

It's time for healthcare professionals to engage with social media.

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Commentary on:

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Competing interests

Anna Marsh has received funding for an NIHR PCAF to explore midwives' use of social media.

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Implications for practice and research

- Social media is one of the fastest growing commercial determinants of health.
- Healthcare professionals need a better understanding of social media and its impact.

Context

Social media has rapidly become a key source of advice and support for women during childbirth. The growth of influencers, popular users credited with knowledge and expertise, can be seen in the numerous social posts, blogs, podcasts, and videos about pregnancy, birth and parenting. Social media influencers provide responsive and relatable content to their network of followers; but there are concerns about the potential to spread misinformation¹.

Methods

This systematic literature review² sought to identify whether following social media influencers had an impact on 'pregnant and new parents' experiences and decision-making. The search, conducted in January 2023, was informed by a survey to identify the search terms to use. Four databases were searched (CINAHL, EMBASE, Medline, and Web of Science); Google Scholar and reference lists revealed no additional papers. Full text papers were uploaded to a web-based app to facilitate review. The quality of papers was assessed using a mixed methods appraisal tool and a score assigned based on the percentage of quality assessment criteria that were met. Papers were read independently by each of the three reviewers and data extracted using a template. Thematic analysis was used to synthesise the data.

Findings

Of the 17 eligible papers, nine were qualitative, five quantitative and three mixed methods. There was considerable heterogeneity in terms of setting, population, intervention (influencer or blogger) and methods. All studies were conducted in high income countries in Europe and North America. The quality of studies was rated very highly with 15 of the 17 papers given a score of 80% or above. Four overarching themes were identified: (1) sharing information (2) support (3) identity and (4) monetisation.

Commentary

The social media industry is arguably one of the fastest growing commercial determinants of health³. Health professionals will be familiar with how formula milk companies have used aggressive marketing strategies to influence how mothers feed their infants⁴. Could the same be true of social media platforms and even influencers?

This review² highlighted the lack of a clear definition of a social media influencer. Influencers are broadly thought of as individuals who have developed 'micro-celebrity' status through social media⁵. In contrast, the relatable, peer-to-peer social media influencers in this review paints a picture of individuals with 'lived experience' who can be highly influential and supportive. However, the authors also raised concerns about misinformation, combative discourse, and the fact that many of the influencers were motivated by financial gain. The lack of any regulation or control of the accuracy of the content on social media is concerning. It could be argued that it is time for health professionals to be communicating via social media and that their absence in this space leaves it wide open to individuals with alternative backgrounds and/or motivations.

Despite evidence that women are increasingly using social media for information during pregnancy, midwives rarely engage with social media as part of their professional roles. Concerns relate to their

lack of knowledge and confidence, and fear of employer and professional body sanctions. A recent study found that the few midwife influencers that do exist are frequently selling a product or service⁶. There is a need to develop clear guidance and examples of models of care that demonstrate how social media within a professional setting can improve care for service users. One such example, 'Ask a Midwife', was recently highlighted in the *NHS Three year delivery plan for maternity and neonatal services*. However, for social media to be adopted more widely most midwives will require training and support. Communication continues to be highlighted as an area of concern in maternity services, but perhaps there may be a role for social media to help.

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