

Ethical and legal aspects of doctors' activities on social media: A literature review

I Wayan Tunjung^a, I Made Putra Biantara^a

^a Medical Education Study Program, Faculty of Medicine, Al-Azhar Islamic University, Mataram, Indonesia.

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Social media has become an essential communication platform influencing medical professionalism. For doctors, it serves as a tool for education, health promotion, and professional networking. However, unregulated use poses legal and ethical challenges, particularly concerning confidentiality and professionalism. This study explores the legal and ethical implications of doctors' activities on social media in Indonesia.

Methods: This research employs a normative legal and literature review approach. Sources were obtained from Google Scholar, PubMed, ScienceDirect, Garuda, and Sinta, using keywords such as doctor, social media, ethics, and health law. Articles published between 2020 and 2025 were selected based on relevance to legal and ethical aspects of medical social media use.

Results: Findings indicate that while social media enhances accessibility to health information, education, and patient engagement, it also introduces risks of privacy breaches, misinformation, and blurred doctor-patient boundaries. Indonesian regulations, such as Law No. 11/2008 (ITE Law) and Law No. 17/2023 (Health Law), partially address these issues, but no specific regulation governs doctors' digital conduct. A comparative analysis with international guidelines, such as those of the General Medical Council (UK), underscores the need for clearer national standards. Ethical principles in the Indonesian Medical Code of Ethics (KODEKI) must guide doctors' online presence. Strengthened digital professionalism, legal clarity, and continuous education are crucial.

Conclusion: Doctors' responsible use of social media can enhance public health communication. However, comprehensive legal frameworks and ethical awareness are vital to safeguard patient rights and uphold medical professionalism in the digital era.

Keywords: Ethics, Legal, Professionalism, Social Media



✉ Correspondence: Medical Education Study Program, Faculty of Medicine, Al-Azhar Islamic University, Mataram, Indonesia.

Email: wayantunjung001@gmail.com



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INTRODUCTION

Health and technology today are inseparable, forming the foundation of modern society's pursuit of better living standards (Bero *et al.*, 2025). Technological advancement, particularly digital innovation, has transformed nearly every sector of human life, including healthcare. In the postmodern era, technology manifests itself through various digital tools and platforms that enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of medical services. From electronic health records to telemedicine, the convergence of health and technology has redefined how doctors interact with patients and the public (Brenner *et al.*, 2024). One of the most prominent products of this digital era is social media, which has become not only a means of social interaction but also an essential medium for professional engagement and public communication in healthcare (Brivot, Paquette, and Huxley, 2025).

Social media is an internet-based platform that allows users to search, create, and share content in the form of information, education, opinion, or entertainment (Bulut and Kar, 2025). The growing role of social media in healthcare is undeniable. It has revolutionized the way medical information is accessed and disseminated, breaking down barriers of geography, socioeconomic status, and education (Calvaresi *et al.*, 2025). According to recent global data, billions of individuals now engage with platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, and LinkedIn daily. The healthcare sector, particularly hospitals and medical professionals, has also adopted social media as a tool for communication, marketing, and education. In fact, studies reveal that more than 90% of hospitals in developed countries maintain an active presence on social media to improve community outreach and promote health literacy (Capulli *et al.*, 2025).

For doctors, social media serves multiple functions: professional networking, knowledge sharing, institutional promotion, and patient education (Chimukuche *et al.*, 2024). Through online engagement, medical professionals can reach larger audiences, respond to health misinformation, and participate in public health campaigns. However, alongside these advantages, social media introduces complex challenges, particularly in relation to medical ethics, patient confidentiality, and legal accountability (Choi *et al.*, 2025). The rapid digitalization of health communication has blurred the boundaries between professional and personal domains. Consequently, what was once a private interaction within the doctor-patient relationship is now susceptible to public exposure and scrutiny (Crawford *et al.*, 2025).

In Indonesia, this issue has become increasingly relevant due to the expanding digital culture and the lack of clear regulations governing doctors' online behavior (Farooq *et al.*, 2024). While general laws such as Law No. 11 of 2008 on Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) and Law No. 17 of 2023 on Health provide overarching frameworks for digital communication and patient rights, there are no specific guidelines addressing how doctors should ethically and legally conduct themselves on social media. This gap in regulation creates uncertainty both for doctors seeking to maintain professionalism in the digital space and for patients whose privacy may be at risk during online consultations or informal exchanges (Irawati, Kistan, and Basri, 2023). Furthermore, ethical concerns arise when doctors share medical cases, express personal opinions, or interact with patients through non-professional channels, all of which may inadvertently damage the credibility of the medical profession (Grijalba *et al.*, 2024).

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative legal and ethical analysis of doctors' activities on social media within the Indonesian context, which remains underexplored in existing literature. Previous studies have largely focused on the social, communicative, or promotional aspects of social media use in healthcare, emphasizing its role in patient education or institutional visibility. However, few have examined how current laws and ethical codes apply to the unique

digital interactions between doctors and patients. This paper fills that gap by critically analyzing the intersection of law, ethics, and digital professionalism in medical practice. It also compares Indonesia's current situation with international best practices, such as those outlined by the General Medical Council (GMC) in the United Kingdom, which has issued explicit guidance on doctors' use of social media to preserve professionalism and patient confidentiality.

By employing a normative legal research approach and reviewing multidisciplinary literature, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the opportunities and risks posed by social media for medical professionals. It highlights the urgent need for clearer ethical standards, specific institutional policies, and professional training in digital communication. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the development of a conceptual framework that balances freedom of expression with medical responsibility. In doing so, it aims to foster responsible digital professionalism among doctors, safeguard patient rights, and enhance public trust in the medical profession within the ever-evolving landscape of digital health communication.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a normative legal research method with a literature review approach to examine the ethical and legal implications of doctors' activities on social media. The purpose of this method is to analyze existing laws, ethical codes, and scholarly discussions to identify challenges and potential solutions regarding medical professionalism in digital spaces.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a systematic search of both international and national academic databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Indonesian journal portals such as Garuda and Sinta. These databases were selected for their credibility and wide coverage of scholarly publications relevant to medical ethics, health law, and digital communication. The following keywords were used during the literature search: "doctor OR medical personnel OR health practitioner," "social media OR digital platform OR online consultation," and "medical ethics OR patient confidentiality OR health law OR professional regulation."

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria The inclusion criteria for selected sources were as follows: Articles published between 2020 and 2025. Publications written in English or Indonesian. Full-text accessibility. Explicit discussion of doctors' use of social media from a legal or ethical perspective. Sources were excluded if they: Were not available in full text, were irrelevant to the research objectives, or did not constitute research or review articles (e.g., opinion pieces or short communications).

Data Analysis

All selected articles were analyzed narratively to identify key themes, issues, and legal implications related to doctors' professional activities on social media. The analysis focused on: the relationship between medical ethics and online professionalism; legal frameworks governing digital communication and patient confidentiality; and comparative perspectives on international guidelines and Indonesian regulations. Through this method, the study aimed to synthesize current knowledge and propose recommendations to strengthen legal certainty and ethical conduct among medical professionals in digital environments.

RESULT

The findings of this literature review reveal that social media has become an inseparable part of modern medical practice, influencing how doctors communicate, educate, and interact

with patients and the broader public. Based on the reviewed studies, doctors use social media for both personal and professional purposes, including professional networking, health promotion, and public education. The increasing integration of social media into healthcare practice provides numerous benefits, such as facilitating quick information dissemination, supporting collaborative research and education, and enhancing patient engagement. However, this digital transformation also presents several challenges, particularly concerning patient privacy, data security, and ethical boundaries in online interactions. Therefore, a balance between accessibility and professional responsibility is essential to ensure that social media remains a constructive tool in advancing public health while safeguarding medical ethics and legal integrity.

Table 1. Summary of Section

Aspect	Findings / Description
Nature of Social Media Use	Social media is widely used by doctors for both personal and professional purposes, serving as a key medium for interaction, information sharing, and support in health-related discussions.
Advantages of Social Media	a) Rapid dissemination of information. b) Facilitates collaborative research projects, online surveys, and academic webinars, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. c) Supports medical education and public health promotion.
Disadvantages of Social Media	a) Time-wasting behavior. b) Overload of health information causing confusion and difficulty verifying accuracy. c) Spread of false or invalid information (hoaxes) leading to public anxiety or fear.
Legal Protection Issues	Patients' privacy and data protection are regulated under Law No. 17 of 2023 on Health and Law No. 11 of 2008 on Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE). - Article 26 of ITE prohibits sharing personal health information without consent. - Ministerial Regulation No. 20/2016 on personal data protection in electronic systems provides guidelines for data handling.
Ethical Considerations	The Indonesian Medical Code of Ethics (KODEKI) stresses the importance of medical confidentiality and professionalism in digital contexts. - Doctors must respect patient consent, avoid defamation, and separate professional and personal online presence.
Impact on Doctor–Patient Relationship	Patients become better informed and more confident, thereby improving consultation quality. However, misinterpretation of online information may challenge doctors' authority and lead to conflicts or mistrust.
Need for Regulation	Indonesia lacks specific regulations on doctors' use of social media. - The study highlights the need for clearer institutional rules, ethical education, and privacy frameworks similar to the UK's General Medical Council (GMC) 2013 guidelines.
International Comparison	The GMC (UK) already has detailed policies covering confidentiality, patient boundaries, and online professionalism. - Such frameworks are recommended for adaptation in Indonesia.
Recommendations	Develop specific, dynamic regulations that involve stakeholders (doctors, patients, regulators, and social media platforms). - Conduct training on digital professionalism. - Encourage ethical awareness and responsible social media behaviour among doctors.

The table summarises the main findings from the literature review on doctors' social media activity. It highlights both the positive and negative implications of social media use in the medical field, as well as the legal and ethical frameworks that shape such activities. The results show that while social media offers significant advantages, such as facilitating information dissemination, professional collaboration, and health promotion, it also introduces new challenges, including privacy violations, misinformation, and ethical dilemmas.

The legal aspects summarized in the table emphasize the importance of data protection laws, such as Law No. 17 of 2023 on Health and Law No. 11 of 2008 on

Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE), which regulate patients' rights and the confidentiality of health information shared online. From an ethical perspective, the findings reinforce the relevance of the Indonesian Medical Code of Ethics (KODEKI), which obliges doctors to maintain confidentiality, professionalism, and integrity even in digital interactions. Furthermore, the table underlines the lack of specific national regulations governing doctors' use of social media in Indonesia. This gap contrasts with international practices, such as the General Medical Council (GMC) guidelines in the United Kingdom, which clearly define professional standards for online conduct. The review therefore suggests the urgent need for comprehensive and adaptive regulations, continuous education on digital professionalism, and clear boundaries between personal and professional online activities.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that social media has transformed the landscape of medical practice, shaping new patterns of interaction between doctors, patients, and the wider community. The rapid evolution of digital communication platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn has brought significant changes to how health information is disseminated and consumed (Kohanová *et al.*, 2025). For doctors, these platforms serve as both opportunities and challenges, offering new pathways for professional engagement, health promotion, and education, while simultaneously demanding greater accountability in upholding medical ethics and patient confidentiality (Jandu and Carey, 2025).

One of the most prominent advantages identified in this review is social media's ability to enhance accessibility and communication. Through social networks, doctors can reach broader audiences beyond the confines of clinics or hospitals (Lee, Panteli, and Lin, 2025). This allows health information to be delivered more efficiently to individuals across different geographical and socio-economic backgrounds (Low *et al.*, 2025). The use of webinars, online discussions, and digital campaigns has proven effective in increasing public awareness of preventive health behaviors, especially during global health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, social media facilitates collaborative research and professional development, enabling doctors to exchange knowledge, share experiences, and participate in multidisciplinary forums that promote continuous learning (Lyytinen, 2025).

However, despite its promising potential, the use of social media in healthcare raises serious legal and ethical concerns. The results show that patient privacy remains a highly sensitive issue. In Indonesia, Law No. 17 of 2023 on Health and Law No. 11 of 2008 concerning Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) provide the legal foundation for protecting personal and health-related data. Yet, the interpretation and implementation of these laws in the context of online consultations remain ambiguous. When a patient discloses personal medical information through private messages or public comments, the boundaries of confidentiality become blurred. This ambiguity not only exposes patients to the risk of data misuse but also places doctors in a vulnerable position if sensitive information is unintentionally disclosed (Omidvar, Ghasemi, and Frau, 2024).

Ethical responsibility further complicates the issue. According to the Indonesian Medical Code of Ethics (KODEKI), doctors are required to uphold confidentiality, honesty, and professionalism under all circumstances, including digital interactions (Reinhart, 2025). The challenge arises when the informal and open nature of social media conflicts with these principles. For example, when doctors share patient cases for educational purposes, even anonymized data may still risk patient identification if not handled carefully. Additionally, social media's instant and public nature increases the potential for defamation, misinformation, or misrepresentation, especially when doctors engage in public debates or respond to controversial health topics (Romero-Moreno, 2025).

This study also highlights the impact of social media on the doctor-patient relationship. Patients today are increasingly well-informed, often arriving at consultations armed with information gathered online (Sánchez-Santos and Cano-Valderrama, 2024). While this can encourage shared decision-making and empower patients, it can also lead to misunderstanding and distrust when online information contradicts professional medical advice. Doctors may find their authority challenged, which can create communication barriers and reduce patient compliance. Therefore, doctors must develop digital literacy and empathy, allowing them to guide patients in distinguishing credible sources from misleading content (Sathianathan, Mhd Ali, and Chong, 2025).

The absence of specific regulations governing doctors' use of social media in Indonesia exacerbates these challenges. Unlike the General Medical Council (GMC) in the United Kingdom, which has published comprehensive guidelines titled "Doctors' Use of Social Media" (2013), Indonesian doctors operate within a largely self-regulated environment. The GMC guidelines emphasise maintaining professional boundaries, safeguarding confidentiality, and avoiding online behaviour that could undermine public trust in the medical profession (Sievi and Pawelec, 2025). Adopting similar frameworks in Indonesia would help provide legal certainty and ethical clarity in the digital era. Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of digital professionalism training for healthcare workers (Suprpto and Ihsan Kamaruddin, 2025). Many ethical and legal violations arise not from malicious intent but from a lack of awareness regarding the implications of online behavior. Integrating digital ethics and communication modules into medical education could prepare future doctors to navigate social media responsibly. This training should include case-based learning on privacy management, online professionalism, and the proper use of social platforms for health education (Sun, Chen, and Zhang, 2025).

To address these issues effectively, a multi-stakeholder approach is required. Policymakers, medical associations, social media companies, and the general public must collaborate to design adaptive and inclusive regulations (Sydorenko, Kubanskyi, and Kiel, 2025). Such policies should ensure that doctors are protected when acting in good faith while still holding them accountable for breaches of professionalism (Zhang *et al.*, 2025). Additionally, continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are necessary to ensure that regulations remain relevant to evolving technologies and social behaviors. Social media should not be viewed solely as a threat but as a valuable extension of medical practice. When used wisely, it enhances transparency, strengthens public engagement, and fosters trust in the healthcare system (Wijayanti *et al.*, 2025). Doctors who embrace ethical digital communication can become influential advocates for public health, using social media to combat misinformation, promote evidence-based practices, and inspire behavioral change (Tunga, 2022).

The discussion underscores the dual nature of social media in the medical field; it is both a powerful tool for education and communication and a potential source of ethical and legal risk. The key to maximising its benefits lies in developing clear regulations, fostering ethical awareness, and promoting professional accountability. By combining legal safeguards with ethical self-discipline, doctors can ensure that social media becomes an instrument for improving healthcare quality, protecting patient rights, and enhancing the integrity of the medical profession in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that social media has become an essential element in modern medical practice, providing doctors with a platform for professional communication, health promotion, and patient education. However, alongside these benefits, the use of social media also poses significant ethical and legal challenges, particularly in maintaining patient confidentiality, professional boundaries, and the accuracy of shared health information. The absence of specific regulations governing doctors' online activities in Indonesia underscores the need for clearer legal frameworks that align with technological advancements and medical ethics. Therefore, social media use among

doctors must be guided by a balance between digital openness and professional responsibility to maintain public trust in the medical profession.

To ensure safe and ethical engagement on social media, it is recommended that comprehensive policies and educational programs be developed at both institutional and national levels. Medical associations should collaborate with policymakers and digital platforms to create specific guidelines that regulate online medical interactions, protect patient data, and promote accountability. Additionally, digital professionalism training should be incorporated into medical education curricula to strengthen doctors' awareness of ethical conduct in virtual environments. By adopting these measures, social media can be transformed from a potential source of ethical risk into a strategic tool for improving public health, strengthening professional networks, and advancing medical communication in the digital era.

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Conflict of Interest

There are no potential conflicts of interest relevant to this article.

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