

## The influence of social media on the perception of health and well-being

*La influencia de las redes sociales en la percepción de la salud y el bienestar*

*A influência das redes sociais na percepção da saúde e bem-estar*

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### Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the main means used by the population to obtain health information, as well as to analyze the risks associated with the dissemination of false information on social networks, the consequences of self-medication, and the role of digital influencers in this context. It is a cross-sectional, descriptive, and analytical study with a quantitative approach, conducted through the application of a semi-structured questionnaire, available on the Google Forms platform, with data collection between April 24 and October 29, 2025. 116 individuals from the general population and the academic community participated in the research. The results demonstrated that social networks, especially Instagram, are widely used as a source of health information, influencing behaviors and decisions related to personal care. Although most participants recognize the importance of verifying sources, there is still significant exposure to content without a scientific basis, including self-medication practices. In conclusion, social media plays a significant role in disseminating information about health and well-being, presenting benefits but also important risks, which reinforces the need for investment in digital health education and the promotion of critical thinking among the population.

**Descriptors:** Social Network; Health Education; Technology; Digital Health; Accessibility.

### Resumen

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo investigar los principales medios utilizados por la población para obtener información de salud, así como analizar los riesgos asociados a la difusión de información falsa en redes sociales, las consecuencias de la automedicación y el papel de los influencers digitales en este contexto. Se trata de un estudio transversal, descriptivo y analítico, con enfoque cuantitativo, realizado mediante la aplicación de un cuestionario semiestructurado disponible en la plataforma Google Forms, con recolección de datos entre el 24 de abril y el 29 de octubre de 2025. Participaron en la investigación 116 individuos de la población general y la comunidad académica. Los resultados demostraron que las redes sociales, especialmente Instagram, son ampliamente utilizadas como fuente de información de salud, influyendo en comportamientos y decisiones relacionadas con el cuidado personal. Aunque la mayoría de los participantes reconoce la importancia de verificar las fuentes, todavía existe una exposición significativa a contenido sin base científica, incluidas las prácticas de automedicación. En conclusión, las redes sociales juegan un papel importante en la difusión de información sobre salud y bienestar, presentando beneficios pero también riesgos importantes, lo que refuerza la necesidad de invertir en educación sanitaria digital y en promover el pensamiento crítico entre la población.

**Descriptorios:** Red Social; Educación en Salud; Tecnología; Salud Digital; Accesibilidad.

### Resumo

O estudo teve como objetivo investigar os principais meios utilizados pela população para a obtenção de informações sobre saúde, bem como analisar os riscos associados à disseminação de informações falsas nas redes sociais, as consequências da automedicação e o papel dos influenciadores digitais nesse contexto. Trata-se de um estudo transversal, descritivo e analítico, de abordagem quantitativa, realizado por meio da aplicação de um questionário semiestructurado, disponibilizado na plataforma *Google Forms*, com coleta de dados entre 24 de abril e 29 de outubro de 2025. Participaram da pesquisa 116 indivíduos da população em geral e do meio acadêmico. Os resultados demonstraram que as redes sociais, especialmente o Instagram, são amplamente utilizadas como fonte de informação em saúde, influenciando comportamentos e decisões relacionadas ao cuidado pessoal. Embora a maioria dos participantes reconheça a importância da verificação das fontes, ainda há exposição significativa a conteúdos sem embasamento científico, incluindo práticas de automedicação. Conclui-se que as mídias sociais desempenham papel relevante na disseminação de informações sobre saúde e bem-estar, apresentando benefícios, mas também riscos importantes, reforçando a necessidade de investimento em educação em saúde digital e na promoção do pensamento crítico da população.

**Descritores:** Rede Social; Educação em Saúde; Tecnologia; Saúde Digital; Acessibilidade.



## Introduction

Technological advancements and increasing internet access have significantly transformed how people live, work, interact, and, above all, seek information. In Brazil, the COVID-19 pandemic, declared by the World Health Organization in March 2020, further intensified the use of digital technologies, causing the percentage of households with internet access to jump from 71% in 2019 to 83% the following year<sup>1</sup>.

In this context, social media has taken on an even more central role in people's daily lives. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Google have become widely used, including for obtaining health information. According to data from Medicina S/A collected on November 21, 2025, 45% of the Brazilian population searches for health content online, with young people being the main users of these platforms, attracted primarily by accessibility, low cost, and identification with the content<sup>2</sup>.

However, the Internet, despite being a powerful tool, also presents considerable risks when used as a source of medical information. Unlike traditional media, the internet offers a vast range of information, often without proper curation. The rapid and impulsive sharing of content, frequently without verifying its veracity, favors the spread of false information, the so-called fake news<sup>3</sup>.

Furthermore, misinformation can negatively influence self-medication behaviors, exposing individuals to risks such as poisoning, adverse reactions, drug dependence, antibiotic resistance, and other potential complications. According to the World Health Organization, diagnostic errors account for approximately 16% of preventable harm to patients globally<sup>4</sup>.

Self-medication is a common practice in Brazil, with 77% of the population habitually using medication without a prescription. People who self-medicate often turn to the internet for advice, which can lead to contradictory medications, incorrect dosages, failure to adhere to the manufacturer's recommended treatment period, and complications<sup>5</sup>.

Another worrying factor is the role of digital influencers in disseminating health information. With millions of followers attentive to their posts, these communicators have the power to shape opinions and behaviors, not always based on scientific evidence. The use of pseudoscientific knowledge can lead to delays in diagnosis, ineffective treatments, and high costs associated with unproven therapies. Given this scenario, it becomes essential to promote health education based on reliable sources and evidence-based practices (EBP), which use the results of scientific research to guide healthcare. Strategies such as educational sessions, the use of social media for informational campaigns, and the distribution of reliable materials can contribute to raising public awareness about the importance of verifying information<sup>6,7</sup>.

The research aims to investigate the main means used by the population to obtain health information, as well as to identify the risks associated with the dissemination of false health information on social networks. It also aims to discuss the consequences of self-medication and the use of

treatments without scientific evidence based on online content, and to analyze the role of digital influencers in the spread of health information and its possible implications.

## Methodology

This is a cross-sectional, exploratory, descriptive study with a quantitative approach.

The research was conducted using digital platforms for dissemination, such as Instagram and WhatsApp; therefore, the reach of social media is necessary and appropriate to reach a considerable sample size. An online form was used via the Google Forms platform, with data collection between April 24 and October 29, 2025, and the link was sent to participants through the researchers' own contacts on social networks and emails. The study population consisted of individuals who were invited to answer a closed-ended questionnaire containing 13 objective questions.

The research gathered data from the academic community and the general population, configuring a non-probabilistic sample with convenience bias, with voluntary participation. After expressing interest in participating in the research, the objectives of the research were explained, and a link to access the online electronic form was provided. Individuals who spontaneously agreed to participate in this study registered their acceptance through the online informed consent form (ICF). After reading the ICF, participants found two clear and distinct options: I agree to participate: by selecting this option, the participant agreed to participate in the study and provided their free and informed consent; I do not agree to participate: by selecting this option, the participant chose not to participate in the study, and no data was collected or used. The participant had the right to access the complete content of the questionnaire before making any decision about their participation. Furthermore, they could end their participation at any time, even if they had not answered all the questions, without any prejudice. Data collection was carried out through the Google platform, via the following link: <https://forms.gle/S34oWMdia3pnhKGD6>.

All necessary ethical aspects for conducting this research were considered. The research project was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of Unisagrado for evaluation, obtaining a favorable opinion no. 7.596.391; CAEE: 88265025.20000.5502.

## Results and Discussion

The research involved 116 participants; therefore, the data analysis considered the responses of those who duly agreed to participate by accepting the ICF. Regarding the sociodemographic profile of the participants, a predominance of older people was observed, with 25.9% being over 50 years old, as shown in Figure 1. Among the interviewees, the following percentages were: over 50 years old 25.9% (30 people), 21 to 25 years old 19.8% (23 people), 18 to 20 years old 17.2% (20 people), 41 to 45 years old 11.2% (12 people), 26 to 30 years old 7.8% (9 people), 36 to 40 years old 7.8% (9 people), 46 to 50 years old 7.8% (9 people), and 31 to 35 years old 3.4% (4 people).



**Chart 1.** Sociodemographic profile of respondents. Bauru, SP, Brazil, 2025 (n=116)

Presentation of the sociodemographic profile		
<b>Age range of respondents</b>		
18 to 20 years old (17.2%)	21 to 25 years old (19.8%)	Over 50 years old (25.9%)
<b>Gender of respondents</b>		
Feminine (50.9%)	Masculine (49.1%)	
<b>Academic background of the interviewees</b>		
Completed High School (31.3%)	Incomplete Higher Education (28.7%)	

**Chart 2.** Data collection instrument: questions administered to respondents. Bauru, SP, Brazil, 2025 (n=116)

Semi-structured questions applied and results	
<b>Which social media platform do you use most to search for health information?</b>	Instagram (29.3 %)
<b>Have you ever changed any health habits based on something you saw on social media?</b>	Yes, sometimes (49.1%)
<b>Which influencers have you seen sharing health-related content?</b>	Dr. Drauzio Varella (81.4%)
<b>When you find health information on social media, what do you usually do?</b>	Research in other sources (84.5%)
<b>Do you believe that digital influencers have a responsibility for what they publish?</b>	Yes, absolutely (46.6%)
<b>Have you ever been self-medicated based on videos, posts, or tips from digital influencers?</b>	No, but I've thought about doing it (39.7%)
<b>Which source do you consider most reliable for health information?</b>	Official government websites (90.5%)
<b>Do you know of any real consequences of following misinformation about health?</b>	I've seen cases like this in the media (61.2%)
<b>If an influencer shares health information without scientific evidence, what do you think should happen?</b>	Having your content removed from platforms (47%)

Regarding social media, Instagram is the most used, being today a tool where people can share countless types of content. There is, indeed, a methodology for filtering some data and information that the application itself deems not to be from a reliable source, but it is a place of great socialization. Instagram has a growing number of users, resulting in a huge amount of different posts per day. Conversation can take place through posts in the feed or in stories; the posts cover different subjects: beauty, fashion, tips, and even remedies<sup>8</sup>.

When respondents were asked whether they had experienced any change in behavior after seeing something on social media, 49.1% (57 people) answered yes; in fact, social media is here with the issue of influencers, and people are impacted when they see results, they want them. An example of this is that in the last 20 years, there has been an increase in the occurrence of eating disorders, with adolescents being the most affected group<sup>9</sup>.

Regarding influencers who work with health issues, among the people who have had some contact with them and like to follow them, it is observed that the most prevalent, at 81.4% (95 people), is Dr. Drauzio Varella. This is a very satisfactory demonstration in relation to health, since,

on his channel, he presents information from reliable sources, and he has medical training.

When respondents were asked what they would do with the information they find on the internet initially, the vast majority said they prefer to search other sources. We believe this isn't the case, as the research methodology is difficult to implement, and the internet is an easy medium. Therefore, when 84.5% (98 people) of respondents said they search other sources, this may seem questionable, considering the modernity of the internet and its speed. While this might be the ideal course of action, in today's world we find this result somewhat curious. However, one of the main ways to avoid the spread of fake news is to verify sources<sup>10</sup>.

Regarding self-medication based on influencer posts, most people say they don't, but they have considered it, so this can be biased and lead to error. The risks and consequences of self-medication and indiscriminate use of medications can lead to incorrect self-diagnosis, common errors in medication dosage, dangerous drug combinations that can cause other types of illness or dependence and abuse. Furthermore, prolonged use of antibiotics can promote resistance in pathogens and a consequent



ineffectiveness of future treatments<sup>11</sup>.

Regarding sources, 90.5% (105 people) predominantly cited official government websites as the most reliable, with the Ministry of Health website being cited as the most trustworthy. In response to situations like these, the Ministry of Health created a communication channel called "Health Without Fake News" in the second half of 2018, offering resources so the public can verify, free of charge, whether the content they receive through their online networks is true or not<sup>12</sup>.

When asked about their opinion on the greatest risk of following health advice on social media, 51.7% (60 people) of respondents, representing the majority, cited all the proposed options, including: using medication without a prescription, misdiagnosing oneself, and failing to seek appropriate medical care. In other words, they believe this could have several negative impacts on their health. The quality of information available on the internet varies; however, through guidance from healthcare professionals, educational programs, and the use of criteria to assess its quality, it is possible to provide those accessing this information with the possibility of obtaining high-quality information that will help them improve their health<sup>13</sup>.

When asked if there were any reports of people experiencing real consequences after following what they saw on the internet, 61.2% (71 people) stated that they had seen cases in the media; these cases show us how to help in this matter, demonstrating how bad and harmful it is to a person's health to follow behaviors without medical guidance. Self-diagnosis can generate or maximize individual stress levels, low self-esteem, and depressive or anxious symptoms, in addition to leading to a delay in identifying the real profile and in the necessary and appropriate

treatment<sup>14</sup>.

The respondents agreed that the ideal would be the removal of this type of content from digital platforms; however, this is a major challenge. Ideally, the people who evaluate these platforms, based on comments, would report these videos, but a large part of this population does not strictly follow this methodology. We emphasize the importance of the role of healthcare professionals in contributing to the dissemination of safe and truthful information.

### Final Considerations

This study demonstrated the importance of social media as a tool for disseminating information about health and well-being, highlighting both its benefits and the risks associated with consuming content without scientific basis. The results showed that many users recognize the risks of following the advice of digital influencers and understand the importance of verifying sources, but in practice, they are still influenced by visual content. This shows the need to further implement digital health education, promoting the development of critical thinking and encouraging the use of reliable sources. Therefore, this study contributes to the field of nursing by reinforcing the importance of the professional's role not only in direct care but also as a health educator in the virtual environment. Promoting the conscious use of social networks is an important step in ensuring the well-being of the population that consumes this content, preventing harm and improving the quality of life of the population. The study makes a significant contribution to the field of nursing by reinforcing the role of the health professional as an educator in the digital environment as well as promoting safe practices.

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