

Conference Abstract



Digital Advocacy: How Social Media is Shaping the Future of Voluntary Blood Donations: Case Studies from Pakistan

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Social media has evolved beyond being a tool for personal interaction, becoming a powerful platform for advocacy and community mobilization. In the context of healthcare, particularly blood donation, social media's impact is undeniable. Pakistan, a nation where only 18% of blood donations come from voluntary donors, faces a persistent challenge in meeting its blood supply needs. Leveraging social media has proven to be an effective strategy for promoting voluntary blood donations, as highlighted by case studies involving platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp.

The partnership between Facebook and the Safe Blood Transfusion Programme (SBTP) of Pakistan is an example of targeted social media advocacy yielding tangible results. Launched to address blood shortages, the Facebook blood donation feature facilitated donor sign-ups and connected them with patients in need. The program saw substantial engagement, resulting in 3-10 walk-in donors and over 20 telephonic inquiries per month at participating centers. This initiative not only increased the number of voluntary donations but also helped in gradually shifting reliance from family replacement donors to a more sustainable, voluntary donor base. During emergencies, the speed and reach of social media can be lifesaving. A prominent case was the suicide bombing in Peshawar in January 2023, which created an immediate need for blood. Within 30 minutes of the incident, a call for donations was posted on the Peshawar Regional Blood Centre's Facebook page. The boosted post reached thousands, resulting in a threefold increase in donations compared to routine collections. Most notably, 70% of the donors reported learning about the need through Facebook. This case underlines the effectiveness of using social media for rapid mobilization, demonstrating how digital tools can bridge communication gaps and encourage first-time and female donors. The increase in female participation, traditionally low in Pakistan, was particularly significant. The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the necessity of adaptive strategies for blood collection.

Traditional donation campaigns faced challenges due to lockdowns and social distancing measures. In response, the Regional Blood Centre in Mirpur used WhatsApp to engage potential donors. By sending motivational messages and videos to a pre-existing list of potential donors, the hospital witnessed a 31.65% response rate, with 56.34% of the responding donors stating they donated because of the WhatsApp message. This approach was particularly successful in recruiting younger donors (ages 18-32) and saw a notable increase in female donors, a group that historically represented a minor percentage of donors. The use of WhatsApp demonstrated that even cost-effective, widely accessible digital tools could make significant contributions to healthcare outreach and donor mobilization.

Despite these successes, challenges remain in shifting cultural perceptions and increasing voluntary blood donations across Pakistan. Misconceptions and societal norms continue to hinder potential donors. Public awareness campaigns, including collaborations with influential figures such as film/TV actors, cricketers, and athletes, have been part of the broader strategy to change attitudes towards blood donation. Looking forward, social media campaigns must be tailored to address these cultural barriers and be inclusive, focusing on attracting both male and female donors. Continued partnerships between healthcare organizations and tech companies are essential to refine these digital tools and expand their reach. The experience in Pakistan demonstrates that social media is more than just a communication platform - it is a powerful tool for advocacy and mobilization. Whether through emergency response efforts like in Peshawar, systematic campaigns involving Facebook features, or adaptable strategies during global health crises, social media has reshaped how blood donations are solicited and sustained. For developing nations facing similar challenges, Pakistan's approach serves as a case study on leveraging digital advocacy to meet critical healthcare needs.

Disclosure

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