information dissemination but also on its ability to support meaningful patient engagement, improve communication, and strengthen relationships between healthcare providers and patients (Moorhead et al., 2013; Smailhodzic et al., 2016).

The proposed evaluation framework consists of four interconnected domains: governance and quality assurance, digital health communication performance, patient health literacy outcomes, and patient engagement outcomes.

6.1 Governance and Quality Assurance

The first evaluation domain focuses on whether hospital social media activities are implemented within an appropriate governance structure. Since health information can directly influence patient decisions, hospitals should ensure that online communication follows professional, ethical, and regulatory standards. Evaluation should consider whether formal social media policies exist, whether health content undergoes appropriate review processes, and whether patient privacy and confidentiality are protected.

Effective governance provides the foundation for trustworthy digital health communication by ensuring that social media activities are managed consistently and responsibly. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of professional standards, ethical considerations, and appropriate governance mechanisms when healthcare organizations use social media platforms (Ventola, 2014; Pirraglia & Kravitz, 2018).

6.2 Digital Health Communication Performance

The second domain examines the effectiveness and accessibility of health information delivered through social media platforms. Hospitals should evaluate whether their digital content reaches intended patient groups and whether communication approaches are appropriate for different levels of health literacy.

Assessment should consider the frequency and quality of educational content, accessibility of information, patient interaction with health materials, and the use of appropriate communication formats. Social media effectiveness depends not only on the amount of information provided but also on the relevance, credibility, and usability of that information for patients (Moorhead et al., 2013; Giustini et al., 2018).

Although engagement indicators are valuable, they should be interpreted as measures of communication activity rather than direct evidence of improved health outcomes. A high number of interactions does not necessarily indicate that patients have gained accurate knowledge or improved their ability to make health-related decisions.

6.3 Patient Health Literacy Outcomes

The central purpose of the proposed framework is to improve patient health literacy. Therefore, evaluation should focus on whether patients demonstrate improved ability to obtain, understand, evaluate, and use health information.

Hospitals may assess changes in patient understanding of health messages, confidence in evaluating online health information, satisfaction with digital education resources, and perceived ability to make informed healthcare decisions. These measures align with the broader concept of patient empowerment, which emphasizes patients' ability to participate actively in healthcare decisions and manage their health effectively (Anderson & Funnell, 2010).

Digital health interventions have demonstrated potential to support patient empowerment when they are designed around accessibility, engagement, and patient needs (Kuijpers et al., 2013). Therefore, patient health literacy indicators should be considered central measures of social media initiative effectiveness.

6.4 Patient Engagement and Health-Related Outcomes

The final evaluation domain considers the contribution of social media initiatives to patient engagement and broader healthcare outcomes. Social media should support meaningful interaction between patients and healthcare providers and encourage active participation in healthcare decisions.

However, healthcare outcomes are influenced by multiple factors, and social media should be viewed as one component within a wider patient-centred healthcare strategy. Evaluation should therefore focus on the contribution of digital communication to patient engagement, informed decision-making, and health-related behaviours rather than attributing outcomes solely to social media use (Smailhodzic et al., 2016; Laranjo et al., 2015).

Table 6. Proposed Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

Evaluation Domain	Purpose	Suggested Evaluation Measures
Governance and Quality Assurance	Ensure responsible and ethical management of social media activities	Availability of policies, content review procedures, privacy compliance
Digital Health Communication Performance	Assess effectiveness and accessibility of online health communication	Content reach, engagement, accessibility, quality of educational materials
Patient Health Literacy Outcomes	Determine whether patients improve their ability to use health information	Patient understanding, confidence, satisfaction, health information skills
Patient Engagement and Health Outcomes	Assess contribution to patient-centred healthcare improvement	Patient participation, healthcare communication, informed decision-making

6.5 Continuous Improvement Approach

Monitoring and evaluation should be implemented as a continuous improvement process rather than a one-time assessment. Hospitals should regularly review evaluation findings and use them to refine their social media strategies, improve content development processes, and better address patient information needs.

A continuous improvement approach is particularly important because digital communication environments evolve rapidly, and patient expectations regarding access to health information continue to change. Establishing common evaluation principles across UAE healthcare organizations can support consistency while allowing individual hospitals to adapt implementation according to their patient populations, available resources, and institutional priorities.

Such an approach can strengthen the role of social media as a sustainable component of digital health transformation and patient-centred healthcare delivery.

7. Discussion

The increasing use of social media in healthcare represents a significant opportunity for hospitals to expand patient education beyond traditional clinical interactions. However, realizing this potential requires a transition from viewing social media primarily as a communication or promotional channel toward recognizing it as a strategic component of patient-centred healthcare. Previous research has demonstrated that social media can support health communication, patient engagement, and access to health information, but its effectiveness depends on appropriate governance, content quality, and alignment with healthcare objectives (Moorhead et al., 2013; Giustini et al., 2018).

The evidence from the Shaam Hospital case study demonstrates the potential value of social media in supporting patient education and improving access to health information within a UAE hospital context. The study examined the relationship between social media use, patient knowledge, and health-related outcomes, providing evidence that digital platforms can

contribute to patient education and engagement. These findings support the need for healthcare organizations to move beyond unstructured social media activities and adopt systematic approaches that integrate digital communication into patient education strategies.

A central implication of this policy framework is that health information quality must remain a priority. The availability of large volumes of health-related content online does not guarantee that patients receive accurate, understandable, or clinically appropriate information. The increasing prevalence of health misinformation highlights the importance of trusted healthcare institutions providing evidence-based digital health communication (Suarez-Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021). By establishing official communication channels, implementing content review processes, and maintaining professional oversight, hospitals can strengthen public confidence and reduce the risks associated with unreliable online information (Moorhead et al., 2013).

The framework also emphasizes the importance of healthcare professionals in digital health communication. Although social media provides opportunities for direct interaction between healthcare providers and patients, effective engagement requires appropriate digital competencies and professional guidance. Healthcare professionals need support to communicate effectively through digital platforms while maintaining ethical standards, protecting patient confidentiality, and managing professional boundaries. Previous studies have highlighted both the opportunities and challenges associated with healthcare professional engagement in social media environments (Ventola, 2014; Rolls et al., 2017).

Another important consideration is that improving health literacy requires more than simply increasing access to information. Patients must be able to understand, evaluate, and apply health information in ways that support informed healthcare decisions. Patient empowerment depends on developing confidence and capability in managing health information and participating actively in healthcare processes (Anderson & Funnell, 2010). Therefore, hospital social media initiatives should be designed not only to distribute information but also to enhance patient engagement, digital health literacy, and informed decision-making.

The proposed framework also has important implications for healthcare policy development in the UAE. As healthcare systems continue to adopt digital technologies, policymakers and healthcare organizations require approaches that balance innovation with quality, safety, and accountability. A coordinated policy approach can support the development of common standards for digital health communication while allowing hospitals to adapt strategies according to their patient populations and organizational priorities. The UAE's rapid digital transformation provides a favourable environment for integrating structured social media strategies into broader healthcare improvement initiatives (Al-Badi, 2015; Alqudsi-Ghabra et al., 2011).

Importantly, the framework presented in this paper should be considered an evidence-informed policy approach rather than a universally validated implementation model. It was developed based on findings from a single UAE hospital case study and translated into practical recommendations for healthcare organizations. While the framework provides a structured approach for implementation, further research across multiple healthcare settings is

required to evaluate its effectiveness, identify contextual factors influencing adoption, and examine its long-term contribution to patient health literacy and healthcare outcomes.

Overall, this policy framework contributes to the discussion on digital health transformation by demonstrating how social media can be integrated into patient health literacy strategies. By combining governance, evidence-based communication, healthcare professional digital competency, patient empowerment, and evaluation mechanisms, UAE hospitals can use social media more effectively as a strategic healthcare resource. This approach supports the broader transition toward patient-centred digital healthcare delivery while maintaining the quality, safety, and trust required in healthcare communication.

8. Limitations

This policy paper has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its contribution. First, the proposed framework was developed based on evidence from a single hospital case study conducted at Shaam Hospital, Ras Al Khaimah, UAE. Although the case provides valuable insights into the role of social media in supporting patient education and health literacy, healthcare organizations differ in terms of resources, patient populations, digital maturity, and organizational structures. Therefore, the applicability of the framework may require adaptation when implemented in other healthcare settings.

Second, the evidence informing the framework was derived from a cross-sectional study design. While the findings provide important information regarding patients' perceptions of social media use, knowledge development, and health-related outcomes, cross-sectional data cannot establish long-term effects or determine whether social media interventions directly improve patient health literacy over time.

Third, the proposed framework represents an evidence-informed policy approach rather than a formally validated implementation model. The five policy enablers were developed through interpretation of the Shaam Hospital findings and supported by existing literature on social media use in healthcare, patient empowerment, and digital health communication. However, further empirical evaluation is required to assess the effectiveness, feasibility, and sustainability of the framework across different healthcare environments.

Fourth, this paper focuses primarily on the organizational and patient education aspects of social media use in healthcare. Other important considerations, including healthcare system-level regulation, technological infrastructure, cybersecurity, digital inequalities, and economic evaluation, were beyond the scope of this policy framework. Future studies should examine these factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital health communication implementation.

Finally, social media platforms and user behaviours continue to evolve rapidly. Changes in digital technologies, communication practices, and patient expectations may influence the relevance of specific implementation strategies over time. Therefore, hospitals should consider the framework as a flexible approach that requires continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation according to emerging digital health needs.

9. Conclusion

Social media has become an increasingly important component of healthcare communication, offering opportunities to improve patient access to health information, enhance engagement, and support patient-centred care. However, achieving meaningful improvements in patient health literacy requires more than simply increasing the availability of online health content. Healthcare organizations need structured policies that ensure digital communication is reliable, ethical, accessible, and aligned with healthcare quality objectives.

This policy paper proposed a framework for leveraging social media to improve patient health literacy in UAE hospitals. The framework was developed based on evidence from the Shaam Hospital case study in Ras Al Khaimah and supported by existing literature on digital health communication, patient empowerment, and healthcare social media practices. The proposed framework identifies five essential policy enablers: hospital social media governance and accountability, evidence-based health communication, healthcare professional digital competency, patient digital health literacy empowerment, and monitoring and evaluation.

Together, these components provide a practical approach for transforming social media from a general communication platform into a structured healthcare education resource. By establishing governance mechanisms, ensuring reliable health information, strengthening healthcare professionals' digital capabilities, empowering patients to evaluate and use health information, and implementing appropriate evaluation systems, UAE hospitals can maximize the benefits of social media while reducing associated risks.

The framework contributes to digital health policy development by providing an evidence-informed pathway for integrating social media into patient education strategies. It highlights that the future role of social media in healthcare should extend beyond information dissemination toward supporting informed patients, stronger healthcare communication, and improved patient-centred outcomes.

Future research should evaluate the implementation of this framework across multiple healthcare settings and examine its long-term contribution to patient health literacy, engagement, and healthcare outcomes. As healthcare systems continue their digital transformation, social media should be considered not only a communication tool but also a strategic resource for advancing patient education and improving healthcare quality.

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