

Impact of Social Media Advertising on Hospital Brand Awareness and Patient Choice

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Abstract—Social media advertising has become a central instrument in hospital marketing strategy, used to build brand recognition, communicate service offerings, and influence the decision-making of prospective patients. This paper examines the impact of social media advertising on hospital brand awareness and patient choice, with reference to multi-specialty hospitals competing within the same urban catchment area. As patients increasingly research and compare hospitals online before making a choice, particularly for elective and planned procedures, social media advertising has emerged as a key touchpoint influencing both awareness and trust ahead of the first clinical interaction. Primary data was collected through structured questionnaires administered to patients and prospective patients who had encountered hospital advertising on social media platforms, supplemented by secondary data drawn from hospital marketing reports, platform advertising analytics, and published healthcare-marketing literature. Findings reveal that patient testimonials, doctor-credential-led content, and targeted local advertising recorded the strongest influence on brand recall and choice, while generic promotional content showed comparatively weak impact. Hospitals with sustained, credibility-focused social media advertising recorded measurably higher brand awareness and stronger representation in patient consideration sets than hospitals relying on sporadic or purely promotional advertising. The paper concludes with recommendations

for credibility-driven content strategy, targeted local advertising, and integration of

advertising analytics with patient-conversion tracking to strengthen the role of social media advertising in hospital brand building.

Keywords: *Social media advertising, hospital branding, brand awareness, patient choice, healthcare marketing, digital advertising, patient decision-making, hospital marketing strategy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Hospital choice was once shaped primarily by physician referral, geographic proximity, and word of mouth within a patient's immediate social circle. That landscape has shifted significantly as patients now research hospitals, doctors, and treatment options online before making a decision, often long before any direct interaction with the institution. Social media advertising, spanning sponsored posts, targeted display ads, and boosted content on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, has become a primary mechanism through which hospitals build visibility within this pre-decision research phase.

Unlike traditional hospital advertising through print or outdoor media, social media advertising allows precise geographic and demographic targeting, measurable engagement metrics, and iterative creative testing, making it an efficient tool for building brand awareness within a defined catchment area. For many private hospitals, social media advertising budgets now rival



or exceed spending on conventional marketing channels.

Yet the relationship between advertising exposure, brand awareness, and actual patient choice is not straightforward. High ad impressions and click-through rates do not automatically translate into trust or preference, particularly in a healthcare context where patients weigh advertising claims against perceived credibility, clinical reputation, and peer recommendation. Advertising that feels overtly promotional risks undermining rather than building trust in a sector where trust is the primary currency of choice.

This paper investigates the impact of social media advertising on hospital brand awareness and patient choice, drawing on primary data collected from patients and prospective patients exposed to hospital advertising on social media, and secondary data from hospital marketing reports and published literature. The study examines advertising formats and sources of hospital awareness, measures the influence of advertising on patient choice, and proposes practical improvements grounded in the findings.

Background:

Hospital marketing in India operates within regulatory guidelines set by bodies such as the Medical Council of India and advertising standards councils, which restrict misleading claims and require verifiable representation of clinical credentials. Within these constraints, hospitals have increasingly turned to credibility-focused social media advertising, featuring doctor profiles, patient testimonials, and treatment-outcome transparency, as a compliant and effective route to building brand trust alongside awareness.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To study the formats and content strategies used in hospital social media advertising.

- To assess the contribution of social media advertising to overall hospital brand awareness.
- To measure the influence of social media advertising on patient hospital choice.
- To examine the relationship between advertising content type and perceived credibility.
- To identify challenges faced by hospitals in designing effective social media advertising.
- To recommend measures for strengthening the role of social media advertising in hospital brand building.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

[1] Aaker (1991) developed the brand equity framework, identifying brand awareness as the foundational stage upon which brand associations, perceived quality, and loyalty are subsequently built.

[2] Keller (1993) proposed the Customer-Based Brand Equity model, arguing that repeated, consistent brand exposure through advertising strengthens brand recall and shapes consumer choice at the point of decision.

[3] Thackeray, Neiger, Hanson, and McKenzie (2008) found that health-sector organisations using social media for promotional purposes achieved higher audience reach but required credibility-focused content to convert reach into trust.

[4] Hausman et al. (2014) studied hospital social media use and found that patient-testimonial content generated significantly higher engagement and perceived authenticity than institutional promotional messaging.

[5] Padma, Rajendran, and Lokachari (2010) studied Indian hospital service quality and noted that brand perception, shaped partly by marketing communication, influenced patient expectations prior to actual service experience.

[6] Advertising Standards Council of India (2020) issued guidelines restricting

misleading claims in healthcare advertising, requiring verifiable representation of clinical credentials and outcomes in promotional content.

[7] Antheunis, Tates, and Nieboer (2013) found that patients used social media both to seek health information and to evaluate the credibility of healthcare providers before making a choice of facility.

[8] Bhat and Kumar (2016) reported that hospitals with consistent, credibility-led digital marketing recorded stronger presence within patient consideration sets than hospitals with irregular advertising activity.

[9] Bakshi and Gupta (2019) found that doctor-credential-led advertising content significantly increased perceived trustworthiness among prospective patients compared to generic facility-promotional content.

[10] Kotler and Keller (2016) emphasised those consistent brand messaging across digital touchpoints strengthens top-of-mind recall, a principle widely applied to service-sector and healthcare brand building.

[11] Sharma and Rao (2022) found that geo-targeted social media advertising within a hospital's catchment area produced higher conversion to appointment enquiry than broadly targeted campaigns.

[12] Verma (2023) studied Indian private hospital marketing spend and found that hospitals allocating a higher share of budget to credibility-focused social media content recorded stronger year-on-year brand-awareness growth.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods research approach was adopted, combining quantitative analysis of patient/prospective-patient survey data on advertising exposure and influence with qualitative insights from hospital marketing professionals, to capture both audience-reported impact and campaign-design realities.

4.1 Research Design

Descriptive and exploratory research design was employed. The descriptive component quantifies sources of hospital awareness, advertising-content preferences, and self-reported influence on choice, while the exploratory component investigates advertising-design challenges through interviews with hospital marketing professionals. The study was conducted among residents in Hyderabad, Telangana, over a period of three months.

4.2 Data Sources

- Primary Data: Structured questionnaires administered to 135 patients and prospective patients aged 20-55 who had encountered hospital advertising on social media, and structured interviews with 9 hospital marketing and digital-communication professionals.
- Secondary Data: Hospital marketing and annual reports, platform advertising analytics summaries, and published healthcare-marketing literature.

4.3 Sample Size

Convenience sampling was used to select 135 respondents who recalled encountering hospital advertising on social media in the six months preceding the survey. Purposive sampling was used to select 9 marketing professionals directly involved in hospital advertising strategy and execution. Respondents were drawn across age groups 20-30 (44), 31-45 (56), and 46-55 (35).

4.4 Tools for Analysis

- Descriptive statistics: mean influence and credibility scores across advertising-content types.
- Frequency and percentage analysis of hospital-awareness source and choice-influence categories.
- Comparative analysis of advertising-content effectiveness (testimonial, doctor-led, promotional, informational).
- Thematic analysis of qualitative responses from hospital marketing professional interviews.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 Content Types Used in Hospital Social Media Advertising

Across the hospitals studied, social media advertising content is organised around six recurring types, summarised in Table I. Hospitals typically run multiple ad types concurrently, targeted at different stages of the patient decision journey.

Ad Content Type	Description
Patient Testimonial Ads	Recovery stories, patient experience videos and posts
Doctor-Credential Ads	Specialist profiles, qualifications, procedure expertise
Promotional/Offer Ads	Health-checkup packages, discount and offer promotions
Informational/Educational Ads	Disease-awareness content linked to hospital services
Facility/Infrastructure Ads	Visuals of equipment, wards, and hospital campus
Event/Camp Ads	Free health-camp and screening-event promotions

Table I: Content Types Used in Hospital Social Media Advertising

5.2 Sources of Hospital Awareness

Table II shows the proportion of respondents citing each source as how they first became aware of a hospital, along with the mean trust score reported for that source. Social media advertising was the most frequently cited source, though doctor and family referral recorded higher mean trust scores.

Awareness Source	Share %	Mean Trust Score
Social Media Advertising	34	4.2
Friends/Family Referral	23	4.5
Doctor Referral	18	4.6
Search Engine	13	3.9
Traditional Media	8	3.5
Others	4	3.3

Table II: Sources of Hospital Awareness Among Respondents (n = 135)

5.3 Effectiveness by Advertising Content Type

Table III presents mean self-reported influence scores on a 5-point scale for each advertising content type. Doctor-credential and patient-testimonial content recorded the highest influence, while promotional/offer content was rated comparatively lower.

Ad Content Type	Mean Score	Rating
Patient Testimonial	4.4	High
Doctor-Credential	4.5	High
Promotional/Offer	3.4	Moderate
Informational/Educational	4.0	High
Facility/Infrastructure	3.7	Moderate
Event/Camp	3.9	Moderate

Table III: Influence Score by Advertising Content Type

5.4 Advertising Strategy and Brand Awareness Comparison

Table IV compares brand-awareness recall rate and mean patient-choice influence score across three hospitals differing in the consistency and content focus of their social media advertising. Hospitals with sustained, credibility-focused advertising recorded markedly higher recall and influence.

Hospital	Advertising Approach	Brand Recall Rate	Choice Influence
Hospital A	Sustained, Credibility-Focused	62%	4.4
Hospital B	Moderate, Mixed Content	48%	3.9
Hospital C	Sporadic, Promotional-Heavy	31%	3.4

Table IV: Brand Recall and Choice Influence by Advertising Strategy

5.5 Advertising Challenges and Corresponding Measures

Interviews with hospital marketing professionals revealed recurring advertising challenges, summarised in Table V along with the proportion of respondents citing each challenge and the corresponding improvement measure suggested.

Challenge	% Citing	Suggested Measure
Difficulty differentiating from competitor ads	22	Develop distinctive brand voice and visual identity
Regulatory restrictions on promotional claims	19	Shift toward credibility and outcome-transparency content
Low trust in overtly promotional content	21	Prioritise testimonial and doctor-led content formats
Difficulty attributing patient conversion to ads	18	Integrate ad analytics with appointment-tracking
Rising cost-per-click on competitive keywords	12	Shift budget toward organic and community engagement
Inconsistent posting and campaign continuity	8	Adopt structured always-on content calendar

Table V: Challenges in Hospital Social Media Advertising

6. FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

6.1 Key Findings

- Social media advertising was the most frequently cited source of hospital awareness (34%), ahead of friends/family referral (23%) and doctor referral (18%).
- Doctor referral (4.6/5) and friends/family referral (4.5/5) recorded the highest mean trust scores despite lower awareness share, indicating advertising builds reach faster than it builds trust.
- Doctor-credential content (4.5/5) and patient-testimonial content (4.4/5) were rated the most influential advertising types, while promotional/offer content (3.4/5) was rated least influential.
- 60% of respondents reported being strongly or moderately influenced by social media advertising in their hospital choice, while 16% reported no influence at all.
- Hospital A, with sustained, credibility-focused advertising, recorded the highest brand-recall rate (62%) and choice-influence score (4.4/5), compared to Hospital C's sporadic, promotional-heavy approach (31%, 3.4/5).

- Difficulty differentiating from competitor advertising, low trust in overtly promotional content, and regulatory restrictions on promotional claims emerged as the three most frequently cited advertising challenges by marketing professionals.

Figure 1 presents the sources through which respondents reported first becoming aware of a hospital, confirming social media advertising as the leading single source.

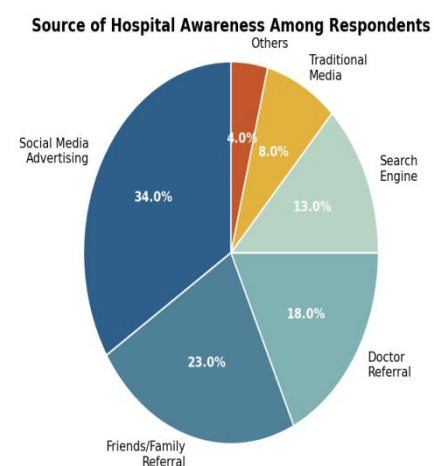


Fig. 1: Source of Hospital Awareness Among Respondents

Figure 2 shows the degree to which respondents reported that social media advertising influenced their hospital choice, with the majority reporting at least moderate influence.

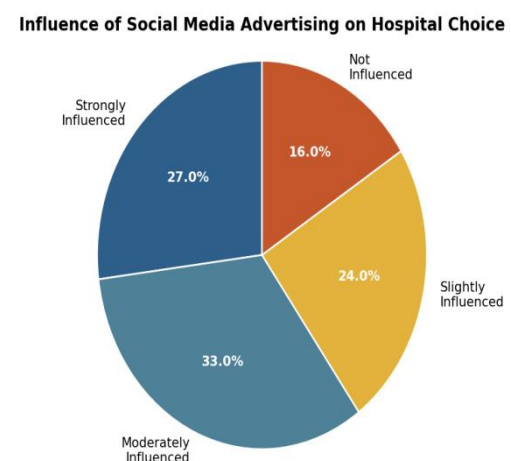


Fig. 2: Influence of Social Media Advertising on Hospital Choice



6.2 Suggestions

- Prioritise doctor-credential and patient-testimonial content over generic promotional or offer-based advertising, given their significantly higher influence scores.
- Develop a distinctive brand voice and visual identity to differentiate hospital advertising from competitor content within the same catchment area.
- Shift advertising emphasis toward outcome-transparency and credibility-building content to work within regulatory restrictions while strengthening trust.
- Integrate advertising analytics with appointment-booking and enquiry-tracking systems to measure actual conversion rather than engagement metrics alone.
- Maintain a sustained, always-on advertising presence rather than sporadic campaigns, given the strong link between advertising consistency and brand recall.
- Balance paid advertising with organic community engagement to manage rising cost-per-click while sustaining visibility.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of social media advertising on hospital brand awareness and patient choice, drawing on primary data from patients, prospective patients, and hospital marketing professionals. Social media advertising emerges as the leading single source through which respondents first become aware of hospitals, confirming its central role in the early stage of the patient decision journey.

Doctor-credential and patient-testimonial content were identified as the strongest drivers of advertising influence, while purely promotional or offer-based content underperformed, indicating that credibility rather than promotion drives patient choice in a healthcare context. Hospitals with sustained, credibility-focused advertising recorded significantly higher brand recall

and choice influence than hospitals relying on sporadic, promotional-heavy campaigns.

Persistent challenges remain, particularly differentiation from competitor advertising, low trust in overtly promotional content, and difficulty attributing patient conversion directly to advertising exposure. Addressing these gaps through credibility-focused content strategy, distinctive brand identity, and integrated conversion tracking offers a practical pathway for hospitals to strengthen the return on their social media advertising investment.

As patients increasingly research hospitals online before making a choice, social media advertising is likely to remain a central instrument of hospital brand building; its effectiveness, however, depends on credibility-led content strategy rather than advertising reach or spend alone.

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