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Health Communication in the Age of AI: A Review of the Tsinghua Doctoral Research Forum

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Abstract

As digital technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) become increasingly integrated into everyday life, their influence on audience research continues to expand. On July 8, 2025, the Tsinghua Doctoral Research Forum was convened as part of the 8th International Conference on "Medicine, Humanity, and Media" (MHM2025). The Forum, led by Associate Professor CHEN Liang from Tsinghua University's School of Journalism and Communication, focused on "Health Communication in the Age of AI: Audience Psychological Mechanisms and Innovations in Communication Models." Four scholars presented their latest research. Topics included the influence of the Third-Person Effect on misinformation correction behaviours during public health emergencies, a systematic review of digital addiction among older adults, the differential effects of stigmatized HIV/AIDS messages across communication platforms, and the impact of threat and efficacy appeals on health behaviour intentions. The studies applied diverse empirical methods—such as structural equation modelling, systematic reviews, and experimental designs—to investigate psychological mechanisms and intervention strategies.

Keywords

Health communication, Audience research, Psychological mechanisms

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On the afternoon of July 8, 2025, the "Tsinghua Doctoral Research Forum," part of the 8th International Conference & PHD Symposium on "Medicine, Humanity, and Media" (MHM), was successfully conducted.

Led by Associate Professor Liang CHEN from Tsinghua University's School of Journalism and Communication, four scholars presented their latest research findings under the theme "Health Communication in the Age of AI: Audience Psychological Mechanisms and Innovations in Communication Models."

Associate Professor CHEN began by summarizing recent developments in health communication research at Tsinghua University, highlighting significant advances in areas such as risk communication, intelligent communication, and computational communication. He commended the innovative format of the doctoral research forum at the MHM conference, emphasizing its effectiveness in promoting scholarly exchanges both within and across institutions and contributing positively to the academic ecosystem.

Subsequently, four scholars from Tsinghua University's School of Journalism and Communication presented their research findings.

Assistant Researcher Lunrui FU presented the paper titled "Let's fight the infodemic: the third-person effect process of misinformation during public health emergencies." Based on the Third-Person Effect (TPE) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), this study examined how third-person perception (TPP) of misinformation during public health emergencies affects intentions to take corrective actions. An online survey of 1,063 participants in China during the COVID-19 outbreak was analysed using structural equation modelling. The results show that attention to online information increases TPP, which then positively affects attitude and perceived behavioural control. These two factors encourage people to take action to correct misinformation. However, TPP does not significantly influence subjective norms. The study extends TPE theory by providing empirical evidence for corrective actions and explaining the cognitive mechanisms involved, contributing both theoretically and practically to efforts against online misinformation (Chen & Fu, 2022).

Doctoral student Qiupeng WANG presented research titled "Conceptualizing and Operationalizing Digital Addictive Behaviour of Older Adults: A Systematic Review." Addressing the emerging public health issue of digital addiction among older adults (DAOA), this study followed PRISMA guidelines to clarify definitions, measurement tools, predictors, and outcomes of DAOA in individuals aged 60 and above. Key predictors identified were age, educational attainment, digital usage time, loneliness, and depression. The main reported outcomes included increased loneliness, depression, and reduced sleep quality. The study also calculated average effect sizes for these relationships when data were available. The findings address existing ambiguities around DAOA and discuss theoretical and practical implications for future research and interventions (Wang, 2025).

Assistant Researcher Yuanming GUO presented the paper "Understanding Stakeholders' Response to Stigmatized Risk Message in HIV/AIDS Campaigns: How Expert-driven Outreach Approaches Trigger Reactance and Behavioural Rejection." This study investigates how stigma in

expert-driven health risk messages affects intentions to follow HIV/AIDS protective behaviours among 260 gay men in China. Using a 2x2 factorial design, it compares high and low stigma messages in general versus targeted outreach. Results show that stigmatized messages increase anger, negative beliefs about message realism, and lead to rejection of protective behaviours, especially in general outreach on public platforms. However, in targeted outreach directly to the gay community, stigmatized messages do not trigger this effect through psychological reactance. The study explains how stigma in health messages can reduce effectiveness depending on communication patterns and clarifies the psychological mechanism underlying these outcomes (He et al., 2025).

Huaizhi HAN shared research on "Communication Strategies for Healthy Lifestyles." Drawing from Fear Appeal Theory, this study examines how different levels of fear and efficacy messages affect people's intention to adopt health behaviours, using balanced diet and physical exercise as contexts. A factorial experiment tested three threat levels (low, medium, high) and two efficacy levels (low, high). Results showed that higher threat and efficacy messages increased intentions to change behaviour, but their interaction was not significant. In the exercise context, the effect of threat was influenced by fatalism: high-threat messages worked best for people with high fatalism, while medium threat was most effective for those with low fatalism. The findings support the Extended Parallel Process Model and suggest that moderate fear may improve the effectiveness of health interventions (Han, 2025).

Following the presentations, attendees engaged actively in insightful and rigorous discussions with the researchers. Attendees contributed their perspectives openly, effectively broadening their academic horizons.

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