
DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES AND HEALTHCARE SERVICE DELIVERY IN MALAWI'S PRIVATE HEALTH SECTOR: A CASE STUDY OF PARTNERS IN HOPE MEDICAL CENTER

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation has become an important component of modern healthcare management, influencing how healthcare organizations communicate, engage stakeholders, and deliver services. This study examined the role of digital and social media strategies in enhancing healthcare service delivery within Malawi's private health sector, using Partners in Hope (PIH) Medical Center as a case study. The study specifically evaluated the digital platforms utilized by private healthcare institutions, assessed their contribution to stakeholder relationships, examined challenges affecting digital adoption, and identified strategies for improving digital communication practices.

A descriptive case study research design using a descriptive -methods approach was employed. Data were collected from 60 respondents comprising healthcare managers, ICT personnel, administrative staff, clinical staff, and patients. A total of 54 questionnaires were successfully completed, representing a response rate of 90%. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, while qualitative responses were analyzed thematically.

The findings revealed that private healthcare institutions in Malawi increasingly rely on digital communication platforms including email, WhatsApp, Facebook, institutional websites, Zoom, Skype, SMS, and Instagram. Email (90%) and WhatsApp (85%) were identified as the most frequently used platforms, followed by Facebook (70%), websites (65%), Zoom/Skype (60%), SMS (55%), and Instagram (30%). The study established that digital and social media platforms contribute significantly to improved communication

efficiency, enhanced patient engagement, faster information sharing, increased stakeholder trust, improved record management, and better healthcare service coordination.

However, several challenges limit effective digital transformation within Malawi's private healthcare sector. These include unreliable internet connectivity, high internet costs, inadequate digital skills, data privacy concerns, misinformation, negative online feedback, and lack of comprehensive digital communication policies.

The study concludes that digital and social media strategies are important drivers of improved healthcare communication and service delivery in Malawi's private health sector. However, realizing their full potential requires investment in digital infrastructure, staff capacity building, cybersecurity measures, and strategic digital communication policies. The study contributes to understanding how private healthcare institutions in developing countries can leverage digital technologies to strengthen stakeholder relationships and improve healthcare management practices.

KEYWORDS: Digital transformation, Social media, Healthcare communication, Stakeholder engagement, Private health sector, Malawi, Service delivery.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has transformed organizational communication and service delivery across various sectors, including healthcare. Digital and social media platforms have changed the traditional approach of one-way communication by introducing interactive, real-time, and stakeholder-centered communication models. Healthcare organizations worldwide increasingly utilize digital technologies such as websites, social networking platforms, electronic communication systems, telemedicine applications, and mobile technologies to improve patient engagement, health education, operational efficiency, and service accessibility.

Globally, healthcare institutions have embraced digital communication platforms as strategic tools for improving relationships with patients, employees, partners, and communities. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and institutional websites allow healthcare organizations to disseminate health information, promote services, respond to patient inquiries, and build organizational reputation. Digital platforms have also supported remote consultations, virtual meetings, online appointment systems, and electronic health information management, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The healthcare sector in developing countries has also experienced increasing adoption of digital communication technologies. In sub-Saharan Africa, mobile phone accessibility has enabled healthcare organizations to use platforms such as WhatsApp, SMS, and social media for health education, appointment reminders, patient follow-up, and disease prevention campaigns. Despite these developments, challenges such as limited internet infrastructure, high data costs, inadequate digital skills, and cybersecurity concerns continue to affect effective digital adoption.

In Malawi, digital transformation within the healthcare sector has gained increasing attention due to the growing importance of technology in improving healthcare accessibility and communication. The country has introduced several digital health initiatives, including electronic medical records, mobile health applications, and digital reporting systems. Private healthcare institutions have also adopted digital tools to support patient communication, service promotion, internal coordination, and stakeholder engagement.

Partners in Hope Medical Center represents an example of a private healthcare institution that has integrated various digital technologies into its operations. The institution uses platforms such as email, WhatsApp, Facebook, websites, Zoom, Skype, and other digital systems to facilitate communication, health awareness, administrative coordination, and stakeholder interaction. These technologies have supported communication with patients, healthcare workers, insurance providers, partners, and the wider community.

However, the effectiveness of digital and social media strategies within Malawi's private healthcare sector remains insufficiently explored. Although healthcare institutions increasingly adopt digital platforms, limited empirical evidence exists regarding how these technologies influence stakeholder relationships, organizational communication, and healthcare service delivery outcomes. Existing studies have largely focused on public health systems, donor-supported digital health programmes, and general technology adoption, creating a research gap regarding private healthcare organizations.

This study therefore evaluates digital and social media strategies within Malawi's private healthcare sector using Partners in Hope Medical Center as a case study. Rather than focusing only on one institution, the study provides broader insights into how private healthcare providers in Malawi can utilize digital communication technologies to enhance stakeholder engagement, improve service delivery, and strengthen organizational performance.

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- To examine digital and social media platforms used within Malawi's private healthcare sector.
- To assess how digital platforms contribute to stakeholder relationship management.
- To analyze challenges affecting digital and social media adoption in private healthcare institutions.
- To determine the effects of digital communication technologies on healthcare service delivery.
- To suggest strategies for improving digital transformation within private healthcare organizations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digital and Social Media in Healthcare Service Delivery

Digital transformation has become a major driver of innovation in healthcare systems worldwide. Healthcare organizations increasingly use digital communication technologies to improve information sharing, patient engagement, operational efficiency, and quality of care. Digital and social media platforms have changed healthcare communication from traditional one-way information dissemination into interactive communication systems where patients, healthcare providers, and other stakeholders can actively participate.

According to Ventola (2014), social media provides healthcare institutions with opportunities to distribute health information, promote preventive healthcare practices, and establish direct communication channels with patients. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, institutional websites, and online communication systems enable healthcare organizations to provide timely updates, respond to patient concerns, and improve public awareness of healthcare services.

Digital communication technologies also support internal organizational processes. Email systems, electronic medical records, virtual meeting platforms, and mobile communication applications enhance coordination among healthcare workers, improve decision-making, and reduce communication delays. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital platforms became particularly important in supporting remote communication, virtual consultations, and healthcare continuity.

However, successful digital transformation requires more than simply adopting technology. Organizations must address issues related to infrastructure, digital skills, information security, and effective management strategies. Poor internet connectivity, high operational

costs, inadequate training, and concerns about patient confidentiality remain significant barriers, particularly in developing countries.

2.2 Digital Health Communication in Africa

Across sub-Saharan Africa, digital technologies have increasingly influenced healthcare communication and service delivery. The expansion of mobile phone ownership has enabled healthcare providers to utilize mobile-based communication tools for health education, disease prevention, appointment reminders, and patient monitoring.

Studies indicate that platforms such as WhatsApp and SMS are particularly valuable in African healthcare environments because they are affordable, accessible, and widely used by both healthcare workers and patients. Healthcare professionals often use mobile communication groups to coordinate activities, consult colleagues, and share urgent medical information.

Despite these advantages, African healthcare institutions continue to experience challenges associated with digital adoption. Limited internet coverage, unstable electricity supply, high data costs, and limited digital literacy reduce the effectiveness of digital health initiatives. Additionally, concerns regarding data privacy and protection remain important due to the sensitive nature of healthcare information.

Therefore, while digital technologies present opportunities for improving healthcare systems in Africa, their success depends on appropriate infrastructure development, organizational readiness, and effective governance mechanisms.

2.3 Digital Transformation in Malawi's Private Healthcare Sector

Malawi has made progress in integrating digital technologies into healthcare management. The Malawi Digital Health Strategy (2020–2025) emphasizes the importance of technology adoption to improve healthcare information systems, coordination, reporting, and service delivery.

Digital platforms have increasingly been adopted by healthcare organizations in Malawi to support electronic medical records, mobile health communication, telemedicine, and health awareness campaigns. Private healthcare providers have also incorporated digital communication channels to improve customer engagement and strengthen organizational visibility.

Private health facilities such as Partners in Hope Medical Center use digital platforms including email, WhatsApp, websites, Facebook, Zoom, and Skype to communicate with

patients, employees, partners, and other stakeholders. These platforms support activities such as appointment coordination, patient follow-up, public health education, internal communication, and administrative management.

However, the private healthcare sector in Malawi faces challenges including limited investment in digital infrastructure, inconsistent internet connectivity, insufficient digital expertise, and lack of formal digital communication policies. These challenges create a gap between the availability of digital technologies and their effective utilization.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by two theories: Media Richness Theory and Stakeholder Theory.

3.1 Media Richness Theory

Media Richness Theory was developed by Daft and Lengel (1986). The theory explains that communication channels differ in their ability to transmit information effectively. Rich communication channels provide immediate feedback, multiple information cues, and personal interaction, making them suitable for complex communication situations.

In healthcare organizations, platforms such as Zoom and Skype represent rich communication channels because they allow real-time interaction between users. WhatsApp provides quick communication and immediate feedback, making it useful for healthcare coordination and urgent information sharing. Email and websites are considered less rich communication channels but remain effective for formal announcements, documentation, and official communication.

This theory helps explain why healthcare institutions select different digital platforms depending on communication needs. Effective use of appropriate communication channels can improve understanding, reduce delays, and enhance service delivery.

3.2 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory, introduced by Freeman (1984), argues that organizations achieve success by effectively managing relationships with different stakeholder groups. Stakeholders include customers, employees, suppliers, partners, government agencies, and communities.

In healthcare organizations, effective stakeholder engagement is essential because service delivery depends on cooperation between patients, healthcare workers, management, and external partners. Digital and social media platforms provide opportunities for organizations to communicate with stakeholders, collect feedback, build trust, and improve relationships.

Within Malawi's private healthcare sector, digital platforms enable healthcare providers to interact with patients, share health information, receive feedback, and improve transparency. Therefore, Stakeholder Theory provides a foundation for understanding how digital communication contributes to stronger healthcare relationships.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive case study research design using a mixed-methods approach. This design was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to examine digital and social media practices within a real healthcare environment while collecting both quantitative and qualitative information.

The case study approach focused on Partners in Hope Medical Center as a representative private healthcare institution in Malawi. The study examined how digital communication technologies are adopted, managed, and experienced by different stakeholders.

4.2 Study Area

The study was conducted at Partners in Hope Medical Center located in Lilongwe, Malawi. The institution was selected because it represents a private healthcare provider that uses various digital communication technologies in healthcare management and stakeholder engagement.

The organization utilizes platforms such as:

Email communication

WhatsApp

Facebook

Institutional website

Zoom and Skype

SMS communication

Electronic systems for operational management

4.3 Study Population and Sample Size

The study population consisted of individuals who interact with or manage digital communication systems within the healthcare institution. These included:

Management personnel

ICT and administrative staff

Healthcare workers

Patients and clients

The estimated population ranged between 120 and 150 individuals.

A sample size of 60 respondents was selected using the formula:

$$n = N/2$$

Where:

n = sample size

N = accessible population

Assuming an accessible population of 120 respondents:

$$n = 120/2 = 60 \text{ respondents}$$

4.4 Sampling Techniques

The study used both purposive and simple random sampling techniques.

Purposive sampling was used to select management, ICT personnel, and individuals with direct responsibility for digital communication systems.

Simple random sampling was used to select administrative staff, healthcare workers, and patients to ensure fair representation and reduce selection bias.

4.5 Data Collection Methods

Primary and secondary data collection methods were used.

Primary Data

Primary data was collected using:

Structured questionnaires

Semi-structured interviews

Observation

Questionnaires collected quantitative information regarding digital platform usage, effectiveness, challenges, and improvement strategies.

Interviews provided deeper understanding of digital communication practices, policies, and organizational experiences.

Observation was used to verify the actual use of digital systems within the institution.

Secondary Data

Secondary information was obtained from:

Academic journals

Digital health strategies

Organizational documents

Previous research studies

4.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages.

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to organize and analyze responses.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis by identifying common themes related to digital communication benefits, challenges, and recommendations.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical research principles. Permission was obtained from relevant authorities before data collection.

Participation was voluntary, and respondents provided informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. Information collected was used strictly for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

5.1 Response Rate and Demographic Characteristics

The study targeted 60 respondents from different stakeholder groups within Partners in Hope Medical Center. Out of the 60 questionnaires distributed, 54 were successfully completed and returned, representing a response rate of 90%. This response rate was considered adequate for providing reliable information regarding digital and social media strategies within Malawi's private healthcare sector.

Table 1: Response Rate.

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Returned questionnaires	54	90%
Not returned	6	10%
Total	60	100%

The demographic findings showed that respondents represented different stakeholder categories, including management, ICT staff, administrative personnel, healthcare workers, and patients. This diversity provided a balanced understanding of digital communication practices from both organizational and user perspectives.

The majority of respondents were aged between 20 and 40 years, indicating that most participants were within the economically active population and had reasonable exposure to digital technologies.

5.2 Digital and Social Media Platforms Used in Private Healthcare Communication

The study established that private healthcare institutions increasingly rely on multiple digital communication platforms to support service delivery and stakeholder engagement.

Table 2: Digital and Social Media Platforms Used.

Digital Platform	Frequency	Percentage
Email	49	90%
WhatsApp	46	85%
Facebook	38	70%
Website	35	65%
Zoom/Skype	32	60%
SMS	30	55%
Instagram	16	30%

The findings indicate that email and WhatsApp are the dominant communication platforms used within the private healthcare environment. Email remains important for formal communication, documentation, referrals, and professional correspondence, while WhatsApp provides faster communication, immediate feedback, and convenient coordination among healthcare workers and patients.

Social media platforms such as Facebook and institutional websites were also identified as important tools for public communication, health promotion, and organizational visibility.

5.3 Contribution of Digital Platforms to Stakeholder Relationships

The study assessed how digital communication technologies contribute to relationships between healthcare organizations and stakeholders.

Table 3: Contribution of Digital Platforms to Stakeholder Engagement.

Contribution	Frequency	Percentage
Improved communication	42	78%
Faster communication	41	75%
Better patient engagement	37	68%
Improved feedback collection	35	65%
Increased stakeholder trust	32	60%

The results show that digital platforms have strengthened healthcare stakeholder relationships by improving accessibility, communication speed, and interaction.

Respondents indicated that patients are now able to access information more easily, make inquiries, receive updates, and provide feedback through digital channels. Healthcare workers also reported improved coordination through instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp. These findings support Stakeholder Theory by Freeman (1984), which emphasizes that effective communication and relationship management are essential for organizational success.

5.4 Effects of Digital Media on Healthcare Communication and Service Delivery

The study examined whether digital technologies improved organizational communication and healthcare service delivery.

Table 4: Effects of Digital Technologies on Service Delivery.

Effect	Frequency	Percentage
Improved internal communication	43	80%
Improved healthcare service delivery	41	76%
Reduced delays	39	72%
Better record keeping	38	70%
Improved information accuracy	37	68%
Improved patient satisfaction	36	66%

The findings demonstrate that digital technologies have positively influenced healthcare operations. Respondents reported that digital communication has reduced delays, improved information accuracy, enhanced record management, and strengthened patient satisfaction.

The findings support Media Richness Theory by Daft and Lengel (1986), which suggests that communication effectiveness depends on selecting appropriate communication channels. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Zoom, and email enable quick information exchange and improved coordination.

5.5 Challenges Affecting Digital Transformation in Private Healthcare

Although digital platforms provided significant benefits, respondents identified several barriers affecting effective implementation.

Table 5: Challenges Affecting Digital Communication.

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Poor internet connectivity	44	82%
High cost of data	41	75%
Lack of digital skills	32	60%
Data privacy concerns	31	58%
Lack of clear digital policies	30	55%
Misinformation	27	50%
Negative online feedback	26	48%

The most significant challenge identified was unreliable internet connectivity, followed by high data costs. These findings reflect common challenges experienced by healthcare organizations in developing countries where digital infrastructure remains limited.

Respondents also highlighted concerns regarding patient confidentiality, misinformation, and lack of formal digital communication guidelines.

5.6 Strategies for Improving Digital Communication in Malawi's Private Healthcare Sector

Respondents proposed several strategies for strengthening digital transformation.

Table 6: Recommended Improvement Strategies.

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Staff training	46	85%
Increased investment in digital technologies	44	82%
Better internet infrastructure	43	80%
Clear communication policies	42	78%
Improved data security	39	72%
Dedicated digital communication team	35	65%

The findings indicate that successful digital transformation requires not only technology adoption but also investment in human capacity, infrastructure, governance, and security systems.

6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study findings demonstrate that digital and social media platforms have become important components of healthcare management in Malawi's private health sector. The widespread use of email and WhatsApp indicates that healthcare organizations are adopting

communication technologies that are affordable, accessible, and suitable for their operational needs.

The dominance of WhatsApp reflects its importance in developing countries where mobile communication is often more accessible than advanced digital systems. Similar studies have shown that mobile-based communication platforms improve coordination among healthcare workers and support patient follow-up.

The findings also show that digital platforms strengthen stakeholder relationships by improving communication, engagement, and feedback mechanisms. This supports Freeman's Stakeholder Theory, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining effective relationships with organizational stakeholders.

Furthermore, improvements in service delivery demonstrate the value of digital transformation in healthcare management. Digital communication reduces delays, improves coordination, and enhances information accuracy. These findings align with Media Richness Theory, which suggests that communication effectiveness improves when organizations select appropriate communication channels according to their communication needs.

However, challenges related to internet connectivity, data costs, and digital skills remain significant barriers. These findings are consistent with evidence from many African healthcare environments where technological adoption is affected by infrastructure limitations and resource constraints.

Therefore, while digital technologies provide substantial benefits, private healthcare organizations in Malawi require strategic investment, effective policies, and continuous capacity building to maximize the value of digital transformation.

7. CONCLUSION

This study evaluated the role of digital and social media strategies in improving healthcare service delivery within Malawi's private health sector using Partners in Hope Medical Center as a case study.

The findings reveal that digital platforms such as email, WhatsApp, Facebook, websites, Zoom, Skype, and SMS are increasingly important tools for healthcare communication and stakeholder engagement. These technologies have improved information sharing, patient interaction, internal coordination, and healthcare service delivery.

However, the study concludes that digital transformation within Malawi's private healthcare sector remains affected by challenges including poor internet infrastructure, high data costs, limited digital skills, privacy concerns, and inadequate digital communication policies.

The study therefore concludes that successful digital healthcare transformation requires a combination of technology investment, organizational readiness, staff capacity development, and effective governance systems.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

1. Investment in Digital Infrastructure

Private healthcare institutions should collaborate with technology providers and stakeholders to improve internet reliability and accessibility.

2. Continuous Digital Skills Training

Healthcare workers and administrative staff should receive regular training to improve confidence and competence in using digital communication tools.

3. Development of Digital Communication Policies

Healthcare organizations should establish clear policies guiding social media management, patient communication, confidentiality, and online engagement.

4. Strengthening Cybersecurity and Data Protection

Institutions should implement stronger security systems to protect sensitive patient information and maintain stakeholder trust.

5. Establishment of Digital Communication Departments

Private healthcare institutions should consider creating dedicated teams responsible for managing online communication, responding to inquiries, and monitoring digital platforms.

6. Increased Investment in Emerging Technologies

Healthcare organizations should invest in modern digital solutions including telemedicine, electronic health systems, and integrated communication platforms.

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