

# Understanding How Social Media Influences Patients' Expectations of Physiotherapy Treatment: A Qualitative Interview Study

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## Abstract

**Background:** Social media has rapidly become a primary source of health information for the public. Although patients frequently consume physiotherapy-related content online, little is known about how this shapes their expectations before entering clinical care.

**Objective:** To explore how social media influences patients' expectations of physiotherapy assessment, treatment approaches, recovery timelines, and outcomes. **Design:** Qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis. **Setting & Participants:** Purposive sample of 20 adults (18–70 years) attending two outpatient physiotherapy clinics who reported using social media for health information. **Methods:** Semi-structured interviews (30–55 minutes) were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. **Credibility** was enhanced through researcher triangulation and participant member-checking. **Results:** Four themes captured the influence of social media on expectations: (1) Anticipation of quick fixes and visible improvements; (2) Requests for techniques popularised online; (3) Tension between empowerment and mistrust; (4) Expectations for digital and remote modes of care. Social media exposure both facilitated engagement and created unrealistic expectations. **Conclusion:** Social media exerts a strong influence on patient expectations in physiotherapy. Clinicians should address online information early in care, navigate misconceptions, and support digital health literacy.

## Keywords

social media, qualitative research, online content, physiotherapy, social media influence, Digital health

## Introduction

The rise of social media has dramatically transformed how people access and interpret health information. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook now function as readily available repositories of rehabilitation tips, exercise demonstrations, patient stories, and physiotherapy “hacks.” These platforms are characterised by fast-paced content, visually appealing demonstrations, and persuasive messaging, often provided not only by licensed physiotherapists but also by fitness influencers, celebrities, or individuals lacking clinical training. For many patients, these online sources are more accessible and relatable than traditional health resources.

As a result, social media shapes not only what patients know about physiotherapy, but also what they expect when attending their first appointment. Expectations play a critical role in healthcare: they influence patient satisfaction, therapeutic alliance, adherence to exercises, perceived credibility of the therapist, and overall clinical outcomes. When expectations are unrealistic such as believing that chronic pain can be resolved instantly through a single stretch, manipulation, or “viral technique”

patients may become disappointed, disengaged, or mistrustful when clinical practice does not match online portrayals.

In musculoskeletal physiotherapy, this mismatch is increasingly recognised. Studies show that patients often arrive requesting specific treatments they have seen online (e.g., cupping, dry needling, taping, or massage gun therapy). Social media also promotes compressed recovery timelines, dramatic before-and-after videos, and simplified narratives about injury and rehabilitation. Yet despite the ubiquity of online physiotherapy content, empirical research exploring how it shapes real patient expectations remains limited.

Understanding this influence is essential for modern physiotherapy practice. Physiotherapists regularly encounter patients who reference online videos, influencers, or treatment claims. However, clinicians may feel unequipped to address misinformation or to guide patients in evaluating online sources critically. Moreover, digital health literacy patients' ability to appraise, interpret, and apply online health information varies widely.

This study therefore explores the ways in which social media shapes patients' expectations before attending physiotherapy. By using qualitative interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, this research aims to provide a nuanced, patient-centred understanding of the opportunities and challenges presented by social media in the physiotherapy context.

## **Methods**

### **Study Design**

A qualitative study using semi-structured interviews was conducted, guided by reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke. This approach was chosen to capture the complexity and subjectivity of patients' experiences and expectations.

#### **Setting and Participants**

Participants were purposively recruited from two urban outpatient physiotherapy clinics between January and March 2025.

#### **Inclusion criteria:**

- Adults  $\geq 18$  years
  - Attending for musculoskeletal physiotherapy
  - Used social media for health information within the past 12 months
- A total of 20 participants (aged 18–70) participated.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews lasted 30–55 minutes and explored:

- Social media platforms used
- Types of physiotherapy content viewed
- Expectations about assessment, treatment, and outcomes
- Experiences of mismatch between online content and real-world care

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Two researchers independently coded transcripts, met to discuss interpretations, and collaboratively developed themes. Eight participants completed member-checking to confirm resonance and credibility.

## Results

Four major themes describe how social media influenced patient expectations.

### Theme 1: Expectations of Quick Fixes and Visible Results

Participants frequently recalled short-form videos portraying instant pain relief or dramatic functional changes after simple interventions. These visual narratives fostered beliefs that physiotherapy would achieve similar rapid improvements.

“I saw a reel where a stretch fixed someone’s pain in 30 seconds. I expected something similar.”

Social media’s emphasis on speed, simplicity, and spectacle shaped unrealistic timelines for recovery.

### Theme 2: Preference for Social-Media-Popular Interventions

Participants arrived asking for techniques they perceived as widely used or endorsed online cupping, taping, scraping, massage guns, or “adjustments.”

“Everyone online does cupping, so I thought that’s what I needed.”

Some participants associated popularity with effectiveness, while others assumed that all physiotherapists routinely used these tools.

### Theme 3: Mistrust Versus Empowerment

Social media empowered many patients to ask informed questions, learn terminology, and feel more prepared for appointments. At the same time, contradictions between online claims and clinician advice sometimes created tension and mistrust.

“My physio said something different than the influencer. I didn’t know whom to trust.”

The credibility of social media figures often seen as relatable, charismatic, and confident sometimes rivalled professional expertise.

### Theme 4: Expectations for Digital Delivery Modes

Because influencers often provide online consultations, video-based exercise demonstrations, or remote progress check-ins, participants expected similar digital accessibility from clinical services. Some expected therapists to send WhatsApp exercise videos or to provide ongoing online support. Overall, social media exposure created both enthusiasm and confusion regarding service delivery formats.

## Discussion

This study demonstrates that social media exerts a significant and multifaceted influence on patient expectations of physiotherapy. The findings deepen existing knowledge by illustrating how expectations extend beyond treatment preferences to include recovery timelines, roles of technology, communication style, and service delivery models.

### Social Media as a Double-Edged Sword

On the positive side, social media increased patient engagement, curiosity, and readiness to participate in physiotherapy. These benefits align with literature showing that digital platforms can enhance patient empowerment and self-efficacy. However, the same mechanisms that promote engagement simple messaging, dramatic visuals, and algorithm-driven repetition also foster unrealistic beliefs about the speed and nature of recovery.

### Unrealistic Recovery Timelines

Patients often expected immediate or highly visible effects because online videos condense treatment processes into short clips. These expectations echo findings from previous studies documenting the

misleading nature of online rehabilitation portrayals. Misaligned expectations may undermine trust when real rehabilitation requires progressive loading, consistency, and patience.

#### Technique-Driven Requests and Modality Bias

The prominence of specific tools or treatments on social media shaped modality-based demands (e.g., cupping, scraping), reflecting a shift from therapist-guided to consumer-driven agendas. When expectations focus narrowly on specific interventions, they may overshadow physiotherapy's broader biopsychosocial approach.

#### Mistrust Fueled by Contradictory Information

Participants experienced confusion when clinicians' explanations differed from influencer narratives. This tension mirrors global concerns about misinformation and its effects on patient-clinician relationships. Influencers often provide confident, simplified answers, whereas physiotherapists must present nuance, uncertainty, and evidence-based reasoning messages that are less "viral."

#### Expectations for Digital Service Models

Participants' desires for video-based exercises and remote follow-up reflect the normalisation of telehealth content online. This highlights an opportunity: physiotherapists could integrate digital resources (e.g., clinic-approved video programmes) to complement in-person care and meet patient preferences.

### Clinical Implications

To navigate the influence of social media, clinicians may benefit from:

- Routinely asking: "What have you seen online about your condition?"
- Validating patient curiosity while clarifying misconceptions
- Using patient-friendly explanations to compare evidence with online claims
  - Providing trustworthy digital resources to bridge the gap between clinic and online spaces
  - Developing skills in digital communication and content creation

**Strengths and Limitations** Strengths include methodological rigour, reflexive analysis, and member-checking. However, the study is limited by its urban setting and reliance on self-reported exposure, which may not capture actual online behaviours. Future research should analyse the content patients consume and include diverse cultural settings.

### Conclusion

Social media strongly shapes what patients believe physiotherapy should look like, from the treatments they expect to the speed of recovery and the preferred mode of service delivery. While social media can empower patients, it also risks fostering unrealistic expectations and mistrust. Physiotherapists must actively engage with patients' online health experiences, promote digital literacy, and provide clear, evidence-aligned guidance. Adapting to digital-era expectations is essential for effective, patient-centred care.

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