

## Social Media - Key Opinion Leaders of the Future?

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### ABSTRACT

Physicians and patients are increasingly represented on social media and perform as so-called medical influencers. As key opinion leaders, they can influence and change opinions on health topics and also establish their work within a specialist community.

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Digitisation is becoming increasingly prevalent in the healthcare sector. Not least as a result of the Corona pandemic, developments towards video consultation hours, e-prescription and Internet-based treatment options have been accelerated. More and more people are also searching for health topics online, using social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or even TikTok and YouTube. These channels not only convey information and knowledge. They also enable patients to create content themselves. Patient opinions are thus made easier visible and to use. This can improve communication between doctor and patient and help to classify the knowledge of patient groups, decrease misinformation or misunderstanding and thus possibly positively influence their health. To date, there is not yet sufficient scientific evidence that Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and other social media channels are actually able to provide this kind of information. But social networks certainly have the potential to change people's behaviour in the area of health, as some studies have already been able to show [1,2]. Not least for this reason, scientists are calling for research into the advantages and disadvantages of digital health communication and the development of targeted measures to incorporate it into information campaigns for the population [3–5].

In addition to patient opinions, there is another aspect of the usability of social media in the medical field: New developments are sometimes passed on more quickly via certain groups in social networks than via specialist journals, congresses or other information channels that have been customary to date. Moreover, the search for patients, for example for clinical or nonclinical studies, is sometimes

easier with the help of social media, especially in the area of rare diseases [6]. Another advantage is that physicians who have established themselves in social networks can also present themselves and their work to a larger audience outside of social media. This sometimes offers the chance to find easier access to professional discussions and groups that deal with similar topics.

This is where a relatively new group of influencers comes into play that has established itself in recent years, the so-called medical or healthcare influencers. They publish content on health topics on their own initiative and with high and regular frequency on Internet-based communication channels such as blogs as well as social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat or Twitter. Through their activity, they engage in social interaction with other social media users and sometimes achieve very high reach. Depending on the number of followers, influencers are generally divided into nano-, micro-, macro- and mega-influencers with follower numbers ranging from 50 to over one million [7]. However, most medical influencers are primarily found in the nano or micro sector, as they often cover a niche due to their expert knowledge on a specific medical topic.

The motivation for a medical influencer to publish content and connect with a community is primarily to educate and share knowledge with their followers. While classic influencers with high reach often promote specific products or brands and earn money from it, many medical influencers blog, tweet and post their content on a part-time basis. Successful medical influencers are, for example, patients, science journalists, lifestyle advisors and, of course, physicians. In fact, doctors in particular have

enormous credibility in their target group due to their medical training and are not only experts, but often also advisors and friends. In addition, the target group often consists of only a few thousand or fewer followers. They can therefore respond to inquiries and comments from the community faster and more frequently than many classic influencers. Sometimes they even know some members of their social media community personally. Altogether, this results in a trust-building dialog with the target group that takes place at eye level and on a very emotional level – and can ultimately lead to influencing the target group's opinion. This applies not only to communication with patients, but also to exchanges with members of a specialist community, which would otherwise, if at all, take place via congresses, journals and other classic information channels.

To answer the question of whether social media, and specifically medical influencers, have the potential to be the key opinion leaders (KOL) of the future in the medical field, we need to look at the exact definition of a KOL. The essential characteristic of a KOL is that the person or also an organisation has specialist knowledge and expertise on a particular topic and can thus significantly influence the opinion of a specialist community – not only in social media [8]. In other words: While the credibility of a classic influencer results from his or her online presence, content and authenticity, the credibility of a Key Opinion Leader results from direct experience in a special field and the accompanying professional qualification. For their followers, then, the focus is on expertise and knowledge. By contrast, for a classic influencer's audience it is particularly important to be able to identify with the influencer personally.

In general medical influencers have this kind of experience and professional qualification. And although trust in medical influencers is not yet massive in the public domain, it could be in the future. At least one in two Europeans believes that medical influencers have gained more popularity thanks to the pandemic. Especially in the group of younger people who use various social media platforms on a daily basis, this could increase in the future [9].

In summary, it can be said that social media or rather the group of medical influencers actually have the potential to be the future KOLs in the medical field,

as they are respected experts within a community due to their professional qualifications and can influence and possibly change opinions on health topics within this target group. In addition to the topic of patient opinions and health education, more professional areas such as research or medical education/training could also play a role. Moreover, social media in the medical field can offer the opportunity for healthcare professionals to find access to specialist target groups more quickly and to establish themselves within this specialist community more easily.

## Disclosure Statement

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