

**MEDIA AND HEALTH LITERACY: A STUDY ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF TV TO THE NAVIGATIONAL HEALTH LITERACY (HL-NAV) OF THE ELDERLY IN PORTUGAL**

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**ABSTRACT**

Low health literacy has been associated with less healthy choices, poorer health status and outcomes, inappropriate use of health care services, and increased costs to individuals and states [1,2,3]. The European health literacy survey (HLS-EU) started to be conducted in 2011. Results estimate that 50% of the EU population has low levels of health literacy. In Portugal, the questionnaire on self-reported difficulties HLS19-Q12 in 2021 placed it at 30% [4,5]. Alike in many other European countries, Portuguese population presented most poor levels regarding the specific dimension of navigational health literacy (HL-NAV): respectively 65.5% of the population, where 44% fall at the lowest level of “inadequate” [5, 6]. For the purpose of navigating the Health Care System (HCS), health literacy refers to: 1) knowing what to expect as one moves through the HCS and as one interacts with health care professionals; 2) having the skills to successfully navigate the HCS, including for communicating effectively with care providers and skills for self-advocacy. HL-NAV is conceptualized therefore on three different levels: system, organization and interaction.

Evidence also shows that health literacy is not distributed evenly across sociodemographic groups in societies, with those who are most vulnerable often having the lowest levels. The population of the EU is ageing rapidly, with a median age of 43.9 years in 2020 and more than one fifth aged 65 and over. In Portugal, this age group already composes one fourth of the population. Elderly have the greatest health literacy needs due to their high prevalence of chronic diseases and comorbidities, yet they are disproportionately represented among the health illiterate [4,7,8]. Adding to vulnerabilities shared with other EU elders, in Portugal the health reforms and health budget cuts in the 2011-14 EAP implemented as part of the Troika agreement have been associated with increasing health inequalities in access to healthcare services for the elderly population. In its aftermath, an increasing deficiency across the entire National Health Service (NHS) to collaborate, integrate and communicate between different healthcare sectors for providing adequate care to the elderly [9] was further accentuated by the COVID-19 Pandemic strains. Results from the DO-HEALTH study published in 2022

comparing five EU countries exposed that physical frailty prevalence of Portuguese aged 70 and older was the highest [10].

The pervasiveness of (mass) media in contemporary societies makes them sources of shared experience that we all use to understand the world and our place in it [11,12]. Media do not simply impart information. They are involved in the production and circulation of representations, beliefs and values, promoting a shared vocabulary for understanding and performing in everyday life. Mediation describes this dialectical process in which entrenched media of communication are involved in meaning making processes. The process is dialectical, because the representations that media produce and circulate are also appropriated and domesticated by audiences. Yet, it is a fundamentally uneven mediation, as the power to control or disturb the dominant meanings that the media provide is unequally distributed [13,14,15]. Understanding their role in the construction of shared public understandings allows the improvement of frameworks for understanding health-related issues, and for contributing to the development of policies and public responses to health concerns.

This study proposes to investigate the role of the media source for health information self-reported as the most relevant in Portugal, the TV [16]. Despite the acknowledgement of this mass medium's value to promote health literacy and namely to elderly people, the nature of the health-related information conveyed by TV has received limited attention. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the role of TV in mediating the health literacy of the elderly in the country, particularly focused on the topic of navigation in health care which has also received relatively little specific attention. It has therefore a dual foci on what the televised health-related coverage imparts to the public and, the ways in which elderly people interpret these health care representations and apply them to form judgments and take decisions in using the HCS. The results will inform future endeavors to enhance the health literacy of the targeted population through more effective TV health-related communication strategies.

This paper presents the results regarding the first object domain - the nature of the health-related information conveyed by TV - which intended to answer the questions: what is TV imparting to Portuguese audiences about health care and the HCS in Portugal? how are these TV health-related contents contributing to people's understanding of how to navigate the HCS?

### **Methods and Sampling:**

Media sources were selected based on most watched TV channels and programmes regularly available and consumed by elderly audiences in Portugal, and which were likely to include health-related contents. A purposive sample of 112 TV programmes, comprising approximately 3 daytime talk shows and 4 news programmes every 5 days, was analyzed over a three-month period from November 2022 to January 2023. Out of the 112 programs analysed, 103 conveyed

one or more health-related segments (92%), contributing to a total sample of 280 health-related topics, which spanned a total duration of 1330 minutes, or roughly 22 hours. It was applied a content and thematic analytical approach to televised health-related segments and to the illocutionary acts of conveying those accounts. Dataset was subjected to consecutive stages of sorting process combining both deductive coding and inductive approaches framed by HL-NAV conceptualization and our two research questions.

Resulting overview of the representational framework conveyed by these TV media sources when addressing healthcare-related issues will be presented in this communication.

**Keywords:** Media, health communication, health literacy, HL-NAV in Europe, TV, Portugal, elderly population.

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