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THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSUASION STRATEGIES IN DOCTORS' SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES

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Abstract:

This study investigates how doctors employ persuasion strategies (Ethos, logos, and pathos) on Instagram to influence the health behaviors of their followers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analyzing three influential doctors on social media (DSMIs), the research applies Aristotle's persuasive strategies to understand how these doctors craft messages that drive behavior change and enhance COVID-19 awareness among their 581 followers. Employing a mixed methods approach within the pragmatism paradigm, the study utilizes interviews, literature reviews, content analysis, and surveys for comprehensive data collection. The study reveals that approximately 41% of followers demonstrated a firm intention, with an additional 43% showing a solid intention to change their attitudes and behaviors. About 84% expressed a strong commitment to adopting a healthier lifestyle. The research also identified followers who initially had doubts or confusion about COVID-19 due to misinformation. However, it became convinced of its existence after following the DSMIs' posts, mainly through engaging video content. Engagement is more significant for video content than photos, with pathos, Ethos, and logos effectively fostering engagement. Around 52,438 (314,000) DSMI followers shifted from initial skepticism to meaningful positive attitude transformations, driven by successful engagement through pathos, Ethos, and logos. The study underscores the significance of delivering persuasive and appealing messages to influence behaviors positively. It suggests active social media participation can extend beyond the pandemic, fostering ongoing health awareness.

Keywords: Persuasion strategies, Doctors, Social Media, Health Behavior

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INTRODUCTION

The ongoing global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruptions worldwide. As of July 19, 2023, there have been over 768 million confirmed cases and 6.9 million deaths globally, with Indonesia reporting 6.8 million cases and 161,879 deaths (World Health Organization, 2023).

Despite emphasizing health precautions and vaccinations, vaccine hesitancy persists due to misinformation spread through excessive cell phone use (Lipschultz, 2018). Mobile phones, particularly on social media, play a role in disseminating misinformation, creating confusion, and influencing public sentiment. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for reliable information is crucial. The challenges posed by this public health crisis have destabilized and reconfigured the global order (Ali & Malaco Jr, 2022).

One solution involves leveraging doctors who are social media influencers (DSMIs), particularly on Instagram. Social media, including platforms like Instagram, is vital in spreading health information and combating misinformation (Tsao et al., 2021). As health experts, doctors can serve as trustworthy sources for disseminating accurate health information.

This study investigates how three DSMIs employ persuasion, focusing on Ethos, logos, and pathos, guided by Aristotle's strategy (West & Turner, 2018; Hamzah et al., 2023). Social media communication implements rhetoric, emphasizing the need for persuasive techniques, especially during health crises like COVID-19 (Berlanga-Fernández et al., 2013; Kjeldsen et al., 2022). Influential actors, such as DSMIs, are considered experts, emphasizing the importance of engagement for effective messaging (Hermida, 2015; Zhang & Clark, 2019).

Using a pragmatic paradigm and mixed methods, the study explores the impact of emotional appeal on DSMIs' persuasion on Instagram, aligning with practicality and direct experience (Liliweri, 2018). Mixed methods, popular in social and health sciences, provide a comprehensive understanding by combining qualitative and quantitative elements (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002 in Mertens, 2015).

The research emphasizes Ethos, logos, and pathos in effective persuasion, addressing how DSMIs' strategic appeal influences followers' COVID-19 awareness-related behavior change intentions. The significance of this research is evident in its contribution to health communication, combating epidemic disease transmission, and potentially saving lives through competent DSMIs. Addressing these critical issues aligns with Taylor's (2020) encouragement to explore social media platforms and emerging influencer-related topics further. This study has the potential to advance research in persuasive communication within the health sector, an area that currently needs to be explored academically.

In the era of digital connectivity, social media serves as a powerful global information exchange platform, boasting nearly four billion active users worldwide by early 2023. Indonesia is the third-ranking country in Asia for active social media users, with a remarkable 86.5% of its population utilizing Instagram (Statista, 2023).

The rise of "influencers" in the digital realm, individuals who wield influence through their online presence measured by followers and engagement, is a notable phenomenon (Hennessy, 2018, pp. 12-13). These influencers, also called microcelebrities (Abidin & Brown, 2019), accumulate followers through personal narratives and monetize their following through advertisements (Abidin, 2015 in Archer, Wolf, and Nalloor, 2020). However, these social media influencers' (SMIs) potential in promoting credible health messages and influencing behavior has been overlooked (Archer et al., 2020).

Instagram engagement is distinctive and heavily influenced by creativity and positive emotions (Casaló et al., 2020; Okoh, Olapeju et al., 2021). Measured through various activities in response to influencer content (Barger et al., 2016, in Coombes, 2020), follower engagement encompasses cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social elements, significantly shaped by influencer content and engagement strategies (Vivek et al., 2012; Tafesse & Bronwyn, 2021). Understanding the driving factors of audience engagement is crucial to attracting their participation and interaction (Coombes, 2020).

The Instagram algorithm adapts feed exposure based on interaction history (napoleoncat.com, n.d.). Crafting engaging and relevant content can capture more attention from followers and other users (Buffer.com, n.d.), and platforms like Social Blade aid in monitoring statistical growth across various platforms.

This research delves into audience engagement with Doctors Who are Social Media Influencers (DSMIs) and explores the influence of audience motivation (Alversia et al., 2016; Chiang *et al.*, 2017; Coombes, 2020). Additionally, social media design characteristics and content formats, such as videos, images with people, and images without people, are considered for their impact on engagement (Rahman et al., 2022).

The study aims to explain the intricate relationship between the Instagram community, including DSMIs and their followers, as a source of information and audience interaction. Recognizing audience motivation, particularly regarding changing health behavior, is critical in fostering interactions with account owners (Chiang *et al.*, 2017 in Coombes, 2020).

Rothwell (2019, p. 27; 2016, p. 15) defines communication competence as effectively engaging with others within a specific context. Spitzberg (1988, in Croucher, Sommier & Rahmani, 2015) adds that competent communication involves achieving satisfying goals appropriately, where effectiveness meets expected goals, and appropriateness leads to desired outcomes. The communication competency model comprises motivation, knowledge, and skills (Morreale et al., 2006, p. 35; Littlejohn et al., 2017, p. 74). However, Spitzberg and Cupach (Lane, 2016) note that competence depends on the audience or followers. Hermida (2015) emphasizes that communication competencies necessitate persuasion. This competency model extends to Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) with goal-oriented repetitive behaviors (Morreale *et al.*, 2006). In CMC, skills manifest as attentiveness, composure, coordination, and expressiveness, emphasizing both the message and context (Morreale *et al.*, 2006).

To address the research question, it is crucial to evaluate how the three DSMIs demonstrate communication competence and persuasion on Instagram, leading to high engagement among their followers. Effective communicators aim to persuade the audience and induce a change in attitude or behavior, aligning with Aristotle's rhetorical elements and the notions of appropriateness and effectiveness (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

The primary goal of competent communicators is to persuade the audience, influencing their intentions to act, as highlighted by Miller (2005) and Harrington (2015). This study surveyed 581 followers to assess their intentions to adopt healthier behaviors after exposure to DSMIs' messages, predicting potential changes in attitudes and behaviors. Focusing on followers' intentions provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of DSMIs' persuasive communication on Instagram.

In exploring DSMIs' competence as communicators, the study concentrates on persuasion and its elements: Ethos, pathos, and logos, based on Aristotle's rhetoric (Griffin et al., 2019). Effective rhetoric involves understanding the audience and delivering messages effectively (West & Turner, 2018). Rhetoric, defined as the study of "how attention is created and allocated" (Lanham, as cited in Herrick, 2018), acts as the 'economics of attention' and incorporates Ethos, logos, and pathos strategies.

Ethos focuses on the communicator's intelligence, values, and goodwill, aiming to bolster a favorable perception through empathy, understanding, and receptiveness (Ramli et al., 2022). Communicators enhance Ethos by showcasing equal levels of empathy, responsiveness, and understanding, fostering a reciprocal influence with the audience.

Logos requires the audience to follow the logic of the communicator, relying on precise language and arguments (Varpio, 2018). Pathos involves emotional appeal, which is crucial in health promotion messages to persuade individuals to act (Zhang & Clark, 2019). This comprehensive exploration delves into the dynamics of DSMIs' rhetoric, emphasizing effective communication strategies for capturing attention and influencing positive changes in attitudes and behaviors.

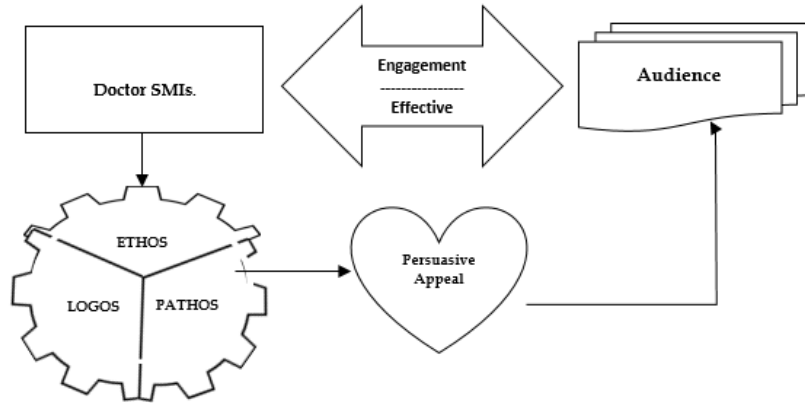


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 clarifies that the communication competence of DSMIs, which encompasses motivation, knowledge, and skills, is effectively put into practice through the application of persuasion. A competent communicator uses Ethos, logos, and pathos to engage and interact with the audience. Communication between DSMIs on Instagram and their followers involves two-way interaction, a vital component of persuasion, and changes in attitude through the audience's perceptions. As persuasion aims to change attitudes in the audience (followers), DSMIs must demonstrate competence by employing Ethos, logos, and pathos. Although pathos mainly plays a significant role through emotional appeals, pathos is alone because it must be accompanied by Ethos and logos (Varpio, 2018).

METHODS

This mixed-methods research, adopting a pragmatism paradigm, explores persuasive communication by three (3) DSMIs on Instagram, focusing on explicitly examining their activities on Instagram during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study combines qualitative data from interviews, literature reviews, and Instagram content analysis with quantitative survey results from 581 followers. The inductive (qualitative) approach is integrated with descriptive (deductive) analysis of survey data. This combination allows for in-depth insights and broader generalizations, contributing to new theories and relevant recommendations for health communication in Indonesia.

The study covers ten months, from March to December 2020, analyzing COVID-19-related posts on Instagram. Data collection involves interviews, Instagram content analysis, and surveys with 581 responses. Integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, method triangulation addresses research questions and forms the basis for interpretation. Percentages from Instagram content analysis are treated descriptively, not inferentially, to avoid seeking causal relationships. The analysis focuses on 30 COVID-19-related content and ten highly engaging posts, comparing them with interview and survey findings. Persuasive elements are assessed using a Likert Scale and relevant keywords.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study focused on three active doctors who have become influencers on Instagram: Doctor R.A. Adaninggar Primadia Nariswari SpPD (Dr. A) with the account of @dr.ningz, Doctor Andhika Raspati SPOT (Dr. D) who owns @dhika.dr account, and Doctor Lula Kamal (Dr. LK) with an account named @lulakamaldr. Dr. Adaninggar (Dr. A) is an internist who lives in Surabaya, East

Java; Dr. Andhika (Dr. D) works as a sports medicine expert in Jakarta; and Dr. Lula Kamal (Dr. LK) is a television star and housewife in Jakarta. They were the subjects of interest in this research.

Table 1 shows that out of the 581 survey participants from the three DSMIs, the majority (81%) were female, aged between 25 to 45 years old. Dr. A significant portion (48%) of the followers reported accessing their Instagram accounts for one to three (1-3) hours daily. The largest occupational group among the followers was housewives (30%), followed by private and public employees (24%) and professionals (22%).

Table 1. Dsmis and Their Follower’s Profiles.

DSMI		dr. A	dr. D	dr. LK	All DSMIs				
A	Number of followers (mid-July 2023)	176,000	157,000	13,900	346,900				
B	Number of postings (mid-July 2023)	2,129	1,157	950	4,236				
Followers who participated in the survey									
		dr. A	dr. D	dr. LK	All DSMIs				
1	Number of respondents	255 (43,9 %)	251 (43,2 %)	75 (12,9 %)	581 (100%)				
2	Followers age: top three (%)								
	15-25	--	--	--	6				
	25-35	35	46	23	38				
	35-45	44	34	31	38				
	45-55	15	10	39	16				
	Above 55	--	--	--	2				
3	Instagram usage (hour/day) - top three								
	0-1 Hours	13	22	20	12				
	1-3 Hours	41	54	56	48				
	3-6 Hours	32	27	17	28				
4	Gender - in percentage (%)	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
		85	15	79	21	76	24	81	19
5	Occupation (%)								
	Housewife	36	26	24	30				
	Employees	22	27	27	24				
	Professionals (Accountant, Etc.)	22	24	16	22				
	Business owner	8	9	11	9				
	Students	4	6	7	5				
	Others	4	3	12	4				

In this study, the authors limited the analysis of messages to postings by DSMIs for nearly ten months from the emergence of COVID-19 in March 2020 to the end of 2020. This was due to the need to limit message choices owing to the large number of posts of each doctor on Instagram and to prioritize content related to the COVID-19 outbreak and vaccinations.

With 176,000 followers, as of mid-July 2023, Dr. A has uploaded 2,129 posts on her Instagram. (Table 1). This 39-year-old mother responds to questions and comments from her followers and uploads content on her feed almost daily. Dr. A consistently talks about COVID-19 and everything related to it, such as the types of variants of infections, vaccinations, and related hoaxes.

Unlike Dr. A, Dr. D prefers entertaining (funny) posts. He recorded 157 thousand followers (until mid-July 2023), as shown in Table 1, using jokes or parodies, with 1,157 posts recorded. Both

A and D accounts have received verification from Instagram (blue tick) in 2023. The youngest among the three doctors, Dr. D sometimes pokes at those who send misleading messages. The available data showed that around 35% of his followers followed him due to his entertaining content.

Since March 2020, Dr. LK, a television star and mother of four, has been actively posting on Instagram. As of mid-July 2023, she had shared 950 posts with 13,900 followers (Table 1). Dr. LK's content often portrays her as a mother in a headscarf. While her content includes health-related topics, her followers also follow her for her beauty.

Between March and December 2022, the three DSMIs made 586 posts related to COVID-19 (Table 2). These posts primarily consisted of images and videos, with Dr. A having the highest number of posts: 420 or 89% of total content, followed by 96 posts (52% of total content) by Dr. D, and Dr. LK posted 70 (39% of total content) (Table 2).

Table 2. DSMIs' Content Summary

Posts (Content)	Contain	A	D	LK
Type (number)	Photo	371	97	170
	Video	99	87	9
Total number of Content		470	184	179
Number of COVID-19 related content	With Photo	328	49	64
	With Video	92	47	6
Total number of Videos & Photo related to COVID-19 information		420 (89 % of total content)	96 (52 % of total content)	70 (39 % of total content)
Number of COVID-19 content with persuasion (caption)	Ethos	99	43	17
	Logos (logic/data)	314	44	9
	Pathos (emotion)	322	89	51

Table 2 also shows that Dr. A's contents have 99 ethos, 314 logos, and 322 pathos elements, Dr. D's contents employ 43 ethos, 44 logos, and 89 pathos components, and Dr. LK employs 17 ethos, nine logos, and 51 pathos elements in her 30 most engaging posts.

Pathos elements are evident, demonstrated through visual expressions and the portrayal of various emotions (happy, sad, etc.) in the content. On the other hand, logos elements are introduced when DSMIs present their message sources (such as WHO, etc.). At the same time, ethos components are reflected in DSMIs dressing as doctors or explicitly stating their names, affirming their status as health experts.

Based on the data in Table 2, the researchers looked at the elements of persuasion in the ten posts of DSMIs that have the highest engagement, shown by their highest number of likes and comments from the followers. Table 3 below shows that most of the top 10 contents posted by each DSMIs contained more pathos than the other two persuasion strategies (Ethos and logos).

Table 3. Ethos, Logos, and Pathos on DSMIs' 10 Content, which gained the most likes and comments.

Likes and Comments on Top 10 Posts			
DSMI	Ethos	Logos	Pathos
A	6	34	39
D	11	17	30
LK	9	5	39
Total	26	56	108

The three doctors, Dr. A, Dr. D, and Dr. LK, each have distinct approaches to creating content related to COVID-19 on their Instagram accounts. Dr. A started posting COVID-19 content on March 22, 2020, and frequently referenced journal articles as credible sources to educate her followers. Dr. A's ten most engaging posts are pathos (77 %), 75 % logos, and 24 % ethos (Table 4). For example, a post on October 20, 2020, featuring a gymnastic athlete's tragic death due to COVID-19, garnered significant attention, such as 1,006 likes and 90 comments from her followers. The image carried pathos elements (fear and sadness), while its caption contained elements of logos and pathos.

The researchers thoroughly analyzed the 30 most engaging posts from all three DSMIs, explicitly focusing on content related to COVID-19, misinformation, and vaccination.

Based on the numbers above, the researchers looked at the elements of persuasion in the ten DSMI posts with the highest engagement (highest number of likes and comments from the followers). Table 4 below shows that most of the top 10 contents posted by all three DSMIs contained more pathos than the other two persuasion strategies.

Table 4. Content of DSMIs' Ethos, Logos, and Pathos related to COVID-19

Element of DSMIs' Ethos, Logos and Pathos			
DSMI	Ethos	Logos	Pathos
A	24%	75%	77%
D	45%	46%	93%
LK	24%	13%	73%

The COVID-19 general topic covered various issues such as health protocols, diagnostics (PCR, swab test), traveling during the pandemic, and face masks without discussing misinformation or vaccination. Table 5 indicates that the general issues contents (which consist of things like traveling rules, etc.) were more dominant among the 30 most engaging posts compared to content related to misinformation or vaccination, possibly due to the broader appeal of the general topic.

Table 5: Most topics in the three DSMIs' 30 top content.

COVID-19 Related Topic	Dr. A	Dr D	Dr. LK
Misinformation	7	0	0
Vaccination	1	0	0
General issues	22	30	30
TOTAL	30	30	30

The authors argue that the difference in the high number of followers added to Dr. D and Dr. LK is very likely related to the form of content uploaded by the two DIMS. The video content that dominates Instagram uploads by Dr. D was more successful in attracting engagement, thereby increasing the number of his followers significantly compared to the photo content uploaded by Dr. LK. According to Rahman *et al.* (2022), video content causes the highest engagement rate, followed by content in the form of images (such as photos) of people and, finally, images without people in them.

The authors assert that the three DSMIs effectively employ Ethos, logos, and emotional appeals, especially pathos, in their persuasion strategies. Pathos, a crucial element in persuasion, is utilized to evoke emotions, primarily happiness, among the followers. A survey of 581 followers supports this observation, with 92% acknowledging experiencing such emotions. The three DSMIs predominantly use emotional appeal to trigger various emotions, with Dr. A, Dr. D, and Dr. LK

incorporating 77%, 93%, and 73% of pathos elements, respectively. The followers' opinions align with these findings, as 92% stated that the DSMIs' messages often evoke positive emotions like happiness, relief, excitement, laughter, and gratitude.

As discussed earlier, communication competence is evident in communication activities' effectiveness and resulting outcomes. Consequently, as Instagram influencers, the doctors have effectively demonstrated their communication competence, especially in their ability to generate emotional appeals, together with their efforts in using ethos and logos appeals.

The DSMIs in this study, as communicators, appeared to be effective in persuading their followers. While they did not explicitly state their use of persuasion strategies, the interview results indicated their efforts in that direction. The researchers explored the use of Ethos, logos, and pathos.

Regarding Ethos, the three DSMIs demonstrated strong credibility as doctors. Through interviews, it became evident that followers trusted them, primarily due to their background as healthcare professionals. The ethos analysis involved questioning followers about their motivations for following the DSMIs and the level of trust they placed in them. As seen in the survey results, approximately 81% of the followers mentioned being drawn by creative content as the main reason for following, while nearly 70% emphasized their trust in the DSMIs' expertise as healthcare professionals. The interview results also indicated that the three DSMIs had established credibility (Ethos) before followers started following them.

The survey result also indicates that the followers unanimously acknowledged the DSMIs' good communication techniques and easy-to-understand content. For example, approximately 93% perceived the DSMIs as demonstrating good communication skills with understandable contents, 98 % thought the DSMIs are competent in interacting and responsive, 97 % considered these doctors to have a unique style, convincing and with clear ideas, 80% recognized their use of analogies and metaphors, and 98% stated that the DSMIs' messages are well organized, simple, logic and easy to understand. All these aspects indicate the presence of logos in the DSMIs' messages.

According to the authors, the three persuasive strategies have been used to effect changes in the attitudes and behavior of the DSMI followers. The survey indicated that at least 13% of skeptical followers became convinced about COVID-19, and 3.4% who initially did not believe in COVID-19 changed their perspective after following the DSMIs' posts and accepting the reality of the outbreak.

Regarding COVID-19 and vaccination, the survey results showed that 79.2% of followers were sure about the severity of COVID-19. However, the DSMIs' competence led to a shift in the beliefs of some followers. Around 13% of initially skeptical followers became convinced about COVID-19, and 88.5% expressed belief in the outbreak and the importance of vaccination. Only 9.1% of followers still felt confused but remained open to receiving information from the doctors.

Trust was considered part of the Ethos in this research on the three DSMIs. The connection between trust, emotions, Technology, and health is unsurprising, as emotions and health are closely intertwined. Emotions play a crucial role in health psychology, which explores the complex relationships between biology, environment, emotions, and health. Technology can either contribute to health problems or be utilized as part of treatment (Tettegah & Garcia, 2016).

The study's findings reveal that a majority (more than 80%) of followers adhered to the suggestions and recommendations of the DSMIs, indicating a positive response to their effectiveness. One of the most significant findings is that 41% demonstrated a firm intention, while approximately 43% exhibited a solid intention to change attitudes and behaviors. Thus, around 84% of followers firmly committed to changing their attitudes and behaviors to embrace a healthier lifestyle. The study also identified followers who initially harbored doubts or confusion about

COVID-19 due to misinformation but became convinced of its existence after following the DSMIs' posts.

Another crucial finding is that, while only a minority (3.4%) initially skeptical about COVID-19 shifted their stance when considering the overall follower count during the survey period (roughly 314,000), this suggests a significant number of people (52,438) underwent a positive attitude transformation due to the persuasive impact of DSMIs.

Regarding content uploads by the three doctors, pathos appeared to be the most prominent component. At the same time, Dr. A utilized more logos at 75%, almost equal to pathos at 77% (Table 4); some content containing logos also integrated elements of pathos. On the other hand, Dr. D and Dr. LK demonstrated a significant dominance of pathos in their Instagram content, indicating their communication prowess on this platform.

Littlejohn and Foss (2009) state that communication competence refers to an individual's ability to interact appropriately and effectively with others in specific contexts. The DSMIs' communication competence on Instagram involves the exchange of authentic, accurate, and appropriate messages without a hierarchical structure between dominant and subordinate relationships. The effectiveness of the DSMIs' communication is evident in their ability to engage with their followers. Engagement is closely linked to the type of content posted, with video content generating higher engagement compared to photos, as indicated by Rahman *et al.* (2022). The three DSMIs demonstrated engagement through a substantial number of likes and comments from followers. The analysis revealed that pathos, Ethos, and logos successfully generated high engagement. The survey showed that 56.3% of followers liked the posts, 28.9% frequently commented or asked questions, and only 14.8% followed the content without reacting.

In conclusion, the authors argue that the acceptability of the DSMIs' messages includes the emergence of intention, indicating followers' adherence to the messages. Therefore, the persuasive appeals delivered by the DSMIs effectively influence followers' intentions, leading to changes in attitudes and behavior.

CONCLUSION

The research highlights the importance of doctors as influencers on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic and their ability to effectively communicate and persuade their audience to bring about behavioral changes. The limitations of traditional communication methods due to social restrictions led to the increased reliance on social media platforms to disseminate health-related information. By utilizing social media, doctors could reach a wider audience and significantly impact public health practices such as mask usage, vaccinations, and medication adherence.

The study recognizes the significance of persuasive appeals (Ethos, logos, and pathos) in conveying messages that generate genuine awareness of COVID-19 and effectively persuade the audience. Healthcare professionals, doctors, and communicators must employ appropriate language, intonation, and engaging visuals to deliver emotionally charged messages, leveraging their pathos, Ethos, and logos as healthcare professionals.

The choice of Instagram as the platform for this research was appropriate, as it allowed for the observation and analysis of interactions between DSMIs and their followers. Instagram's popularity in Indonesia and worldwide further supported its suitability for this study.

The findings of this study imply that doctors' active involvement on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic has inspired them to consider how they can continue leveraging their expertise to share information with the public, even once the pandemic has subsided. By enhancing people's

understanding of health-related topics through social media content, individuals may be motivated to proactively seek medical advice and prioritize their well-being without needing further prompts.

In summary, this research underscores the importance of doctors as influential figures on social media, their effectiveness in conveying messages and persuading their audience, and their lasting impact on public health practices, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

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