

# The Impact of Influencer Physicians Perceived Source Credibility by Consumers on Healthcare Institution Choice\*

## Sosyal Medyada Yer Alan Hekimlerin Algılanan Kaynak Güvenirliğinin Tüketicilerin Sağlık Kurumu Seçimindeki Etkisi



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### Abstract

Advancing information technologies have extended medical expertise beyond health institutions to social media, making it more accessible. Since the pandemic, many specialist physicians have gained visibility on these platforms, influencing how people learn about health. This study explores the impact of doctors' social media presence on individuals' choice of healthcare providers, focusing on perceived source credibility. The research targets social media users in Türkiye over 18. This quantitative study was conducted based on the general survey model, using the online survey method, and analyzed based on 482 valid responses. Findings reveal that the professional stance of healthcare institutions and physicians on social media directly influences healthcare preferences. However, negative effects in attractiveness dimensions suggest that psychological and sociological factors in health decisions require further investigation. The study highlights the need for a strategic approach to social media use in the health sector.

**Keywords:** Source Credibility, Social Media, Service Selection, Communication in Health, Physicians.

### Öz

Gelişen bilişim teknolojileri sağlık alanındaki uzmanlıkları sağlık kurumlarının dört duvarı arasından alıp, her daim ulaşılabilir olan sosyal medya platformlarına taşımıştır. Bu kapsamda özellikle Covid-19 pandemisi sonrası birçok uzman hekim sosyal medya platformlarında uzmanlık alanlarıyla ilgili daha görünür olmuştur. Sosyal medyanın sağlık sektöründeki çok boyutlu önemi ve sağlıklı yaşam ve bilinçlenme konusundaki etkisinden dolayı tüketicilerin hastane seçimlerinde sosyal medyada yer alan hekimlerin etkisinin araştırılması çalışmanın çıkış noktasıdır. Bu nedenle bu araştırmanın temel amacı, tüketicilerin sosyal medyada takip ettikleri hekimlere yönelik algıladıkları kaynak güvenliğinin sağlık hizmeti alacakları sağlık kurumu seçimi üzerindeki etkisinin belirlenmesidir. Araştırmanın evrenini Türkiye’de ikamet eden 18 yaş üzeri tüketiciler oluşturmaktadır. Bu çalışma, genel tarama modeline dayalı olarak gerçekleştirilmiş, online anket yöntemi kullanılmış ve 482 geçerli yanıt üzerinden analiz edilmiştir. Araştırma, demografik değişkenlerin algıları farklılaştırdığını ortaya koymuştur. Sonuçlar, sağlık kurumları ve hekimlerin sosyal medyadaki profesyonel duruşlarının, tüketicilerin sağlık hizmeti tercihlerini doğrudan etkilediğini göstermektedir. Ancak çekicilik gibi bazı boyutlardaki olumsuz etkiler, bireylerin sağlık kararlarında psikolojik ve sosyolojik faktörlerin daha fazla incelenmesi gerektiğini işaret etmektedir. Araştırma, sosyal medyanın sağlık sektöründe stratejik bir şekilde kullanılmasının gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kaynak Güvenirliği, Sosyal Medya, Hizmet Seçimi, Sağlıkta İletişim, Hekimler.

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## Introduction

Advances in technology and science affect the health sector as in many other sectors. This impact necessitates the restructuring of both information sharing methods and the forms of communication between healthcare professionals and patients (Işık et al., 2016, p. 100). Patients (consumers) are considered weak against the power of the expert due to the information asymmetry in the field of health. When many goods and services are considered, consumers may have an idea about both the suitability and quality of the product/service to be purchased. However, when it comes to health, consumers do not have the competence to diagnose themselves and make decisions about treatment, so they cannot make an opinion about the service they will purchase (Tengilimoğlu & Köksal, 2013, p. 66). The goal of health and quality of life, which is also included in the sustainable development goals that Türkiye has included in its plans (Türkiye’de Birleşmiş Milletler, n.d.), is formed as a result of individuals becoming aware of this issue and accessing the necessary information. In addition, all developments in technology and science have enabled individuals to become more conscious about health services and to express preferences in the health services market (Işık et al., 2016).

Although the concept of marketing in the health sector is not considered warmly, these developments have recently brought the concept of health marketing to the agenda. Health marketing strategies to be implemented by healthcare enterprises increase the competitiveness of the enterprise while providing benefits such as understanding patient expectations and needs, providing better quality service to patients (Şantaş et al., 2016, p. 18), and creating a reliable image in society (Salman & Uydaci, 2011). When the factors affecting hospital choice within the scope of health marketing are examined, it is seen that basically four dimensions stand out: the image of the health institution, technological/physical facilities and cleanliness of the health institution, the attitude of the employees of the health institution, and the quality of the service provided in the health institution (Tengilimoğlu, 2001). A review study conducted by Hoşgör and Hoşgör (2019) revealed that the most prominent criteria for choosing a hospital in Türkiye are the distance/proximity of the hospital, recommendation of the close environment, perceived reasonable price, lack of alternatives, health insurance, awareness/image of the hospital, and service quality/quality certificate. The image of an institution is based on both its practices as an institution and the image of its staff.

In addition to all these, one of the most important factors for the success of any marketing activity in the digital environment is to be perceived as reliable. Source trustworthiness perceived by consumers indirectly affects both electronic word-of-mouth communication (e-WOM) and consumers’ purchase intention through the attitude towards the content created by users on social media (SM) platforms (Muda & Hamzah, 2021, p. 451) a general understanding of the source credibility of voluntary user-generated content (UGC). Consumers’ judgments of e-WOM messages are driven by social capital, information richness, and interaction (Levy & Gvili, 2015). When it comes to health and physicians, it is obvious that the importance of the trust factor is even more significant.

Tengilimoğlu vd. (2015), in their study investigating the impact of SM on hospital and physician selection, revealed that 66.9% of individuals follow health-related developments through SM, 45.5% seek information from SM before purchasing health services, and 52.4% use SM for physician selection. Therefore, the benefits of SM in terms of being healthy, living a healthy life, and the right of everyone to access quality health services (Türkiye’de Birleşmiş Milletler, n.d.) are undeniable. Due to the multidimensional

importance of SM in the health sector and its impact on healthy living and awareness raising, the starting point of the study is to investigate the impact of physicians (phenomenon physicians) on SM on consumers' hospital choices.

For this reason, in this research, the issue of hospital selection is addressed through the SM visibility of physicians working in health institutions. Accordingly, the main purpose of this study is to determine the effect of the source credibility that consumers perceive about the physicians they follow on SM on the choice of the health institution where they will receive health services. It is thought that the data obtained in the study will guide both physicians and healthcare organizations in the field of health marketing, which has only recently begun to be accepted.

## **1. Conceptual Framework**

### **1.1. The Role of Social Media in Health Services**

Health occupies a central position among the sustainable development goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations. SDG-3 aims to ensure that all individuals lead healthy lives and promote well-being at all ages. In line with this goal, facilitating access to health services, increasing access to information, and improving the quality of health services are among the priority steps (Türkiye'de Birleşmiş Milletler, n.d.). Developing digital technology and SM platforms have become an important tool in achieving these goals.

Sustainability in health is possible by supporting individuals to make informed health choices by providing access to accurate information. The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the importance of digital tools in healthcare and transformed the way physicians use SM. In other words, physicians have become SM influencers. Physicians naturally have high credibility due to their professional training and expertise. This credibility increases even more when they share medical information on SM, making them influential figures in the digital space (Zengin, 2023). During and after the pandemic period, SM further strengthened physicians' perception of credibility and became an effective tool in their healthcare choices.

Especially after the pandemic, SM platforms have assumed a critical role in delivering health-related information to large masses quickly and effectively. While sharing information on SM by specialist physicians' increases individuals' health awareness, it stands out as an important factor in their choice of hospitals and physicians. The sustainability of health services is directly related not only to the provision of quality care but also to the development of individuals' capacity to access accurate information and make informed decisions. In this context, the study of McCarroll et al. (2014) reveals that SM plays an important role in obtaining health-related information, especially for young women.

Promotion is a vital element of marketing management in service marketing and is often referred to as a sustainable process. In other words, it turns individuals who were not previously interested in the product or business into individuals who are interested and try it out, thus enabling the consumer to buy it. For a successful promotion campaign, the planned promotion mix tools should be integrated with a good strategy. At this point, in health services, which have a complex structure and where the consumer is in a weak position unlike other service sectors, the use of SM is important in terms of promoting services, allowing experts to express themselves, and enabling individuals to access health-related information more easily. According to Mahadewi et al. (2019), using SM

for promotion is easy, less costly, and can be used at any time. It also has a high impact on attracting customers for hospitals.

## 1.2. Source Credibility (SC) and Physicians' Use of Social Media

In marketing communication, the source refers to the person or organization to whom the message is delivered. Source credibility is a critical factor affecting consumer behavior in marketing communication (Yavuz & Özüpek, 2025) because the credibility of the source significantly affects the way consumers perceive the message and how they react to it. The level of expertise of the source in the field of information and its perceived credibility by the target audience affects consumers' trust in and intention to adopt information on digital platforms through e-WOM (Ismagilova et al., 2020). The level of expertise of the source plays an important role in the persuasion process and often has more impact than non-expert sources (Wilson & Sherrell, 1993). The source's tendency to tell the truth and the potential to present the truth to the target audience constitute the basic dimensions of credibility. The presentation of the message is also part of source credibility and shapes consumer perception (Eisend, 2006).

The concept and dimensions of source credibility in marketing have long been discussed in the literature due to its importance. Since the late 1960s, many studies have been conducted on how source credibility should be determined. The concept has been examined from various perspectives such as the character of the source, source credibility, mass communication credibility, and celebrity/introducer credibility. In general, the view that source credibility should be considered in 2 to 4 dimensions has emerged widely.

In the context of healthcare services, physicians stand out as an important source of information due to their expertise. The patient-physician relationship, which is traditionally based on face-to-face communication, has transformed in recent years with the acceleration of digitalization and the fear of exposure to disease that emerged in individuals after the pandemic. This transformation has paved the way for physicians to become more active and visible on SM, and as a result, the perceived source credibility of physicians has become an important area of discussion. In the literature, source credibility is generally examined through four dimensions (Toplan, 2023):

*Expertise (EXP):* The level of expertise of the source in the field of information is an important factor for the target audience to accept the message (Fernandes Crespo & Tille, 2024). While sharing medical information by physicians strengthens the perception of expertise, sharing information without scientific basis and unverified information may damage the perception of expertise formed by consumers. For example, if a physician who specializes in women's health and diseases shares short videos about their surgeries, if a cardiologist who gives recommendations on heart health takes care to refer to reliable sources while making recommendations about their field, or if a physical therapist shares training videos for healthy living, the likelihood of the relevant physician being perceived as an expert may increase.

*Trustworthiness (TW):* The physician's potential to tell the truth and the ability to be impartial in presenting information affect the perceived trustworthiness of messages shared on SM (Hovland et al., 1953). While patients generally trust the information provided by physicians regarding health practices more, posts that contain advertisements or give the impression of commercial interest may undermine this trust. For example, physicians who make general health recommendations without promoting a specific



product or brand, or who transparently include patient comments may increase their credibility.

*Attractiveness(ATT):* The physical or personal attractiveness of the source can increase the target audience's interest in the message and the impact of the message (Li & Yin, 2018). Physicians presenting a professional yet sincere image on SM can support the attractiveness dimension. For example, physicians who share aesthetically edited content on SM or show their commitment to their profession with short personal stories may attract more attention from the target audience.

*Similarity(SIM):* The commonalities, perspectives, and values that the target audience perceives with the source can affect message adoption (Dewanthi, 2024). Content that shows that physicians can empathize with their patients on SM can contribute to strengthening this dimension. For example, offering suggestions in plain language to a target audience with skin problems or participating in social awareness campaigns may allow physicians to establish a closer bond with their audience.

The fact that SM is an integral part of daily life has brought the need to take part in SM platforms both individually and institutionally. Especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of physicians taking part in SM and informing people about their field of expertise has increased considerably. The health information and guidance provided by these physicians started to affect consumers (flexy\_breadcrumb, 2021). While the number of followers of many physicians in Türkiye, especially the physicians who took part in the pandemic science committee, increased, this situation enabled health institutions to establish two-way communication with consumers within the scope of promotion activities and to carry out marketing communication activities more easily through SM (Dondurucu & Uran, 2022, p. 4).

The active presence of physicians on SM offers both opportunities and risks in the patient-health professional relationship. In addition to source credibility, another crucial factor that influences consumers' interpretation of messages shared via social media is digital literacy. The ability to access, evaluate, and interpret digital content effectively (van Kessel et al., 2022), especially on platforms where health-related information is shared by influencers, is closely tied to the user's digital literacy level. In today's digital landscape—where artificial intelligence tools, sponsored content, and algorithmic visibility increasingly shape social media—both physicians and patients need a baseline level of digital literacy to understand, assess, and reflect source credibility properly. Therefore, when discussing source credibility in the context of social media, integrating the concept of digital literacy is essential for a comprehensive evaluation of trust and influence in digital health communication. Physicians sharing accurate and scientific information can increase individuals' health literacy and support patients' adherence to treatment (Chretien & Kind, 2013). This can be particularly beneficial for individuals who have difficulty accessing health services (Forgie et al., 2021). Empathic messages and community-building posts can address the emotional needs of patients. It can also make it easier to get support by interacting with other individuals experiencing similar health problems (Nikiphorou & Berenbaum, 2018). SM can make patients feel closer to the physician by facilitating access to the physician (Smailhodzic et al., 2016).

In addition to these opportunities, physicians sharing inappropriate, commercial, political, or racist content on SM, sharing private information about their patients, making negative comments about their patients, or providing false information may reduce

the credibility of the source by the patient (Farnan, 2013; Fatollahi et al., 2020). The risk of physicians sharing patients' information and images on SM without permission (Nikiphorou & Berenbaum, 2018) and also the excessive sharing of their personal lives rather than their professional lives (Sun et al., 2024) may negatively affect the perception of professionalism. Excessive use of SM may lead to information pollution, making it difficult for patients to make decisions.

### 1.3. The Impact of Social Media on Health Institution Selection

Technological advances and increasing competition have forced healthcare organizations to innovate to promote their services through SM (Dzakiyya & Hijrah Hati, 2024). For example, Mahadewi et al. (2019, p. 409)'s study showed that advertisements using SM, information shared about doctors, and price-related promotions influenced the decision to choose a hospital. Similarly, another study (Richter & Kazley, 2020) revealed that healthcare organizations that actively use SM such as Facebook have higher satisfaction rates and are more willing to recommend their services by their followers. However, the presence of the organization on SM alone does not provide these factors. Especially healthcare organizations with higher service complexity are expected to be active and interactive on SM platforms (Lee et al., 2020). The study conducted by Dzakiyya and Hijrah Hati (2024) shows that the marketing activities of healthcare organizations on SM affect brand image, brand awareness, and perceived trust, while the intention to receive services from the hospital is not affected. However, it emphasizes that if these variables are used together, the intention to receive service will also be positively affected.

The content presented by influencers on SM can directly influence consumers' shopping choices (Nasiketha et al., 2024). SM content such as online reviews and expert opinions can positively influence consumers' shopping behavior (Janitrafia & Ruswanti, 2024). In particular, social interaction factors (similarity, familiarity, expertise) can increase consumers' shopping intentions (Fu et al., 2020). In this case, perceived high source credibility may increase trust in the health institution to which a physician is affiliated and cause consumers to make their preferences in favor of that institution. In particular, physicians with a strong perception of expertise and trustworthiness can create a positive reputation on SM and increase the brand value of healthcare institutions.

The professional stance and communication of physicians on SM can directly affect individuals' healthcare decisions. The posts of physicians who display a positive image and the positive comments under these posts may play an important role in patients' preference for the relevant physician and thus the health institution where the physician works (Kanouse et al., 2016). Hu and Shyam Sundar (2010) state that information from sources considered to be experts increases the perception of trustworthiness and increases the likelihood of individuals to make informed decisions. Moore et al. (2020)2014, to examine factors that explain trust in sources reporting healthcare quality provided by physicians. Using factor analysis, 3 overarching information sources were identified: (1) found that individuals trust information sources similar to their social and economic status more. These findings emphasize the effect of highlighting the professional identities of physicians on SM on healthcare preferences. In a study conducted by Tengilimoğlu et al. (2017), it was determined that 41.9% of the participants used SM to choose a doctor, 34.1% used SM to choose a dentist, and 41.7% used SM to choose a hospital. This shows that physicians who create a strong source credibility on SM are a critical factor in choosing a healthcare institution. However, unethical posts and false information can damage the reputation of healthcare institutions and lead to patient

loss. Therefore, physicians' use of SM should be managed strategically and consciously.

Accordingly, the main purpose of this study is to determine the effect of the source credibility that consumers perceive about the physicians they follow on SM on the choice of the health institution where they will receive health services. For this purpose, the following hypotheses were established:

- **H<sub>1</sub>:** Perceived source credibility of physician(s) followed on SM differs in terms of demographic characteristics of consumers.
- **H<sub>2</sub>:** The perceived expertise of the physician(s) followed on SM affects the choice of health institution to receive health services.
- **H<sub>3</sub>:** The perceived trustworthiness dimension of the physician(s) followed on SM affects the choice of health institution to receive health services.
- **H<sub>4</sub>:** The perceived attractiveness dimension of the physician(s) followed on SM affects the choice of health institution to receive health services.
- **H<sub>5</sub>:** The perceived similarity dimension of the physician(s) followed on SM affects the choice of health institution to receive health services.

## 2. Data and Methodology

This research is a quantitative study based on the general survey model. The population of the research consists of consumers who use SM, follow at least one physician on SM platforms, reside in Türkiye, and are 18 years of age or older. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) (2023), 95.5% of households in Türkiye have internet access and 87.1% of individuals between the ages of 16-74 use the internet. According to the report of We Are Social (2023), 73.1% of Türkiye's population (62.55 million) uses SM. 47.1% of individuals between the ages of 16-64 have searched the internet for information about various products and products. 22.6% of these users stated that they use SM to follow celebrities or influencers. Considering the size of the population, the research was conducted on a sample basis due to time constraints and possible resource constraints. The formula suggested by Yamane (2001) was used to calculate the sample size in this study. According to the formula, the sample size was calculated as at least 385 with  $\pm 5\%$  sampling error at 95% confidence interval.

An online questionnaire consisting of three sections was used as a data collection tool. The first part of the data collection tool includes questions to define demographic characteristics. The second part includes the research adaptation of the source credibility scale based on the research of Munnuka et al. (2016) and translated into Turkish by Toplan (2023) in order to measure consumers' perceived source credibility attitudes towards the physician(s) they follow. The third section includes the adaptation of the purchase intention (PI) scale based on the research of Jalilvand et al. (2012) and Rodgers (2003) and translated into Turkish by Karadağ and Ünal (2022) in order to measure consumers' hospital choice intention.

The field study was conducted through Google Forms between 09.05.2024-25.07.2024. After the fieldwork, 502 questionnaires were obtained. After eliminating the unsuitable forms, 482 questionnaires were included in the analysis. SPSS 26.0 and Microsoft Excel 2016 programs were used for data analysis.

### Ethics Committee Permission

Within the framework of the decision taken during the meeting by Hitit University Non-Interventional Research Ethics Committee dated 30/04/2024 and numbered 2024/11; the study does not contain any ethical issues.

### 3. Findings

64.3% of the participants were male and 35.7% were female. 35.7% of the participants are between the ages of 31-47, 32.6% are between the ages of 18-30, 23.2% are between the ages of 48-59, and 8.5% are aged 60 and over. 29.7% of the participants were high school graduates, 23.9% were associate degree graduates, 14.5% were secondary school graduates, 11.4% were undergraduate graduates, 11.2% were postgraduate graduates and 9.3% were primary school graduates. 30.5% of the participants were private sector employees, 25.1% were public sector employees, 19.5% were students, 12.9% were unemployed and 12.0% were retired. 36.3% of the participants stated that their income was less than their expenses, 34.9% stated that they had an income-expenditure balance, and 28.8% stated that their income was more than their expenses. While 36.3% of the participants had a disease that required regular follow-up, 63.7% stated that they did not have such a disease. In addition, 39.4% of the participants stated that they had previously received health services from a physician they followed on SM.

**Table 2.** Source Credibility in Terms of Demographic Variables

Variable		n	EXP ( $\bar{X}$ , p)	TW ( $\bar{X}$ , p)	ATT ( $\bar{X}$ , p)	SIM ( $\bar{X}$ , p)	SC ( $\bar{X}$ , p)
Gender	Female	172	3.67, 0.198	3.67, 0.000	2.58, 0.000	2.47, 0.000	3.14, 0.103
	Male	310	3.53	3.34	3.10	3.10	3.28
Chronic Disease	Yes	175	3.40, 0.011	3.34, 0.120	3.06, 0.045	3.03, 0.036	3.22, 0.866
	No	307	3.68	3.52	2.83	2.79	3.23
Age	18-30	41	3.30, 0.393	3.34, 0.820	3.18, 0.000	3.10, 0.000	3.24, 0.010
	31-47	112	3.65	3.53	3.32	3.34	3.46
	48-59	172	3.61	3.43	2.85	2.80	3.20
	60+	157	3.57	3.47	2.62	2.58	3.10
Education	Primary School	45	2.87, 0.000	3.11, 0.000	2.87, 0.001	3.13, 0.030	2.99, 0.002
	Middle School	70	3.55	3.33	3.44	3.12	3.38
	High School	143	3.64	3.51	2.87	2.87	3.25
	Associate Degree	115	3.53	3.30	2.68	2.64	3.07
	Bachelor's Degree	55	3.68	3.47	2.76	2.69	3.18
	Postgraduate Degree	54	4.07	4.10	3.00	3.04	3.59
Income	Income Less Than Expenses	175	3.33, 0.001	3.18, 0.000	3.02, 0.293	2.98, 0.219	3.14, 0.111
	Income Equal to Expenses	168	3.66	3.55	2.83	2.76	3.23
	Income Greater Than Expenses	139	3.80	3.71	2.88	2.88	3.35



Variable		n	EXP ( $\bar{X}$ , p)	TW ( $\bar{X}$ , p)	ATT ( $\bar{X}$ , p)	SIM ( $\bar{X}$ , p)	SC ( $\bar{X}$ , p)
Employment Status	Public Sector Employee	121	3.35, 0.006	3.72, 0.077	3.59, 0.004	3.09, 0.142	2.91, 0.007
	Private Sector Employee	147	3.27	3.67	3.50	2.90	2.94
	Retired	58	3.34	3.46	3.53	3.22	3.12
	Student	94	3.15	3.63	3.44	2.74	2.65
	Unemployed	62	2.89	3.12	3.07	2.56	2.78

Table 2 shows the results of the independent variables t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) conducted to examine the differentiation of the source credibility of physicians followed on SM in terms of demographic characteristics of consumers. Scheffe and Tamhane tests were used to determine between which groups there were differences in the variables that were found to have statistically significant differences. Scheffe test (Scheffe, 1959) was used when the variances were homogeneous and the number of observations of the compared groups were not equal, and Tamhane test (Hochberg & Tamhane, 1987) was used when the observation values of the compared groups were not equal and the variances were not homogeneous..

According to the results in the table, the gender variable shows a statistically significant difference in the dimensions of trustworthiness ( $t=2.953$ ), attractiveness ( $t=-5.170$ ) and similarity ( $t=-6.039$ ). While women differ from men in the trustworthiness dimension, men have a different tendency than women in the attractiveness and similarity dimensions. The variable of having a disease that requires regular follow-up shows a statistically significant difference in the dimensions of expertise ( $t=-2.545$ ), attractiveness ( $t=2.017$ ) and similarity ( $t=2.106$ ). Consumers who do not have a disease that requires regular follow-up differ from the others in the expertise dimension, and consumers who have a disease that requires regular follow-up differ from the others in the attractiveness and similarity dimensions.

The age variable shows a statistically significant difference in the dimensions of attractiveness ( $t=9.643$ ) and similarity ( $t=9.732$ ), as well as in overall source credibility ( $t=4.063$ ). Consumers aged 31-47 differ from older age groups in terms of attractiveness and similarity, while they differ from consumers aged 60 and above in terms of source credibility. Consumers in the 18-30 age group also differ from those aged 60 and above in the attractiveness dimension. The education level variable shows a statistically significant difference across all dimensions: expertise ( $t=6.157$ ), trustworthiness ( $t=4.640$ ), attractiveness ( $t=4.389$ ), and similarity ( $t=2.501$ ), as well as in overall source credibility ( $t=3.775$ ).

In the expertise dimension, primary school graduates differ from consumers with all other education levels except middle school graduates. In the trustworthiness dimension, consumers with a postgraduate degree differ from those with all other education levels except primary school graduates. In the attractiveness dimension, middle school graduates differ from high school, associate degree, and bachelor's degree graduates. In the similarity dimension, associate degree graduates differ from primary school, middle school, and postgraduate graduates, while bachelor's degree graduates differ from middle school graduates.

In terms of overall source credibility, primary school and associate degree graduates differ from postgraduate graduates. The income variable shows a statistically significant difference in the dimensions of expertise ( $t=7.670$ ) and trustworthiness ( $t=8.563$ ). In both dimensions, consumers whose income is lower than their expenses differ from those whose income is equal to or greater than their expenses. The employment status variable shows a statistically significant difference in the dimensions of expertise ( $t=3.618$ ) and attractiveness ( $t=3.882$ ), as well as in overall source credibility ( $t=3.551$ ). In the expertise dimension, public and private sector employees differ from the unemployed. In the attractiveness dimension, public sector employees and students differ from the unemployed. In terms of overall source credibility, public sector employees differ from the unemployed.

When demographic variables are examined in detail on the basis of general and sub-dimensions, it is determined that source credibility differs in terms of demographic variables. In this context, hypothesis  $H_1$  is supported. However, the fact that source credibility differs in terms of variables such as gender, having a disease requiring regular follow-up and income status in terms of sub-dimensions, but does not differ holistically shows that this issue should be examined in more depth.

**Table 3.** Correlations

	PI	EXP	TW	ATT	SIM
PI	1.000	0.512	0.517	0.193	0.310
EXP	0.512	1.000	0.658	0.356	0.361
TW	0.517	0.658	1.000	0.400	0.339
ATT	0.193	0.356	0.4	1.000	0.483
SIM	0.310	0.361	0.339	0.483	1.000

Tables 3, and 4 contain the results of the regression analysis conducted to examine the effects of perceived expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity dimensions in the context of source credibility of the physician(s) followed on SM on the choice of health institution to receive health services.

**Table 4.** Regression Analysis Results

Variable	B		Std. Error	$\beta$	t	p
Constant	1.275		0.158	-	8.058	0.000
EXP	0.280		0.050	0.285	5.642	0.001
TW	0.301		0.048	0.322	6.320	0.001
ATT	-0.108		0.043	-0.110	-2.477	0.014
SIM	0.143		0.041	0.151	3.445	0.001
Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Std. Error of Estimate	F	p
Enter Model	0.581	0.338	0.332	0.90952	60.889	0.000

a. Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention

The magnitude and direction of the effect of the sub-dimensions of source credibility on purchase intention were evaluated with the  $\beta$  coefficient. The  $\beta$  coefficient indicates the magnitude of the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable, and as the magnitude of the coefficient increases, the magnitude of this effect increases. Moreover, the sign of the  $\beta$  coefficient (positive or negative) indicates the direction of the relationship between the variables: A positive coefficient means that as the independent

variable increases, the dependent variable increases; a negative coefficient means that as the independent variable increases, the dependent variable decreases (Field, 2017).

According to the results of the analysis, expertise ( $\beta = 0.285, p < 0.001$ ), trustworthiness ( $\beta = 0.322, p < 0.001$ ), and similarity ( $\beta = 0.151, p = 0.001$ ) dimensions of source credibility have a positive and significant effect on purchase intention. In the attractiveness dimension, a significant, but contrary to expectations, negative effect was found ( $\beta = -0.110, p = 0.014$ ). In other words, as the expertise, trustworthiness, and similarity that consumers perceive about the physicians they follow on SM increases, the intention to purchase healthcare services from the healthcare institution where that physician is located also increases. However, when the perception of attractiveness towards the physician they follow increases, the intention to purchase healthcare services from the healthcare institution where that physician is located decreases.

According to the results of the enter model regression analysis, the model was found to be significant, and it was determined that the sub-dimensions of source credibility explained 33.8% of the purchase intention as a whole ( $R^2 = 0.338, F = 60.889, p < 0.001$ ). These results show that hypotheses  $H_2$ ,  $H_3$ ,  $H_4$ , and  $H_5$  are supported. However, both the rate at which source credibility explains purchase intention and the negative effect detected in the attractiveness dimension indicate that other variables should be examined to explain consumers' tendency to choose the health institution where they will receive health services. In particular, psychological variables such as personality perception and self-confidence level of the individual may be important.

## Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed that individuals' perceptions of source credibility of the physicians they follow on SM differ according to demographic variables such as age, gender, educational level, and income status. It was observed that women attach more importance to the credibility of physicians, while men are more sensitive to perceptions of similarity and attractiveness. According to Gupta and Jordan (2024)), the gender of the physician followed on SM also changes consumer perception of physician sincerity. While female physicians on SM are evaluated with more positive emotions, male physicians who share personal content may be perceived as less professional (Clyde et al., 2014).

It was found that younger individuals trusted physicians they felt similar to themselves more, whereas older individuals valued the general perception of trustworthiness more. These differences may be associated with the more frequent and confident use of SM by younger individuals and the more cautious approach by older individuals (Marsh et al., 2021) which are businesses through which one or more physicians treat patients, have likely not yet taken full advantage of the reach of social media. This study analyzed data collected using an anonymous survey to assess the potential utilization of large, established social media platforms in health care. The survey collected data from a diverse population of health care professional students, faculty, and physicians affiliated with the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC. Frequency of use, on the other hand, means the differentiation of the level of sensitivity, awareness, and interaction of physicians on SM towards online media behaviors (Klee et al., 2015).

These findings show that demographic factors play a strong role in perceived source credibility in communication via SM and indicate that health marketing should be customized according to the target audience. Physicians' perceived expertise and

credibility, in particular, stand out as factors that positively affect consumers' health institution preferences. Hu and Shyam Sundar (2010) also state that information from sources considered as experts, such as physicians, increases the perception of trustworthiness and the likelihood of individuals making informed choices.

These results, which reveal that consumers attach importance to acting in an informed manner when making health-related decisions, emphasize that the perception of trustworthiness plays a decisive role in the choice of health services. In addition, it has been observed that individuals trust physicians they feel close to more, which affects their decision processes. A study by Moore et al. (2020)2014, to examine factors that explain trust in sources reporting healthcare quality provided by physicians. Using factor analysis, 3 overarching information sources were identified: (1 emphasizes that individual and contextual characteristics of consumers are important factors in trusting information sources regardless of health status. Therefore, consumers' trust in sources similar to their social and economic status differs.

Many studies in the literature show that the perceived attractiveness of influencers makes a significant difference in increasing their influence on their followers and that this effect positively affects consumers' purchase intention (Weismueller et al., 2020; Boonchutima & Sankosik, 2022; Martiningsih & Setyawan, 2022; Ao et al., 2023; Viona Daisy & Lily Purwianti, 2023; Yudha, 2023). However, contrary to expectations, a negative effect was found in the perceived attractiveness dimension of physicians. This can be interpreted as individuals attaching more importance to professional qualifications rather than physical appearance when choosing a physician. In this context, the professional stance and communication of physicians on SM have the potential to directly affect individuals' healthcare decisions. Additionally, positive comments under the posts of physicians who portray a positive image on SM may directly affect patients' choice of service from the relevant physician (Kanouse et al., 2016) and thus from the health institution where the physician works. Therefore, comments made about physicians on online platforms play an important role in patients' decision-making processes.

In the study, only the impact of SM-based perceptions on individuals' healthcare preferences was focused on, and other factors were excluded. Therefore, the results should be evaluated in a broader context that affects healthcare preferences. Nevertheless, the results obtained reveal that physicians who will take part in SM will create a more effective perception on consumers if they take care to display an informed and professional stance. Posts that emphasize professional knowledge and trust can strengthen the trust relationship that physicians establish with individuals. Developing strategies to increase the professional visibility of physicians on SM can play a critical role in this process. In particular, sharing content that accurately reflects physicians' areas of expertise and their achievements in this field will be beneficial in terms of gaining the trust of consumers and influencing institutional preferences. Similarly, Liu et al. (2024) state that hospitals should focus on improving their SM operations and optimizing online guidance to enhance digital healthcare quality and impact.

The results also show that SM campaigns should be customized according to the demographic characteristics of the target audience. Since younger individuals show more interest in physicians who they feel close to in terms of lifestyle, communication language, or appearance, it may be a more effective strategy to provide content that emphasizes the way physicians describe themselves, while for older individuals, it may be a more

effective strategy to provide content that emphasizes perceptions of trustworthiness and expertise.

The findings of this study reveal the necessity of conscious and strategic use of SM in healthcare marketing. However, further research is needed to understand the role of psychological and sociological factors in consumers' healthcare preferences. For example, focusing on personality traits and cultural factors that affect individuals' healthcare preferences may deepen the knowledge in this field and contribute to the development of more effective strategies in practice.

In light of these findings, it can be argued that the effectiveness of messages transmitted through social media is not solely dependent on the perceived credibility of the source but is also closely related to the digital literacy levels of the target audience. Given that younger and older individuals differ not only in their perception of source characteristics but also in their familiarity with digital platforms, digital literacy becomes a critical mediator in shaping healthcare decisions. Digital literacy enables individuals to discern, evaluate, and interpret content shared on platforms such as social media, directly influencing both the trust-building process and decision-making behaviors (Diviani et al., 2015; Norman & Skinner, 2006) however, remains questionable. The issue of information evaluation has become a hot topic, leading to the development of guidelines and checklists to design high-quality online health information. However, little attention has been devoted to how consumers, in particular people with low health literacy, evaluate online health information.

**OBJECTIVE:** The main aim of this study was to review existing evidence on the association between low health literacy and (1. Therefore, physicians active on social media should produce content that not only reflects their professional expertise but also considers the digital competencies of their audience to strengthen trust. Similarly, individuals with higher health and digital literacy are more likely to critically and consciously evaluate health messages. Thus, communication strategies in healthcare marketing should be designed with sensitivity to varying levels of health and digital literacy among target audiences.

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# The Impact of Influencer Physicians Perceived Source Credibility by Consumers on Healthcare Institution Choice

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## Extended Abstract

Advancements in technology and science have also influenced the healthcare sector, necessitating the restructuring of information-sharing methods and communication between patients and healthcare professionals (Işık et al., 2016, p. 100). Due to information asymmetry in healthcare, patients are perceived as weaker compared to experts (Tengilimoğlu & Köksal, 2013). However, technological developments have enabled individuals to become more informed about healthcare services and express their preferences (Işık et al., 2016). Although healthcare marketing was initially met with skepticism, it has gained importance due to its benefits, such as providing a competitive advantage, helping to understand patient expectations, and establishing a trustworthy image (Salman & Uydaci, 2011; Şantaş et al., 2016). The key factors influencing hospital selection include the institution's image, technological/physical facilities, staff attitudes, and service quality (Tengilimoğlu, 2001). Additionally, source credibility on social media (SM) plays a crucial role in how consumers evaluate electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) messages (Muda & Hamzah, 2021). Given the significance of trust in healthcare, research shows that individuals actively use SM to follow health-related developments, seek information, and choose physicians (Tengilimoğlu et al., 2015).

With the widespread adoption of digital transformation in healthcare, consumers now obtain information about physicians not only through traditional media or face-to-face consultations but also via SM. Consequently, how physicians actively engaged on SM are perceived by consumers and how these perceptions influence critical decisions such as hospital or clinic selection has become an important research topic. For this reason, the aim of this research is to examine hospital selection through the SM visibility of physicians working in healthcare institutions. Accordingly, the main purpose of this study is to determine the effect of the source credibility that consumers perceive about the physicians they follow on SM on the choice of the healthcare institution where they will receive services. The data obtained from this study are expected to guide both physicians and healthcare organizations in the field of healthcare marketing, which has only recently begun to gain acceptance.

This research is a quantitative study based on the general survey model. The population of the research consists of consumers who use SM, follow at least one physician on SM platforms, reside in Türkiye, and are 18 years of age or older. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) (2023) 95.5% of households in Türkiye have internet access and 87.1% of individuals between the ages of 16-74 use the internet. According to the report of We Are Social (2023), 73.1% of Türkiye's population (62.55 million) uses SM. 47.1% of individuals between the ages of 16-64 have searched the internet for information about various products and products. 22.6% of these users stated that they use SM to follow celebrities or influencers. Considering the size of the population, the research was conducted on a sample basis due to time constraints and possible resource constraints. The formula suggested by Yamane (2001) was used to calculate the sample

size in this study. According to the formula, the sample size was calculated as at least 385 with  $\pm 5\%$  sampling error at 95% confidence interval.

An online questionnaire with three sections (demographic characteristics, the source credibility scale, and the purchase intention scale) was used as the data collection tool. The field study was conducted via Google Forms between May 9 and July 25, 2024. A total of 502 questionnaires were collected, and after eliminating unsuitable responses, 482 were included in the analysis. Data analysis was performed using SPSS 26.0 and Microsoft Excel 2016.

In the study, perceived source credibility of physicians is examined in terms of expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity, playing a decisive role in shaping consumer behavior. The findings of this study reveal that expertise, trustworthiness, and similarity positively influence consumers' hospital selection; however, attractiveness, contrary to expectations, has a negative effect. Additionally, it was observed that demographic factors create differences in perceived source credibility. For instance, female consumers place greater importance on trustworthiness, while male consumers are more sensitive to similarity and attractiveness (Gupta & Jordan, 2024). Similarly, younger consumers tend to trust physicians they feel closer to, whereas older individuals prioritize general perceptions of trustworthiness (Marsh et al., 2021).

This study provides a detailed examination of how the perceived source credibility of physicians followed on social media affects healthcare institution selection. The findings highlight that healthcare providers' professional and trustworthy image on social media has a direct impact on patient preferences. Furthermore, it has been determined that demographic factors influence perceptions of social media differently and that consumers' perceptions of physicians are shaped by their personal characteristics. Therefore, it is crucial for physicians and healthcare institutions to tailor their social media strategies according to their target audiences (Liu et al., 2024).

In conclusion, the strategic use of social media as a tool in the healthcare sector is becoming increasingly important. However, further research is needed to explore psychological and sociological factors in greater depth.

**Keywords:** Source credibility, Social media, Service selection, Communication in Health, Physicians.

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In this study, the rules stated in the “**Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive**” were followed.

Yazarların çalışmadaki **katkı oranları**; birinci yazar %70, ikinci yazar %30.

**Contribution rates** of the authors in the study; first author 70%, second author 30%.

Çalışma kapsamında herhangi bir kurum veya kişi ile **çakar çatışması** bulunmamaktadır.

There is no **conflict of interest** with any institution or person within the scope of the study.

#### **Etik Kurul İzni | Ethics Committee Permission**

Within the framework of the decision taken during the meeting by Hitit University Non-Interventional Research Ethics Committee dated 30/04/2024 and numbered 2024/11; the study does not contain any ethical issues.

Hitit Üniversitesi Girişimsel Olmayan Araştırmalar Etik Kurulu’nun 30/04/2024 tarihli toplantısında alınan 2024/11; sayılı kararı çerçevesinde çalışma etik açıdan bir sakınca içermemektedir.