The Role of Social Media Influencer Doctors in Shaping Health Attitudes among University Students in Southeast Nigeria

Chibueze Nnaemeka, Njoku, Fatima Omotoyosi Yusuf & Nebo, Eunice Chiegbuodo

School of General Studies, Federal Polytechnic Ohodo, Enugu State

Abstract		Original Research Articles

In an era dominated by digital communication, doctor-influencers have emerged as a significant source of health information globally. This study explored students' perception of influencer doctors, the extent to which they engage with their content, and their influence on health-related beliefs and behaviours. Using Philip Meyer's sample size calculations, this study engaged 400 students at 6 universities in southeast Nigeria, and used the mixed methods approach (quantitative and qualitative methods) to elicit data. Through the use of SPSS data tables, mediation analysis as outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986), and thematic analysis, it was found that students believe the social media influencer doctors because they find them credible. These influencers were found to play a positive role in students' health choices, particularly regarding the health topics they have expounded on. The study recommended that the Ministry of Health work with the influencer doctors and use their platforms as a mechanism to combat the high spread of infectious diseases, promote a healthy lifestyle to the public, especially the youth, and control the wide spread of diseases during health epidemics and pandemics.

Keywords: Social Media, Physician, Doctors, Influencers, Health Attitudes, Behaviour, University Students, Health Communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of social media has revolutionized information dissemination, including health-related content. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter have become ubiquitous, serving as primary sources of news, entertainment, and increasingly, health information for young adults (Ofori & Boateng, 2021). Within this digital landscape, influencers have emerged. These individuals have a significant online following, and can influence their audience's decisions and opinions. A specialized group of professionals within this group are the 'Doctor-influencers', licensed medical professionals who leverage social media to share health knowledge, advocate for public health, and engage with a broad audience (Kim & Hancock, 2021).

University students, a demographic known for high social media engagement, are particularly susceptible to the information and influence propagated through these channels. Their health attitudes, which are predispositions to respond in a favorable or unfavorable way to a particular health behavior or object (Ajzen, 1991), can significantly impact their lifestyle choices and overall well-being. In Nigeria, where access to conventional healthcare information may be varied, social media offers a readily accessible alternative. However, the reliability and role of information from influencer doctors on student health attitudes remain underexplored, particularly in the context of southeast Universities in Nigeria.

This study seeks to examine the specific role(s) these influencer doctors play in shaping the health attitudes of students at six universities in southeast Nigeria. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for developing effective health education strategies and ensuring that students receive accurate and beneficial health information.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Since the advent of social media, there has been a change in how individuals relate to and influence one another (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). One of the uses of social media has emerged as an effective tool for disseminating health information which influences people's lifestyles and behavior (Moorhead et al., 2013). .

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67

Research indicates that 61% of social media users find influencers who provide valuable information on varieties of topics, including health. Among these are doctor-influencers who offer professional health information in an appealing and instructive manner (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). These influencers have the potentials to induce health behavior changes, especially among the new generation of youths, who make up a considerable number of university students. Among this generation, 43% prefer to discover new products or services, including health-related content, through social media influencers, while 32% make decisions based on these influencers' recommendations (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024).

More so, studies also indicate that social media significantly influences health behavior, with 60% of users reporting of changes to their health habits due to online information (Fox & Duggan, 2013). In addition, 72% of online health seekers report having trust in the information provided by online healthcare professionals (HINTS, 2019).

Despite the growing prominence of doctor influencers, there is no empirical evidence to show their specific role on the health behaviour of Nigerian university students, particularly at the universities in southeast Nigeria. This gap poses a significant issue, as effective health interventions depend on understanding the mechanisms driving behaviour change. Although there is a widespread assumption of a positive relationship between influencer content and audience engagement, the actual roles of this relationship on students' health behaviors, such as adopting healthier diets, exercising regularly, or adhering to medical advice, remains unclear. Therefore, this study aims to investigate and establish the role of social media influencer-doctors on the health behavior of university students in southeast Nigeria. It seeks to determine if students trust and believe these doctor influencers and if their medical health advice on social media influence attitudinal change.

1.2 Research Objectives

The following objectives were formulated to guide this research:

1. To evaluate the perceptions of students at southeast universities regarding the credibility and trustworthiness of social media influencer doctors.

2. To assess the southeast university students' perceptions of the credibility and trustworthiness of social media physician-influencers.

3. To examine the influence of social media influencer doctors on southeast university students' health attitudes concerning specific health behaviors.

1.3 Research Questions

To address the identified problem of this study, the following questions will be investigated:

1. To what extent do students in southeast universities engage with social media influencer doctors for health information?

2. What are the southeast university students' perceptions of the credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise of social media influencer doctors?

3. How do social media influencer doctors influence the health attitudes of University students in southeast Nigeria regarding specific health behaviors (e.g., diet, exercise, substance use, mental health, vaccine hesitancy)?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

The existing literature offers insights into social media's role in health communication, the concept of influencer marketing, and the specific emergence of physician-influencers.

A. Social Media and Health Information Seeking

Research indicates that young adults frequently turn to social media for health information, citing convenience and accessibility as primary reasons (Wang et al., 2019). However, concerns about information quality and misinformation are prevalent (Chung & Kim, 2020). Studies have explored how individuals assess the credibility of online health information, often relying on source characteristics, perceived expertise, and social cues (Sundar, 2008).

B. Influencer Marketing and Persuasion

Influencer marketing leverages the perceived authenticity, relatability, and trust that followers place in influencers (Freberg et al., 2011). The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) suggests that persuasion can occur via central routes (based on thoughtful consideration of arguments) or peripheral routes (based on cues like source credibility or attractiveness). Physician-influencers may activate both routes, given their professional authority and personal appeal.

C. The Rise of Physician-Influencers

Physician-influencers represent a unique blend of medical authority and social media accessibility. They engage in various forms of health communication, from debunking myths to promoting healthy lifestyles and discussing medical conditions (Kim & Hancock, 2021). Their appeal often stems from their ability to translate complex medical information into understandable language, offer relatable experiences, and foster a sense of community (Han et al., 2022). They are a breed of medical practitioners who combine clinical experience with the wide reach of social media. These doctors often use their platforms on social media where they enjoy huge followership to educate the public on various health-related topics, including wellness recommendations and refuting medical myths. The popularity of influencer doctors stems from their ability to make difficult medical knowledge understandable, personal, and engaging (Househ, 2019). For example, Dr. Chinonso Egemba (@Aporoko Dr. on X), Dr. Kelechi Okoro (@healthertainer on

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68

Instagram), Dr. Nurudeen Shotayo (@FirstDoctor on X) etc, have amassed hundreds of thousands of fans by breaking down medical topics in a fun and understandable manner.

Influencer physicians can greatly impact public health by positively changing health behaviors and attitudes through their social media handle, especially during critical public health crises. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous influencer doctors performed essential roles of sharing virus knowledge, supporting vaccination, and fighting misinformation (Basch et al., 2020). Their capacity to communicate quickly and engage with many of the public made them important allies in the fight against the pandemic.

While the contents of these influencer doctors are effectively positive, some challenges come with it. Some impostors create catfish accounts for phony reasons, like seeking financial benefits by promoting items or services on commission. Others may want to mislead the public for ideological purposes, such as spreading anti-vaccine ideas or other health disinformation. In other situations, these accounts may be part of a larger effort to disrupt public health campaigns or create confusion during health crises (Cheng & Koh, 2020).

D. Health Behavior and challenges among university students

University students are at a critical point in their lives, they are at the point where they manage to navigate towards having a sound education and growing into maturity. This phase can be characterized by severe health-related behavioral issues that might influence their general well-being and academic achievement. Some of them are;

a. **Poor eating habits**; some undergraduates find it difficult to maintain a balanced diet due to busy schedules with their studies, limited financial resources, and the availability of unhealthy food options. So they are exposed to poor dietary habits, such as consuming high-calorie, low-nutrient foods and skipping meals, which can lead to weight gain, nutritional deficiencies, and other health issues. Research shows that students with poor dietary practices frequently experience decreased academic performance and overall health problems (Adebiyi, Ojo, & Oduola, 2020).

b. **High level of stress**; Academic burdens, social obligations, and personal obstacles that revolve around university students contribute to this. Chronic stress can cause mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, lowering pupils' academic performance and general well-being. Effective stress management methods and support networks are critical for students who have these challenges (Iheanacho, Uzochukwu, & Eze, 2019).

c. **Substance abuse**; Substance addiction, particularly the use of alcohol and other substances, is a serious issue among university students. The availability and social acceptance of these substances encourage their abuse, which can impede academic performance, lead to addiction, and cause long-term mental health concerns. (Okafor, Ifediora, and Chukwu, 2022).

d. **Irregular sleep patterns**; many students have inconsistent sleep habits owing to academic pressures, social activities, and lifestyle choices. Poor sleep quality can harm cognitive functioning, academic performance, and general health (Eze & Akpan, 2020). Promoting excellent sleep hygiene and managing sleep problems are critical to improving students' health and academic performance.

e. **Sexual health behaviors**; Problems with sexual health, such as unsafe practices and insufficient knowledge, are common among university students in Nigeria. These problems may impact students' general well-being and result in health consequences (Iwuanyanwu & Eze, 2021). This requires comprehensive sexual health education and easy access to medical services is crucial to overcome.

Addressing these health behavior challenges that are popular among university students requires a holistic approach, and getting daily tips from influencer doctors from their social media handles will go a long way in curbing them.

E. Contextual Gap: Nigerian University Students

While general trends in social media use and health communication are observed globally, specific research focusing on the impact of physician-influencers on health attitudes among university students in Nigeria, particularly from the southeast region, is scarce. Local cultural nuances, access to healthcare, and prevalent health challenges may shape how students interact with and are influenced by online health content.

Empirical Literature Review

Social media used as a platform for disseminating health information has changed some individuals' perspectives, especially young adults, on how to engage with health content. This review examines some empirical evidence on the impact of social media influencer-doctors on health behavior change, particularly among university students.

a. Influence of Social Media on Health Behaviors

Research reveals that social media platforms are increasingly used for health promotions Whelan and Crawford (2017) found that 80% of studies reported positive outcomes for health promotion interventions using social media (p. 243). Another research work that studied how effective social media is in teaching healthy lifestyles, by Harris S. E et al (2019) mentioned that 40% of studies used media platforms to deliver health promotion interventions (p. 273). This exposes that social media can be an effective medium for teaching and inculcating healthy lifestyles among university students, which includes improved eating habits and increased physical activities. Students who follow trusted influencers and are exposed to their health-related content are more likely to be

Njoku, C. N., Omotoyosi, Y. F., & Nebo, E. C. (2025). The role of social media influencer doctors in shaping health attitudes among students in Southeast Nigeria. *ISA Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(5), [67-76].　　69

influenced by them and adopt their proposed better health practices.

Moreover, another study by the World Health Organization (2019), reveals the potential of social media to promote public health, particularly in disease surveillance and health education. According to their global action plan, social media platforms can effectively disseminate accurate health information, promote healthy behaviors, and support health research.

b. Credibility of Influencer-Doctors

The credibility of influencers is crucial to their ability to influence health behavior change. Influencers with medical credentials and experience (such as doctors or health experts) tend to influence their followers more. According to Influencer Marketing Hub (2022), 72% of the younger generation who use social media trust social media influencers for health advice, especially when the influencers are recognized as experts in their professions. This conclusion is noteworthy for university students, many of whom belong to this generation, cohort and are thus more inclined to rely on social media influencer doctors, for advice on health problems.

2.2 Theoretical Review

This study is anchored on Albert Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory (SLT). This theory posits that individuals can learn and adopt behaviors through observation, imitation and reinforcement mechanisms. The theory has its core components as;

1. Observational learning: this refers to the process where people learn by imitating certain behaviors they observe.

2. Modeling: Individuals tend to adopt certain behaviour advocated by those they hold at high esteem.

3. Self-Efficacy: People will have confidence in adopting and performing behaviors.

4. Reinforcement: This component explains how consequences of behavior influence learning and adoption.

5. Cognitive process: This explains how people process information, think and make decisions in regards to the information.

The idea focuses on the reciprocal relationships between personal variables, behavior, and environmental effects. Students at universities in southeast may watch health behaviors modeled by social media influencer doctors, which will shape their attitudes and actions towards health practices.

3. METHODOLOGY

The mixed-methods design was used for this research, with data collected through questionnaires and structured interviews. The study was conducted on six different universities in southeast Nigeria; Abia State University, Uturu, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Imo State University, Owerri, Federal University of Technology Owerri, University of Nigeria Nsukka, and Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Enugu.

The population for this study is well above 200 thousand students, and was obtained from the entire students at the above-listed universities. Using Philip Meyer's (1973) sample size calculations for a 95% confidence level, an initial sample size of 380 students was determined. However, in order to minimize the margin of error in statistical analysis, as recommended by Cochran (1977), the sample size was increased to 400 participants.

A convenience sampling procedure was employed because it allowed for easy access to prospective respondents on campus, regardless of their departments or academic levels. And 24 questionnaires were shared at each of the six universities for this study. The collected data were analyzed using the IBM SPSS statistical Software. The quantitative data specifically, were subjected to mediation analysis employing the Baron and Kenny (1986) causal steps approach. The result of this analysis, alongside other relevant findings, were summarized and presented in tabular forms. Additionally, for qualitative insights, a focus group was conducted, for which ten students from each of the six universities in southeast Nigeria (totaling sixty students) were purposively selected for this study.

The researcher recruited five research assistants, that is, one per-each of the universities except UNN Nzukka campus which he covered himself. The research assistants were properly trained on how to administer questionnaire and conduct focus group interviews specially made for this study.

3.1 Hypothesis

To help address this issue from the statistical perspective, a hypothesis was formulated for test:

H_0: The relationship between students' social media use and changes in their health attitudes, is not mediated by their decision to follow influencer doctors.

H$_1$: The relationship between students' social media use and changes in their health attitudes, is mediated by their decision to follow influencer doctors.

4. DATA PRESENTATION

The following analysis is based on data gathered from a questionnaire distributed to students at ABSU, IMSU, ESUT, FUTO, MUOA and UNN, 10 of the 400 questionnaires distributed to respondents were incomplete, and 25 were not returned.

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70

Table 1. Demographics

Gender	Male	208
	Female	182
Age	16-20	168
	21-25	175
	26-30	46
	31 and above	1
Academic Level	100 level	75
	200 level	36
	300 level	121
	400 level	107
	500 level	51

From the table above, data gathered shows there were more female respondents to their male counterparts, and from the age range listed in the questionnaire, students who are between 21-25 years responded more to the questionnaire more than students who fall in other age ranges. While more respondents of this study are in their 3rd year in school.

Table 2. Social Media Usage

How often do you use social media	Never	0
	Daily	320
	Several times a week	49
	Once a week	0
	Rarely	21
Which social media platform(s) do you use the most	Facebook	118
	Instagram	113
	X or twitter	47
	Youtube	63
	Tiktok	29
Do you follow any doctor or healthcare professional on social media	No	160
	Yes	230
How often do you come across health-related posts or videos by influencer doctors on social media	Never	0
	Very often	134
	Occasionally	151
	Rare	75
Which of the following types of health-related content have you seen on social media by influencer doctors	Physical fitness and exercise	0
	Nutrition and dieting	56
	Mental health and wellness	0
	Disease prevention	23
Health related content you have seen on social media by influencer doctors.	Sexual and reproductive health	44
	All of the above	267

Data shows that 83% of the respondents use social media daily, while 12% use it several times a week, and 5% use it rarely. Among social media platforms, 34% primarily use Instagram, followed by 30% on Facebook, 17% on YouTube, 11% on Twitter, and 8% on TikTok. Regarding health professionals on social media, 58% of respondents follow doctors or healthcare providers, while 42% do not. Health-related posts by influencer doctors are frequently encountered, with 35% seeing them very often, 46% occasionally, and 19% rarely. For content type, 68% of respondents have seen all listed health topics, with 11% noting sexual and reproductive health, 14% nutrition, 8% each for physical fitness and disease prevention, and 4% for mental health content. This data suggests influencer doctors reach a broad audience, enhancing awareness on various health topics.

Table 3. Health Behavior Change

Have you ever made any changes to your health habits based on advice from a social media influencer doctor	No	46
	Yes	344
If yes, did it improve your health and wellness	No	52
	Yes	338
To what extent has health-related content by influencer doctors impacted your overall health awareness	Not at all	31
	Very much	0
	Moderately	151
	Slightly	208
On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate the credibility of health information shared by influencer doctors on social media	Not credible	25
	Slightly credible	79
	somewhat credible	222
	Credible	29
	Very credible	35

The data above reveals that most of the respondents (88%) have adjusted their health habits based on advice from social media influencer doctors, which means that the influencers have a strong influence on health-related behavior.

Among the respondents, almost all 338, felt that these adjustments caused improvements in their health and wellness, suggesting that influencer doctors may play a positive role in motivating healthier choices. In terms of health awareness, responses varied: while 8% of the respondents reported no impact from influencer doctors' health content, most respondents felt some degree of influence.

About 39% perceived a moderate impact, and 53% reported a slight impact on their overall health awareness. This suggests that influencer doctors contribute meaningfully to health awareness, though for many, the influence may not be highly transformative. Regarding the credibility of health information shared by influencer doctors, the data shows a small portion (7%) viewed the information as "Not credible," while 20% found it "Slightly credible." The largest segment, at 57%, rated it as "Somewhat credible," indicating that most respondents approach this information with a degree of skepticism. A smaller group considered it "Credible" (7%) or "Very credible" (9%), showing that while influencer doctors are trusted by some, a majority may still seek additional sources or verification for health advice received through social media.

Overall, this data illustrates that while social media influencer doctors can affect health behaviors and awareness, their perceived credibility is moderate, reflecting a balance between influence and cautious engagement from the audience.

Table 4. Factors Influencing Health Behavior

What motivates you the most to follow health-related content from influencer doctors	Peer recommendations	18
	Trust in the influencer doctors	61
	Personal health concerns	66
	Popularity of the content	39
	Easy access of the information	106
	Others..... specify	0
How confident are you in making health-related decisions based on information from social media doctors	Not confident	6
	Very confident	0
	Somewhat confident	216
	Confident	168
Do you believe social media influencer doctors play a significant role in promoting healthy behaviors among students	No	37
	Yes	353

The data for the 4th section in the questionnaire indicates that 42% (106) of respondents are motivated to follow health-related content from influencer doctors because of 'easy access to information'. Personal health concerns drive 26% (66) of respondents, while 24% (61) are motivated by trust in these influencers. A smaller portion, 15.4%, follow due to the popularity of the content, and only 7.1% are influenced by peer recommendations. No respondents indicated additional reasons in the "others" category.

Regarding confidence in making health-related decisions based on information from social media doctors, respondents who are somewhat confident are 64%, while 50% feel confident. 1%, are not confident, and no respondent was very confident in their

decision-making.

Finally, regarding the perceived role of influencer doctors in promoting healthy behaviors, 91% of respondents believe these influencers play a significant role in encouraging healthy behaviors among students, whereas 90% disagree.

In summary, easy access to information (42%) and personal health concerns (26%) are the leading motivators for following health content. While respondents show varying levels of confidence, the majority view influencer doctors as positively influencing student health behaviors.

To properly test the hypothesis posed for this study, a mediation analyses was conducted to find if students' engagements with influencer doctors mediated the relationship between social media use and changes in health attitudes. This analyses followed the approach properly outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986), using a series of three linear regressions.

Table 5. Summary of mediation analysis

Predictor	Unstandardized Coeff. (B)	Std. Error	p-value (Sig.)
Step 1: Total Effect			
Social Media Use & Health Habits	-.242	.019	.000
Step 2: Path a			
Social Media Use & Following Doctors	.034	.004	.000
Step 3: Path b and c'			
Following Doctors & Health Habits	.247	.025	.000
Social Media Use & Health Habits	-.221	.017	.000

Looking at the data in table 5, the first analysis shows a significant relationship social media use and changes in health habits (p= .000), but with a negative coefficient (B= -242). This means that without considering the mediator (influencer doctors) will never lead to a change in health habits. The second analysis has part a, which shows a significant relationship between social media use and following influencer doctors (p= .000). And a positive coefficient (b= .034), which means that as students use social media the more, they are more likely to follow influencer doctors. Step 3 part b. and c which describes the final regression model of the mediation analysis, shows a significant relationship between following influencer doctors and health habit changes (p= .000). It also shows a positive coefficient (B= .247) students following influencer doctors will lead more positive changes in their health attitudes. It is crucial to note from the table, that the direct relationship between social media use and health habits (p= .000) remained significant in the 'model', though the coefficient was slightly reduced (from -.242 to -.221).

The combined results of the mediation analysis on table 5 above indicate that influencer doctors play a significant and positive mediating role. While the initial total effect of social media on health habits appeared to be negative, the mediation model, reveals a more complex relationship. The analysis depicts a positive pathway in that students use the social media, which leads them to follow influencer doctors, and this engagement in turn leads to positive change in their health behaviours.

Simply put, the findings show that students at universities in southeast Nigeria who use the social media regularly will follow influencer doctors, who will positively influence their health attitudes through the posts they make.

4.1 Presentation of the Focus Group Discussion Data

The student participants willingly obliged their consent at the start of the interview. The interview sessions did not last more than 50 minutes, and responses were carefully recorded and the participants were promised anonymity. Data generated from the six universities were collated and thematically analysed accordingly to the different questions.

Question 1: what factors lead to the belief or doubt of health content presented by doctor influencers on your timeline?

The majority of the student participants noted that they trust the content because they believe the influencer doctors are professionally qualified doctors. However, they are cautious of the proliferation of fraudulent accounts that clone legitimate social media profiles. Participants 11, 05 and 14 stated:

I am aware that they are medical doctors who have offices where they practice their profession in some of the big hospitals in Nigeria. But I am also cautious of fakes, because there are a lot of fakes in Nigeria.

I believe them especially those whose accounts on social media have been verified. I know they give health advice on what they know with the way the present their messages.

The fraudulent people who clone their accounts and use the cloned accounts to deceive their followers make it difficult. But I believe the influencer doctors who use video contents for their presentations, seeing them makes it easier to believe them.

73

A small number of participants were neutral with their answers, they couldn't give a satisfying response. For example, participant 30 stated:

I don't just know, I won't say I believe them or not. It's just that issues about health are too tender that you shouldn't allow random health messages on social media to damage it.

Other participants expressed skepticism, stating that even though they recognized the influencers as medical professionals, the absence of personal face-to-face interactions cause them to doubt their messages.

So from their responses, it can be deduced that most of the university students in southeast Nigeria, believe that social media influencer doctors are credible and trust the health messages they post.

Question 2: If you trust social media influencer physicians, do you follow their advice or share their posts?

Most of the participants consented to following the advice of the social media influencer physicians and sharing their messages to spread their messages. According to them, they find their posts educative and worth sharing. They stated that they have often adhered to their health advice because the influencer doctors are certified medical professionals practicing on social media. Furthermore, they believe that those with verified accounts are the most reliable to follow as this helps in easily identifying imposters. Participant 8 and 26 said:

They are professionals, and they give quality health tips often. So I follow them to learn more about health issues and how to avoid them.

I learned a lot from a health video message about mensuration and infections. Ever since, I have been sharing his videos to my friends and siblings.

The answers above show that many students, or a good number of them follow the health advice they see on social media from influencer physicians, because these doctors are simply practicing their profession.

Question 3: can you share example of where a social media influencer doctor changed your mind about a health behavior?

Most of them said 'yes' and gave different instances;

Participant 10: Yes, there was this doctor on Instagram who constantly posted about the hidden sugars in common Nigerian foods and drinks. I used to think I was eating healthy, but she broke down how even local snacks have a lot of sugar. She would show charts and even short videos of her preparing healthier alternatives using local ingredients.

Participant 2: 'I used to buy antibiotics whenever I felt sick, especially for a cough or fever. But I saw a doctor on Facebook who did a whole series on antibiotic resistance and why it's so dangerous to self-medicate. He used simple analogies to explain how it makes future infections harder to treat. He also stressed the importance of seeing a doctor for proper diagnoses.

Participant 3: 'there's a psychiatrist on Twitter I follow. I used to think talking about mental health was a sign of weakness, or just something 'foreigners' did. But he would share stories (covered their faces so they won't be identified) of people overcoming challenges, and he always emphasized that seeking help is a sign of strength. He used very compassionate language and often debunked myths about mental illness that are common in our society.

Participant 4: one of the doctor influencers on Facebook comically described how dangerous it is to use alcohol to take drugs (flagyl). He presented it in a way that made me change my mind and has adhered to only taking my drugs with water.

Participant 9: health messages from Aproko doctor on Instagram and Twitter have made me love exercise. I kept following him in his online keeping fit sections and I have taken it upon myself to exercise on my own especially on weekends.

Participant 37: Though I drink garri, but I do it sparingly, because of the general belief that drinking garri causes poor eyesight. However, after watching Aproko Doctor's health advice on drinking garri. I have a changed my mind and now drink it without fear.

Participant 55: I did not use tampons because my friends kept saying using them could deflower a lady. But after watching a video of a female influencer doctor on Twitter clearly describe how impossible that is, I have changed my mind and now use tampons. This has also stopped me from getting rashes from pads.

From the participants' responses for Q3, it is clear that influencer doctors play positive role for the university students in southeast Nigeria, as their social media posts have influenced the students' behavior in one way or the other.

5. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings from both qualitative and quantitative approaches are mutually reinforcing. And reveal significant information about social media, influencer doctors, and the role of exposure to health information on the social media platforms in affecting health behavior change.

Thus, this study reveals that social media influencer doctor's play a positive role in health behaviour change among university students in southeast Nigeria, because they frequently visit social media platforms daily. Table 2 provides the data which shows that almost all the respondents 320 (83%) visit different social media platforms daily and a good number of them 134 (33%) and 151 (46%) often and occasionally come across health messages on social media. This means that being on social media regularly exposes one to health-related messages from the supposedly 'doctor influencers'. This affirms findings from other studies (Whelan and Crawford, 2017. & Harris S. E et al 2019) that were captured in the earlier part of this study. Their studies posit that a good number of youths (students) use the social media, which makes the social media an effective tool for health intervention schemes.

Also, the findings of this study align with almost the principles

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74

of the Social Learning Theory, which anchored this study. From table 2, we can see that a high percentage (83%) of the respondents visit their different social media platforms daily, and a good number of them 267 (68%) see different health tips from influencer doctors, which completely agrees with the 'observational learning' that the SLT advocates. Thus, making social media the right environment where people can learn good health lifestyles by watching videos and imitating what they have seen.

Table 2 also shows that most of the respondents (230) follow influencer doctors on social media, which means they students see them as models they look up to. This agrees with another component of the SLT, that people tend to adopt certain behaviors advocated by those they hold in high esteem. Responses from the focus group participants affirmed this too.

Table 4 and results from focus group interviews provide the data which supports the confidence aspect of the SLT, and reveals that 49% of the respondents are confident, while 63% of them are somewhat confident of the posts and health tips they get from influencer doctors on social media. This means self-efficacy comes into play while adopting and imitating behaviors and making the findings of this study to a great length supports the components of the SLT.

For the hypothesis posed for this study, findings as seen in Table 5 and the focus group interview result of Q1 and 2, strongly support the alternating hypothesis which is, The relationship between students' social media use and changes in their health attitudes, is mediated by their decision to follow influencer doctors'. The table shows through the mediation analysis the influencer doctors play a significant and positive mediating role. While the initial total effect of social media on health habits appeared to be negative, the mediation model, reveals a more complex relationship. The analysis depicts a positive pathway in that students use the social media, which leads them to follow influencer doctors, and this engagement in turn leads to positive change in their health.

Furthermore, through the focus group result, this study reveals that the students find the influencer doctors credible enough to trust their messages and apply them in their day-to-day living. The mediation analysis and the result of the focus group, prove that influencer doctors on the social media have a strong positive relationship with students. This simply means that that influencer doctors play the role of positively influencing the habits, attitudes and behaviours of university students in southeast Nigeria.

6. CONLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The usefulness of the social media is profound. If certified doctors who are on social media offer health tips to their followers regularly, it will help their followers form and live healthier lifestyles, and it will make getting reasonable health information for a healthy lifestyle a click away for many.

So this study recommends:

1. The Ministry of Health should find a way to work with influencer doctors and use their platforms as a mechanism to combat the high spread of infectious diseases and promote a healthy lifestyle to the public. With the impact these influencer doctors have on their followers, engaging them during health epidemics will surely prove positive in limiting the widespread of diseases, especially among the youth.

2. Sensitization programs on this subject should be carried out in rural areas for secondary school students to allay them of the fear of not trusting and believing in health messages from influencer doctors on social media.

3. Broader studies should be carried out on this to know how effective influencer doctors are in the behavior change of university students in the country at large.

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75

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76