

Medical Authority in the Age of Influencers: Examining Source Credibility and Health Message Adoption among Nigerian Undergraduates

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Article information	Abstract
DOI : 10.25077/jds.3.1.38-47.2026 Correspondence : shadrachidi@gmail.com	The increasing dependence on social media for health information among young people has transformed health communication, with health influencers emerging as important sources of health advice. However, concerns have been raised regarding the credibility of health information shared by influencers and the extent to which such information influences the health behaviour of users. Previous studies have examined health influencers; however, the specific dimensions of source credibility particularly expertise and trustworthiness and how these dimensions predict the adoption of health messages among Nigerian undergraduates have received limited scholarly attention. This study examined the influence of the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of Aproko Doctor, a Nigerian medical influencer, on the adoption of health messages among undergraduates of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University (COOU), Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was adopted. Data were collected from 264 undergraduates who followed Aproko Doctor on social media using a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation, and multiple linear regression were used for data analysis. The findings revealed high levels of perceived expertise (Grand Mean = 4.13) and trustworthiness (Grand Mean = 4.11) among the respondents. The respondents also demonstrated a high level of health message adoption (Grand Mean = 4.03). Correlation analysis showed that perceived expertise ($r = 0.369$, $p < 0.001$) and trustworthiness ($r = 0.523$, $p < 0.001$) were significantly associated with message adoption. However, multiple regression analysis revealed that when both variables were modelled simultaneously, only perceived trustworthiness significantly predicted message adoption ($\beta = 0.507$, $p < 0.001$), while perceived expertise did not emerge as a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.023$, $p = 0.711$). The regression model was statistically significant ($F(2, 261) = 49.19$, $p < 0.001$) and accounted for 27.4% of the variance in health message adoption ($R^2 = 0.274$). The study demonstrates that medically qualified health influencers can serve as credible sources of health information and effectively promote positive health behaviours among young people. The findings provide practical insights for public health agencies seeking to leverage trusted medical influencers in health promotion campaigns in Nigeria.
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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, health communication is carried out by trained medical personnel such as medical doctors, global health regulators such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), public health institutions like hospitals, Centers for Disease Control such as the Nigerian Center for Disease Control, and the influence of these institutions is grounded in scientific validation, formal training, and institutional backing (Weisz & Nannestad, 2021). However, the emergence of new media technologies, particularly social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and X has brought a shift, leading to the

emergence of self-proclaimed health communicators known as health influencers, who discuss diverse health issues such as nutrition and physical education (Kaňková, et al. 2024; Liu & Zheng, 2024). While some of these advocates are trained health practitioners who deploy their medical knowledge and training into health content creation, many have no formal training. Instead, they rely on skilled storytelling and information from different sources, which they use to create persuasive content that resonates with their target audience. This raises questions about their implications for individual audiences and the broader health communication sector.

Access to and utilisation of online health information have attracted a plethora of studies. Many of the studies (Fox et al., 2026; Kaňková et al., 2024) show that young people increasingly access health information from diverse online sources rather than traditional established medical ones. This development is attributed to easy access as a result of algorithmic visibility, speed, interactivity, relatability, skilled storytelling techniques and emotional engagement that characterise the communication styles of influencers which making consumers to pay little or no attention to the professional background or authority of health influencers. Scholars (Xu, et al., 2023) further assert that social media platforms like Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, Tiktok and a host of others have become contested arenas where institutional medical authority competes with influencer-based authority for legitimacy and influence. This development is very significant considering the importance of informed decisions regarding one's health. An uninformed decision regarding health matters such as medication use, vaccination, nutritional practices, mental health decisions can have severe long-term effect and can even lead to death. Additionally, studies have established that the proliferation of health misinformation on social media platforms during outbreaks of diseases such as COVID-19 has led to the concept of 'infodemic', a phenomenon described by World Health Organisation as worse than COVID-19 pandemic ((Rodrigues et al., 2024; Al-Qahtani et al., 2025).

The increasing popularity of health influencers has also attracted attention of studies. Globally, studies showed that that health influencers shape health attitudes of adolescent and young in areas like nutritional and diary habits (Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2024; Sercu, 2024), body image perceptions (Engel et al., 2024), mental health awareness (Adeane & Stasiak, 2024), physical activity (Ramlan, et al., 2023) and general health information-seeking behaviors (Pfender & Bleakley, 2023). Some studies (Pfender & Bleakley, 2024; Lawal & Stvilia, 2025) further elucidate that young people often perceive health influencers as credible and relatable sources of health advice, leading to increased trust in both health information and health-related products promoted online by the influencers. However, a several other studies raise concerns about the promotion of unstandardized health products with unrealistic health promises especially in relation to body shape and weight-control practices (Simba & Girma, 2025; Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019; Engel, et al. 2024; Fortunato et al., 2026). With Nigeria, Studies (Nnaemeka et al., 2025; Luqman et al. 2025; Femi-Aderinto, 2024) reported that social media audience are significantly influence by social media influencers that are trained medical practitioners compared to non-medical experts. Furthermore, a strand of studies suggest that subject matter discuss by influencers determines level of influence, suggesting that fitness and dietary influencers exert high influence (Oni, 2025; Kanmodi et al, 2021; Ikpi & Undelikwo, 2019).

Taken together, the existing studies show a presence of inconsistent understanding of the determinants of credibility and adoption of health information from social media health influencers. Most studies tend to treat credibility as a single construct rather than disaggregating the key dimensions such as expertise and trustworthiness, and how they lead to adoption of health information, especially among university undergraduates in Nigeria who are major consumers of social media and often follow influencers including health influencers (Oni et al., 2025). Drawing from Source Credibility Theory, the current study aims to examine whether undergraduates in Nigeria perceive social media health influencers as more credible than medical professionals in online health communication and how such credibility perceptions influence their adoption of health messages and their behavioral intentions. The study is significant because it

contributes to contemporary debates on digital authority, youth media culture, health misinformation, and strategic health communication in developing countries, particularly Nigeria.

METHODS

Study Design

Descriptive quantitative survey design was adopted to investigate how undergraduates in Nigeria perceive the credibility of the health social media health influencer known as *Aproko Doctor* and their level of adoption of health messages disseminated by the influencer. The design was considered appropriate because it allows for the systematic collection and analysis of data on perceptions and behavioural intentions and is widely used in similar studies examining source credibility and health message adoption among Nigerian university students (Oni et al., 2025; Adeitan et al., 2021).

Participants

This study is delimited to undergraduates at Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University (COOU), Igbariam Campus, Anambra State, Southeast Nigeria. The undergraduates at COOU are assumed to share similar characteristics common among undergraduates across Nigerian universities, particularly high digital engagement and frequent exposure to health-related content on social media platforms (Okara et al., 2024). A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents. The inclusion criterion is that only followers of *Aproko Doctor* on any social media platforms were selected. This is because we want to ensure that only respondents with direct exposure to the influencer's content participated in the study. A minimum sample size of 384 respondents was determined using Cochran's (1977) formula at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. However, only 264 fully completed questionnaire were retrieved and found suitable for analysis, representing a response rate of 68.8% (Fincham, 2008).

Materials and Instruments

Data were collected using a questionnaire. The questionnaire items were developed based on insights from previous related studies (Njoku et al. 2025; Nnaemeka et al., 2025) and adapted scales based on Source Credibility Scale model (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). The questionnaire was further validated by three experts in Mass Communication at Taraba State University, Jalingo. and was pilot-tested on 30 undergraduates at National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja yielding a minimum Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.87 across all items, suggesting valid internal consistency (Menon et al., 2025).

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered online using Google Forms. The link to the questionnaire was shared to the participants through various departmental WhatsApp groups platforms, between February and March 2026. A brief introduction explaining the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality was provided on the first page of the form. Participants were screened through an initial filter question to confirm they followed *Aproko Doctor* before proceeding.

Data Analysis

Data collected were analysed using Descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive tools used were frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations while the inferential tools were Pearson Product Moment Correlation and multiple linear regression analysis. Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to determine the relationship between perceived credibility and adoption of health messages (Odunsi & Farris, 2023), while multiple linear regression was employed to determine the extent to which credibility dimensions (trustworthiness and expertise) predicted adoption of health messages (Gao et al., 2026). Both analyses were conducted with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents ($n = 264$)

Variable	Categories	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	121	45.8
	Female	143	54.2
Age Range	18 – 20 years	78	29.5
	21 – 25 years	152	57.6
	26 – 30 years	29	11.0
	31 years and above	5	1.9
Level of Study	100 Level	42	15.9
	200 Level	66	25.0
	300 Level	82	31.1
	400 Level	68	25.8
	500 Level (Carryover/Law/Eng)	6	2.2
Primary Platform used to follow Aproko Doctor	X (Twitter)	14	5.3
	Instagram	54	20.4
	TikTok	60	22.7
	Facebook	114	43.2
	YouTube	22	8.3

Table 1 above shows the demographic features of the respondents. It can be deduced that female are slightly predominance, accounting for 54.2% ($n = 143$) compared to males. This implies that the findings may slightly reflect female perspectives. The majority of respondents were within the 21–25 years (57.6%, $n = 152$), suggesting that the study largely represents young undergraduates, a cohort typically characterised by high digital engagement and strong exposure to online health content. Regarding academic level, though the respondents were selected across all levels, year three students formed the largest proportion (31.1%, $n = 82$), suggesting a moderate concentration of mid-level undergraduates whose academic exposure may enhance their ability to critically engage with health information sources. Regarding social media platforms used to follow health influencers particularly *Aproko Doctor*, Facebook recorded the highest usage (43.2%, $n = 114$), followed by Tiktok (22.7%, $n = 60$) and Instagram (20.4%, $n = 54$), while X and YouTube were less utilised, implying that health communication from influencers is most likely to achieve wider reach through Facebook and secondarily through TikTok and Instagram, making platform selection a key consideration in digital health communication strategies.

Table 2: Perceived Expertise of Aproko Doctor ($n = 264$)

S/N	Research Items	SA (5)	A (4)	U (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean
1.	I consider Aproko Doctor to be highly skilled in providing medical and health-related information.	118	98	22	16	10	4.13
2.	Aproko Doctor demonstrates a high level of professional competence as a medical doctor on social media.	134	88	18	14	10	4.18
3.	I perceive the health advice shared by Aproko Doctor as being based on deep medical knowledge and experience.	105	112	25	12	10	4.09
4.	Aproko Doctor is an authoritative source when it comes to preventive healthcare and wellness.	110	102	28	15	9	4.09
5.	I find Aproko Doctor's medical explanations to be clear, logical, and professionally sound.	125	95	20	14	10	4.18
Grand Mean							4.13

Note: $M \geq 3.00 = Accepted$

$M < 3.00 = Rejected$

Perceived Expertise refers to the extent to which the audience perceives a communicator to be knowledgeable and competent in a given subject and its delivery (Hovland et al., 1953). Table 2 presents respondents' ratings of the perceived expertise of Aproko Doctor across five measurement items. The results show that Aproko Doctor is highly skilled in providing medical and health-related information as evident in Item 1, where 118 respondents strongly agreed and 98 agreed, with a mean of 4.13. The

respondents further indicated that Aproko Doctor demonstrates a high level of professional competence as a medical doctor on social media. This is seen in Item 2, where 134 respondents strongly agreed and 88 agreed resulting in a mean of 4.18. Furthermore, the respondents perceived the health advice by the influencer as product of deep medical knowledge and experience. This is reflected in Item 3 with a mean of 4.09. Similarly, the respondents perceived the influencer as an authoritative source of health information ($M=4.09$) and indicated that his explanations of health issues are clear, logical and professional (4.18). The grand mean for perceived expertise is 4.13 which is above the decision point of 3.00. This suggests that the respondents have a positive perception of Aproko Doctor's expertise.

Table 3: Perceived Trustworthiness of Aproko Doctor's Messages (n = 264)

S/N	Research Items (Perceived Trustworthiness)	SA (5)	A (4)	U (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean
1.	I believe Aproko Doctor is honest and sincere in the health information he provides.	130	90	20	14	10	4.20
2.	I consider the health messages from Aproko Doctor to be reliable and dependable.	115	105	18	16	10	4.13
3.	I trust that Aproko Doctor has the best interests of his audience at heart when sharing advice.	108	110	26	12	8	4.13
4.	I perceive Aproko Doctor's messages as being objective and free from hidden commercial bias.	95	102	35	22	10	3.95
5.	I have high confidence in the integrity of the medical tips shared by Aproko Doctor.	122	98	22	12	10	4.17
Grand Mean							4.11

Note: $M \geq 3.00 = Accepted$

$M < 3.00 = Rejected$

Perceived trustworthiness is the confidence the receiver has in the validity of a communicator's messages or assertions (Hovland et al., 1953). Table 3 shows respondents' ratings of the perceived trustworthiness of Aproko Doctor's health messages across five measurement items. Item 1 reveals that the respondents perceived Aproko Doctor as honest and sincere in the health information he provides, yielding a mean score of 4.20. Similarly, the respondents considered his health messages as reliable and dependable, as evident in Item 2 with 115 respondents strongly agreeing and 105 agreeing, resulting in a mean of 4.13. The respondents believed that the influencer has the best interests of his audience at heart when sharing advice, as evident in Item 3, which recorded a mean score of 4.13. The respondents further hold the opinion that his messages are objective and free from hidden commercial bias, as seen in Item 4, where 95 respondents strongly agreed and 102 agreed, yielding a mean score of 3.95. The results further show that the respondents have high confidence in the integrity of Aproko Doctor's medical tips as evident in Item 5, where 122 respondents strongly agreed and 98 agreed, yielding a mean score of 4.17. The grand mean is 4.11, which exceeds the decision threshold of 3.00, indicating that respondents perceived Aproko Doctor as highly trustworthy.

Table 4: Extent of Adoption of Aproko Doctor's Health Messages (n = 264)

S/N	Items	SA (5)	A (4)	U (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean ($\bar{X}$)
1.	I have personally changed some of my health habits based on advice from Aproko Doctor.	95	110	30	19	10	3.99
2.	I frequently practice the preventive health tips (e.g., water intake, sleep) shared by Aproko Doctor.	102	115	22	15	10	4.08
3.	I have shared Aproko Doctor's health messages with friends or family to encourage them to adopt similar habits.	112	98	28	16	10	4.08
4.	I rely on Aproko Doctor's guidance when making minor daily health and wellness decisions.	88	105	42	19	10	3.78
5.	I intend to continue following the medical recommendations provided by Aproko Doctor in the future.	125	102	18	10	9	4.23
Grand Mean							4.03

Note: $M \geq 3.00 = Accepted$

$M < 3.00 = Rejected$

Message adoption is the degree to which individuals are persuaded and use the information they receive for belief and behaviour change (Mogo et al., 2023). Table 4 presents the respondents' ratings regarding the extent to which they have adopted Aproko Doctor's health messages based on five measurement items. Item 1 shows that the respondents have personally changed some health habits based on Aproko Doctor's advice ($M=3.99$). Similarly, they frequently practice preventive health tips such as water intake and sleep recommendations shared by him, as seen in Item 2, where 102 respondents strongly agreed and 115 agreed, yielding a mean of 4.08. The results further show that the respondents shared his health messages with friends or family to encourage similar practices ($M=4.08$). Additionally, they indicated that they rely on his guidance when making minor daily health and wellness decisions although this Item recorded the lowest mean score of 3.78. They also indicated their intention to continue following his medical recommendations ($M=4.23$). The grand mean for adoption is 4.03, which exceeds the decision benchmark of 3.00. This indicates a generally high level of adoption of Aproko Doctor's health messages among the respondents.

Table 5: Pearson Correlation analysis between Perceived Credibility (Expertise and Trustworthiness) and Adoption of Health Messages

Variable	Expertise	Trustworthiness	Adoption
Expertise	1		
Trustworthiness	0.682**	1	
Adoption of Health Messages	0.369**	0.523**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

The results of Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analysis show a moderate positive correlation between perceived expertise and adoption of Aproko Doctor's health messages ($r = 0.369$, $p < 0.001$). A stronger positive and significant correlation between perceived trustworthiness and adoption ($r = 0.523$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 6: Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Adoption of Health Messages

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value
Constant	1.841	0.284	-	6.482	0.001
Expertise	0.022	0.059	0.023	3.371	< 0.711
Trustworthiness	0.518	0.064	0.507	8.125	< 0.001

Model Summary

$R^2 = 2.274$ (27.4% of variance explained)

Adjusted $R^2 = 0.268$

$F(2, 261) = 49.19$, $p < 0.001$

Note: Dependent Variable = Adoption of Health Messages. $p < 0.01$

Table 6 shows the results of the multiple linear regression analysis conducted to determine the predictive influence of perceived expertise and trustworthiness on adoption of health messages by Aproko Doctor's health messages. The regression model was statistically significant () and accounted for 27.4% of the variance in health message adoption (). A critical examination of the individual predictors revealed that when both variables were modeled simultaneously, only perceived trustworthiness emerged as a statistically significant independent predictor of message adoption (). Perceived expertise did not emerge as a significant independent predictor within the model (). This indicated that the strong initial relationship between expertise and adoption was largely accounted for by the overarching influence of user trust.

DISCUSSION

The study examined perceived source credibility and the adoption of health messages disseminated by social media health influencers in Nigeria, particularly Aproko Doctor, among undergraduates in

COOU, Igbariam, Anambra State. The study revealed that the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of Aproko Doctor among the respondents are high, which in turn significantly influence the adoption of his health messages. This indicates that students view him as a competent medical authority whose advice is reliable. The results strongly support Source Credibility Theory, confirming that both expertise and trustworthiness serve as critical drivers of persuasion and behavioral change in digital health communication. However, the inferential findings introduced an important insight to Source Credibility Theory in digital spaces. While the bivariate Pearson correlation indicated that both expertise () and trustworthiness () were individually vital to persuasion, the multiple linear regression model showed that when both dimensions competed, trustworthiness acted as the definitive anchor (), absorbing the predictive strength of expertise ().

This suggest that young undergraduates, social media environments, while professional medical qualification (expertise) established an initial baseline of visibility, it was the influencer's perceived honesty, objectivity, and audience care (trustworthiness) that directly compelled them to alter their daily health habits. These findings are consistent with Nigerian studies such as Luqman et al. (2025) among University of Ilorin students, Nnaemeka et al. (2025) on influencer-doctors in Southeast Nigeria, Njoku et al. (2025) on audience perception of Aproko Doctor's content, and Femi-Aderinto (2025) on his impact in adult health education, all of which established that the expertise of a health influencer (Aproko Doctor) plays a significant role in influencing the acceptance and utilization of content shared by the influencer. It also mirrors global findings from Wang et al. (2024) on fitness influencers in China, Wellman (2024) on wellness influencers, and Simba et al. (2025), who noted influencers' effectiveness in health behavior change due to perceived expertise among audiences or followers. However, the strong role of trustworthiness found in the study contrasts with Safdar and Eman (2025), who found emotional resonance more dominant in Pakistan. The adoption levels challenge Looi et al. (2023) on mega-influencers' lower effectiveness, showing that Aproko Doctor's hybrid medical-influencer model succeeds through cultural relevance, aligning with Bello et al. (2025) on authority cues in Nigerian health messaging and Sharevski et al. (2025) on medical professionals countering misinformation. The findings have significant theoretical implications. It reinforces the applicability of Source Credibility Theory in non-Western-centric environments and the health sector, showing how professional expertise can mitigate the online crisis of trust. Practically, it positions medically qualified influencers as valuable partners for government health agencies in designing targeted campaigns for young populations, especially within the university setting.

CONCLUSION

This study found that undergraduates at Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University (COOU), Nigeria have a high positive perception of the credibility of Aproko Doctor and have been significantly influenced by his health tips, leading to reported changes in preventive health behaviours such as improved hydration and reduced self-medication. This implies that medically qualified influencers can drive health behaviour change and overcome the crisis of trust in social media in Nigeria. Therefore, qualified medical influencers can serve as powerful tools for reaching young people with credible health information. This suggests that government health agencies like the NCDC should consider strategic partnerships with health influencers such as Aproko Doctor to improve the effectiveness of public health campaigns among undergraduates and youths. Despite the contributions of the study, it is limited to undergraduates within a single university in Nigeria; thus, the findings cannot be generalized to other universities. Future research should expand to more universities across different regions and should explore comparative analyses between qualified medical influencers and non-professional wellness creators. Such studies would provide deeper insights needed on how to deploy digital strategies for public health communication in the country and the Sub-Saharan region. Despite these contributions, the study is limited by its focus on a single university and reliance on self-reported data. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to assess

long-term behavioural change, expand the scope to other Nigerian and African universities, and compare medically qualified influencers with non-professional wellness creators.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Prior to the study, participants were informed about the purpose of the study. Participation was entirely voluntary and by consent. Furthermore, no identifiable personal information was collected.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Shadrach Idi conceptualised the study, developed the research framework, and led the overall design of the manuscript. Chinonso Chinaemere Adikuru contributed in the data collection and cleaning. Dennis Oche Abutu conducted the pilot test and the data analysis. All authors read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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