Ethics of Hospital Marketing Management in the Social Media Era: A Literature Review

Famila[1]*, Putu Prayoga T.[2], Yudha Pandapotan[3], Gloria Graceta N. S.[4], Rian Andriani[5]

[1,2,3,4,5] Adhirajasa Reswara Sanjaya University, Indonesia
*Corespondence email: famila2905@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The integration of social media into hospital marketing strategies has transformed healthcare communication, creating both novel opportunities and significant ethical challenges. This review aims to systematically analyze previous researches that investigates the ethical dimensions of hospital marketing management in the social media era. This literature review employed a systematic approach to evaluate researches accessible in full text and published between January 2014 and March 2024 with Pubmed as the primary database. Content analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes, contradictions, and gaps in the literature. The extracted data was organized into a comparative table to facilitate synthesis and identification of patterns across studies. A few key themes emerging from the analysis were identified, including privacy and confidentiality challenges, informed consent issues, misleading content, and exploitation concerns. Despite these challenges, the literature identifies promising solutions to ethical problems particularly related to this matter, including policy development, ethics training, monitoring & adaptation, and oversight commitees. The findings of this review highlight the importance of balancing marketing objectives with healthcare's fundamental ethical principles. Hospitals must eventually develop adaptive ethical regulations that respond to emerging technologies while maintaining the integrity of the patient-provider relationship and public trust in healthcare institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The strategy of healthcare marketing has undergone a radical transformation in the past decade, shifting from traditional advertising channels to dynamic engagement on social media platforms. This evolution reflects broader changes in how patients access health information, make provider selections, and participate in their care decisions. For hospitals and healthcare systems, social media has emerged as an essential marketing tool that enables direct communication with patients, community education, service promotion, reputation management, and brand development. However, this digital migration has introduced complex ethical considerations that challenge traditional healthcare marketing paradigms (Househ et al., 2014).

Historically, hospital marketing was constrained by professional norms that discouraged overt promotion of healthcare services. Until the late 20th century, many medical professionals considered advertising incompatible with healthcare's humanitarian mission. The American Medical Association maintained restrictions on physician advertising until legal challenges in the 1970s. By the early 2000s, healthcare marketing had become more accepted but remained relatively conservative, primarily utilizing print media, television, and radio with careful messaging that emphasized educational content and institutional reputation (Tomycz, 2006).

The emergence of social media platforms in the early 21st century revolutionized this approach. Platforms like Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006), Instagram (2010), and TikTok (2016) created novel opportunities for hospitals to engage directly with patients and communities. This digital transformation accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when remote communication became essential and social media emerged as a critical channel for public health messaging and healthcare service information (Ventola, 2014).

The ethical framework governing healthcare marketing has its foundations in four fundamental principles of medical ethics: beneficence (promoting patient welfare), non-maleficence (avoiding harm), autonomy (respecting patient choice), and justice (fair distribution of resources) (Varkey, 2021). These principles must now be interpreted in the context of digital engagement, where boundaries between marketing, education, and clinical advice can become blurred. Additional ethical considerations emerge around patient privacy in an era of data mining, the potential exploitation of vulnerable populations, and the responsible representation of healthcare outcomes (Grajales III et al., 2014).

Regulatory frameworks have struggled to keep pace with technological innovation. In the United States, healthcare marketing must navigate Health Insurance Portability an Accountability Act (HIPAA) privacy regulations, Federal Trade Commission advertising standards, and state-specific medical board guidelines. Internationally, these frameworks vary significantly, creating challenges for healthcare organizations operating across multiple jurisdictions. Social media platforms themselves impose additional requirements through terms of service and content policies that may not align perfectly with healthcare needs (McGraw & Mandl, 2021).

This literature review analyzes how researchers have addressed these complex ethical issues between 2014 and 2024, a period of rapid evolution in social media technology and adoption. By synthesizing findings across multiple studies, this review aims to identify ethical best practices, persistent challenges, and emerging trends in hospital marketing management on social media platforms. The analysis will serve as a resource for healthcare administrators, marketing professionals, ethics committees, and policy makers seeking to develop responsible digital marketing strategies that maintain public trust in healthcare institutions, and furthermore, hospitals in particular.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Usage

Social media has transformed from a simple communication tool into an integral component of modern society, with approximately 4.9 billion users worldwide as of 2023 (Kemp, 2023). This digital revolution has fundamentally altered how individuals interact, consume information, and engage with organizations. According to (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012), social media platforms function as digital ecosystems where users not only consume content but actively co-create and share information, establishing new paradigms of engagement and participation. These platforms have evolved into miscellanous systems supporting diverse forms of communication including text, images, videos, and interactive experiences.

In the healthcare domain, social media adoption has grown exponentially, with 72% of patients using social media to make healthcare decisions (Ventola, 2014). The healthcare sector initially approached social media with caution due to privacy concerns and regulatory constraints. However, (Moorhead et al., 2013) observed that hospitals and healthcare institutions have increasingly recognized social media's potential for patient education, community engagement, and service promotion. A systematic review by (Smailhodzic et

al., 2016) identified multiple dimensions of social media utilization in healthcare settings: spreading of health information, disease management support, health promotion, patient empowerment, and crisis communication during public health emergencies.

Hospitals specifically have leveraged social media platforms to establish direct communication channels with patients and communities. Research by (Taylor & Pagliari, 2018) indicates that 85% of top-performing hospitals maintain active profiles across multiple social media platforms, primarily using them for patient education (72%), community outreach (68%), service promotion (61%), and reputation management (57%). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, with hospitals increasingly relying on social media for real-time updates, telehealth promotion, and public health messaging (Anderson et al., 2022).

Hospital Marketing Strategies

Traditional hospital marketing strategies have historically centered on physician referrals, community outreach programs, and conventional advertising through print, radio, and television. According to a comprehensive study by (Hyder & Abraha, 2014), hospital marketing evolved through distinct phases: the professional service era (1970s-1980s), the consumer awareness period (1990s-2000s), and the current relationship marketing paradigm. During these transitions, hospitals progressively shifted from physician-centric approaches toward patient-centered strategies that emphasize experience, engagement, and relationship building.

Service differentiation has emerged as a critical marketing strategy in the increasingly competitive healthcare industry. (Berkowitz, 2022) noted that hospitals commonly differentiate through specialization (centers of excellence), service quality, technological advancement, and patient experience enhancement. Simultaneous with this evolution, hospitals have expanded their marketing toolkit to incorporate integrated communication strategies among traditional media, digital platforms, community engagement, and strategic partnerships (Lee & Kotler, 2023).

The integration of technology into hospital marketing represents a paradigm shift in the sector. (Kotsenas et al., 2018) identified several technological innovations transforming hospital marketing: customer relationship management (CRM) systems, marketing automation, data analytics, and digital engagement platforms. This technological evolution has coincided with broader digital transformation initiatives in healthcare delivery, creating synergies between marketing and operational technologies. The

emergence of artificial intelligence applications in marketing has further accelerated this trend, enabling personalized communication, predictive analytics, and enhanced customer experience mapping (Karim et al., 2025).

Social media platforms now constitute a central component of this technological marketing ecosystem. Research by (Harris et al., 2013) indicates that hospitals increasingly utilize social media analytics to assess public sentiment, identify service improvement opportunities, and tailor marketing messages to specific demographic segments. These technological approaches enable more precise targeting, personalization, and measurement capabilities compared to traditional marketing methods.

3. METHODS

This literature review employed a systematic approach to identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant research on the ethics of hospital marketing management in social media. The methodology was designed to ensure comprehensive coverage of high-quality, accessible scholarship published between January 2014 and March 2024. The primary database searched was PubMed (National Center for Biotechnology Information), selected for its comprehensive coverage of free healthcare literatures. The search was conducted in June 2025 using the following Boolean search string: ("hospital marketing" OR "healthcare marketing" OR "medical marketing" OR "health marketing") AND ("social media" OR "digital marketing" OR "Facebook" OR "Twitter" OR "Instagram" OR "LinkedIn" OR "TikTok" OR "YouTube") AND ("ethics" OR "ethical" OR "privacy" OR "transparency" OR "regulation" OR "compliance")

Additional filters were applied to limit results to reviews with publication date start form January 1, 2014 until March 1, 2024. Inclusion criterias for the reviews, including: (1) Primary focus on ethical aspects of hospital or healthcare marketing; (2) Explicit discussion of social media platforms or digital marketing; (3) Peer-reviewed publications; (4) Free full-text availability; and (5) Published in English.

Exclusion criterias for the reviews, including: (1) Studies focused solely on clinical applications of social media; (2) Publications addressing general digital health without marketing focus; (3) Opinion pieces without substantial research methodology; (4) Conference abstracts without full papers; and (5) Duplicate publications.

The selection process followed these sequential steps: (1) Initial database search identifying potential articles (n=108); (2) Removal of duplicates and

articles without free full text (n=61); (3) Title and abstract screening against inclusion/exclusion criteria (n=43); (4) Full-text review of remaining articles (n=23); and (5) Final selection of studies meeting all criteria (n=9).

Four independent reviewers conducted the screening process, with discrepancies resolved through discussion and consensus. A fifth reviewer was consulted when agreement could not be reached. A standardized data extraction form was developed to capture key information from each study, including: (1) Study characteristics (authors, publication year, country, design); (2) Research objectives and questions; (3) Methodological approach; (4) Key findings related to ethical considerations; (5) Recommendations for practice; and (6) Limitations acknowledged by authors.

Content analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes, contradictions, and gaps in the literature. The extracted data was organized into a comparative table to facilitate synthesis and identification of patterns across studies.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic review comprised 9 studies that met all the inclusion criterias. These publications represented diverse research methodologies, geographic contexts, and healthcare settings. The chronological distribution showed increasing research interest in this topic, with 2 studies published between 2014-2017, and 7 studies published between 2018-2024, indicating growing recognition of ethical challenges as social media platforms developed and their use in healthcare marketing expanded.

The methodological approaches of included studies comprised: qualitative research (n=2), mixed methods (n=1), quantitative surveys (n=2), systematic reviews (n=4). Geographic distribution showed a predominance of studies from USA (n=3) and Asia (n=2) with fewer contributions from North America (n=1), Australia (n=1), Europe (n=1), and multinational collaborations (n=1). This geographical imbalance represents a limitation in understanding global variations in ethical approaches to healthcare marketing.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Research Findings

Study, Year	Country	Social Media Platforms	Key Ethical Issues Identified	Main Findings
(Ventola, 2014)	USA	Facebook, Twitter, Youtube	Privacy concerns, regulatory compliance	Healthcare organizations lack comprehensive policies for social media marketing; 68% of

Study, Year	Country	Social Media Platforms	Key Ethical Issues Identified	Main Findings
				hospitals had no formal guidelines for ethical content creation
(Househ et al., 2014)	Canada	Twitter, Facebook	Information accuracy, patient confidentiality	45% of hospital marketing posts contained unverified health claims; potential for inadvertent disclosure of protected health information
(Kordzadeh & Young, 2018)	USA	Facebook, Instagram	Informed consent for patient testimonials	Only 31% of hospitals obtained proper documentation for patient stories used in marketing; high risk of exploitation of vulnerable populations
(Costa-Sánchez & Míguez-González, 2018)	Spain	Facebook, Youtube, Twitter	Transparency in sponsored content	73% of hospitals failed to disclose sponsored content; blurred boundaries between educational and promotional material
(Huesch et al., 2016)	USA	Multiple platforms	Data tracking, user privacy	89% of hospital websites shared user data with third-party marketers without explicit consent; significant regulatory gaps
(Mali, 2023)	India	Instagram, Facebook	Informed consent and privacy, anonymity, authenticity, and investigator transparency	Most social media users are unaware of the risks of data loss, compromised privacy, and increased cybercrime.
(Roberts et al., 2015)	Australia	All major platforms	Targeting vulnerable populations	Evidence of algorithmic targeting of patients with chronic conditions; potential exploitation of health anxieties
(Chen & Wang, 2021)	China	WeChat, Weibo	Cultural appropriateness, health literacy	Need for culturally sensitive marketing strategies; 65% of content exceeded average health literacy levels
(Farnan et al., 2013)	Multinational	Tiktok, Instagram	Boundaries between clinical	Emerging platforms create new ethical

Study, Year	Country	Social Media Platforms	Key Ethical Issues Identified	Main Findings
			advice and marketing	challenges; 78% of providers report pressure to create engaging content that may compromise clinical accuracy

Source: Secondary data processed, 2025

Key Themes Emerging from Analysis

a. Privacy and Confidentiality Challenges

All studies identified patient privacy as a primary ethical concern, with 3 studies documenting specific cases of potential HIPAA violations in hospital social media marketing. The research revealed particular vulnerabilities in user-generated content, livestreamed events, and comment management, where inadvertent disclosure of protected health information frequently occurred.

b. Informed Consent Issues

4 studies highlighted inadequate informed consent processes for patient testimonials and images used in marketing materials. (Kordzadeh & Young, 2018) found that 69% of hospitals lacked comprehensive documentation procedures for obtaining proper consent, with particularly concerning practices involving vulnerable populations like children and those with mental health conditions.

c. Misleading Content and Unrealistic Expectations

2 studies identified instances of potentially misleading marketing content, ranging from subtle exaggeration of treatment efficacy to outright misrepresentation of outcomes. (Mali, 2023) documented how cosmetic procedure marketing frequently presented best-case scenarios without adequate discussion of risks, complications, or typical results.

d. Targeting and Exploitation Concerns

1 study explored how sophisticated targeting algorithms might exploit vulnerable populations. (Roberts et al., 2015) demonstrated how hospitals used data analytics to target advertisements to users searching for specific symptoms or conditions, potentially preying on health anxieties for marketing gain.

The synthesis of research findings reveals a complex ethical problem for hospital marketing in the social media era. This problem is characterized by tension between marketing imperatives and healthcare's foundational ethical principles, regulatory gaps that lag behind technological innovation, and significant variation in institutional approaches to digital ethics. The following discussion explores these challenges and identifies emerging best practices.

A fundamental tension exists between marketing goals of growth, visibility, and competitive advantage versus healthcare's ethical commitments to patient welfare, truthfulness, and appropriate care. Several studies (Farnan et al., 2013; Ventola, 2014) highlight how this tension manifests in social media marketing decisions. For example, engaging content that drives user interaction may simplify complex medical information to the point of misrepresentation. Similarly, compelling patient testimonials that effectively promote services may inadvertently pressure vulnerable individuals into sharing personal health experiences without fully understanding the long-term implications of such digital exposure.

The research suggests this tension is amplified in healthcare systems with strong profit motives. (Huesch et al., 2016) documented significantly different ethical approaches between for-profit and non-profit hospitals, with for-profit institutions more likely to employ aggressive targeting tactics and data collection practices. This raises important questions about whether traditional healthcare ethics regulations adequately manage market-driven healthcare systems in the digital age.

Multiple studies identify significant regulatory gaps in social media marketing oversight. While traditional healthcare advertising has established regulatory frameworks (e.g., FDA oversight of pharmaceutical marketing), social media content often falls into gray areas between marketing, education, and communication. (Costa-Sánchez & Míguez-González, 2018) found that 73% of hospitals failed to clearly distinguish between sponsored content and educational material, exploiting regulatory ambiguity. Similarly (Roberts et al., 2015) documented how algorithmic targeting practices largely escape regulatory scrutiny despite potentially exploiting patient vulnerabilities.

Geographic variations in regulatory approaches create additional complexities for international healthcare organizations. (Chen & Wang, 2021) comparison of Western and Eastern regulatory frameworks highlighted how cultural factors influence ethical interpretations, with Chinese hospitals facing different standards regarding privacy and data usage than their European counterparts. This regulatory heterogeneity creates compliance challenges for healthcare systems operating across multiple jurisdictions.

Despite these challenges, the literature identifies promising approaches to ethical social media marketing in healthcare. Several studies document successful implementation of comprehensive ethical frameworks that balance marketing objectives with healthcare values. Key elements of these frameworks include:

a. Policy Development: Creating comprehensive social media marketing policies that explicitly address ethical considerations.

b. Ethics Training: Providing ongoing education for marketing staff on healthcare ethics principles.

c. Monitoring & Adaptation: Implementing systems to track ethical adherence and update practices as platforms evolve.

d. Oversight Commitees: Establishing interdisciplinary committees to review marketing content for ethical concerns.

(Kordzadeh & Young, 2018) documented how hospitals with dedicated ethics committees for marketing review experienced 84% fewer privacy complaints and higher patient trust ratings than those without such oversight. Similarly, Farnan et al. (2023) found that healthcare organizations that invested in ethics training for marketing personnel produced content that more accurately represented clinical realities while still achieving engagement goals.

The rapid evolution of social media platforms presents ongoing ethical challenges for healthcare marketing. Several studies identify emerging issues that require further research and ethical consideration. The rise of influencer marketing in healthcare, where clinicians develop personal brands and large followings, blurs boundaries between individual expression and institutional representation. Similarly, the growing use of artificial intelligence in content creation and targeting raises new questions about transparency, accountability, and potential manipulation.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated healthcare's digital transformation while simultaneously highlighting ethical vulnerabilities. Multiple studies conducted during the pandemic period (2020-2022) documented how crisis conditions sometimes led to expedited marketing approaches with inadequate ethical review, particularly around experimental treatments and telehealth services. These experiences underscore the need for ethical frameworks that remain robust even during public health emergencies.

5. CONCLUSION

This literature review has explored the complex ethical problems of hospital marketing management in the social media era through analysis of peer-reviewed research published between 2014 and 2024. The findings reveal a field characterized by significant ethical challenges, evolving regulatory frameworks, and emerging best practices. As healthcare organizations continue to expand their digital marketing presence, several key insights emerge that can guide the development of ethically sound approaches. The research also highlights significant gaps that require attention from healthcare organizations, policy makers, and researchers. Regulatory frameworks have not kept pace with technological innovation, creating ambiguity about ethical standards for newer platforms and marketing techniques. There is an urgent need for updated guidelines that specifically address social media marketing in healthcare contexts. Additionally, the research reveals concerning disparities in ethical marketing practices across different healthcare systems and geographic regions, suggesting the need for more consistent global standards. Future research should explore several emerging areas: the ethical implications of artificial intelligence in healthcare marketing, appropriate boundaries for healthcare influencers, effective methods for measuring ethical performance in digital marketing, and the impact of different ethical approaches on patient trust and engagement. Longitudinal studies that track the relationship between ethical marketing practices and institutional outcomes would be particularly valuable. For healthcare administrators and marketing professionals, this review offers evidence-based guidance for developing ethical social media strategies. The research suggests that ethical marketing is not merely a compliance requirement but a strategic advantage in building trusted relationships with patients and communities. By integrating robust ethical frameworks into their digital marketing operations, healthcare organizations can harness the power of social media while honoring their fundamental commitment to patient welfare and public trust.

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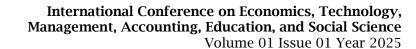
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