



Mixed Methods in Health Communication Research: A Review of Associate Professor Shaohai Jiang's Lecture at Peking

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Abstract

This article reviews the inaugural lecture of the MHM2025 special series delivered by Professor Shaohai Jiang, titled “Mixed Methods in Health Communication Research”. This lecture systematically explains the application value and practical path of mixed research methods in the field of health communication. Professor Shaohai Jiang demonstrated the synergy between quantitative and qualitative methods through interpretive and exploratory design; he used the Queenstown project as an example to illustrate the closed-loop application of formative research, process evaluation and summative evaluation in health communication activities; and he guided the students to apply social cognitive theories and other methodologies to the design of issues such as short-video addiction interventions and optimization of the healthcare experience in the classroom, so as to strengthen the problem-oriented research mindset.

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Keywords

Mixed research methods, Research design, Health communication campaigns, Formative research, Case studies

Introduction

On July 10, 2025, MHM2025 invited Dr. Shaohai Jiang, Associate Professor, Department of Communication and New Media, National University of Singapore, to give a lecture entitled “Mixed-methods Research in Health Communication Studies”.

At the beginning of the lecture, Prof. Jing Xu, head of the Master’s Program in Health Communication at the School of Journalism and Communication of Peking University, introduced Shaohai Jiang’s research experience and academic background. This is not the first time that Jiang has come to the classroom of health communication at Peking University, and every year, Jiang has been exploring new perspectives on his own field of research and imparting research ideas and methodological explorations to the students in the classroom. Prof. Jing Xu also reviewed the general content and logic of the first three lectures of the lecture, from sensory communication to tobacco control research to interpersonal family communication, leading to the sharing of mixed methods theory topics brought by Prof. Jiang in this class.

Jiang understood the basic situation of the course by asking everyone’s professional background, adjusted the focus of his expression, and opened the special lecture in an affable way. The professor systematically sorted out his research system in the fields of doctor-patient communication, Internet healthcare and social media health communication.

This course focuses on the two core sections of Mixed-methods Research and applied health communication campaigns. In the first part, the two basic research methods, quantitative and qualitative, lead to the explanation of Mixed-methods Research. The second part of the course starts from the design of health communication campaigns, and explains the planning methods and theories with examples. In the third part, Jiang starts from his own research, and shows the innovation of mixed research methods through theoretical explanations and case studies. In the fourth part of the course, Jiang provided opportunities for group discussion and interactive Q&A during the middle and end of the course, which increased the activity and interactivity of the class and triggered active thinking about health communication issues and practices.

Mixed-methods Research

Jiang explained the core value of mixed-methods research. Jiang pointed out that qualitative research uses focus groups and in-depth interviews to deeply understand the behavioral drivers, while quantitative research uses questionnaires and experimental design to verify the parameters

of the effect, and the two form a complementary mechanism. Specifically, the explanatory design of mixed research methods can deeply interpret the causes of the phenomenon, for example, in the study of online doctor-patient communication, after the scale data revealed the barriers to use by the middle-aged and elderly groups, the interviews further explored the essential contradiction of “it is difficult to establish doctor-patient trust in digital interactions”; the exploratory design can build a theoretical framework, for example, the theme modeling based on social media and text to refine the information and behavior of the patients and their families. The exploratory design can build a theoretical framework, such as refining the message characteristics based on theme modeling of social media, and then verifying the communication effect through a large-sample survey.

In class, Jiang has been encouraging and emphasizing the importance of first thinking deeply about the problem-solving process and subsequently matching the appropriate solution strategy, “thinking about the problem first and then matching it with the method”.

Through this strategy, researchers are able to identify and analyze key issues in health communication in a more systematic way, and are able to select and apply appropriate theoretical frameworks and research tools more precisely. This not only improves the relevance and validity of research, but also promotes interdisciplinary theoretical integration and innovation.

Applied health communication campaigns

In constructing health communication campaigns, Jiang highlighted the scientific basis for audience segmentation. When selecting target populations, it is important to consider demographic characteristics (e.g., age, region), psychological factors (e.g., self-efficacy), and socio-cultural background, and to utilize formative research to accurately identify needs. In the case of the Queenstown Health District project in Singapore, focus groups revealed the perceptions of the super-aged community about aging and concerns about technology use, leading to the development of a series of multilevel communication strategies, including community events and intergenerational learning, among other proven programs.

Meanwhile, process evaluations were conducted to monitor the coverage of the campaign in real time, and summative evaluations were used to examine attitudinal and behavioral changes, and a “design-design” approach was constructed to identify the target population. A complete design-implement-improve cycle was established. The results of the study show that precise communication strategies can significantly improve results: for example, targeting childhood obesity requires a combination of school, family and policy support, while tobacco control campaigns should take into account the needs of smokers, their family members and health professionals.

In addition, Jiang shared how emerging technologies such as social media and mobile applications can be utilized to enhance health communication. He pointed out that these platforms, with their wide reach and instant interactivity, are powerful tools for delivering health information

to the public. However, to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the information, stringent quality control in the content production and dissemination process is necessary.

Case Studies

At the stage of elaborating the research content, Jiang brilliantly demonstrated the common value of the methodology with the help of three research cases led by himself. For the study of online doctor-patient communication in China, a randomized controlled trial method was adopted and a competence enhancement module was constructed based on social cognitive theory, thus confirming an effective way to improve the digital health literacy of middle-aged and elderly people. In the HPV vaccine social media study, computational analysis and behavioral science were combined to not only analyze the characteristics of information dissemination, but also reveal the different impacts of active searching and passive receiving on vaccination decision-making. In the case of the aging issue in Queenstown, Singapore, qualitative findings such as “eliminating self-imposed age bias” and “re-establishing cross-generational connections” were transformed into feasible and practicable dissemination strategies based on community practices.

Together, these cases illustrate that health communication activities can only achieve consistency between the scientific and humanistic aspects when theory construction and research methodology are complementary, and when quantitative data are closely integrated with qualitative thinking and insights.

Interactive Q&A

Jiang also carefully designed an interactive discussion session in the classroom, highlighting the complementary nature of teaching and learning. Under the guidance of Jiang, students conducted in-depth group discussions on topics such as “Intervention of elderly people’s dependence on short videos” and “Designing and planning a health communication campaign related to your topic”. To address the issue of video dependence, the professor proposed to introduce self-efficacy assessment by drawing on social cognitive theory; for the students’ proposal on “improving medical experience”, he emphasized the importance of multi-stage formative research modeled on the Queenstown project.

This kind of training combining theory and practice allowed students to experience the whole process from problem identification to the selection of research methods, and made the classroom full of sparks of students’ thinking collision.

Conclusion

Jiang's research has been fruitful in the fields of medical communication, health information dissemination, and health promotion on social platforms. He has contributed new perspectives and strategies to the advancement of these fields by utilizing an integrated research approach. Jiang's experience and insights are of great value to both academics and practitioners. His research not only covers the depth of theory but also focuses on the breadth of practice, and he is committed to integrating theory and practice with a view to achieving optimal health communication. At the end of the course, Jiang emphasized that only through continuous exploration and innovation can we effectively respond to the evolving challenges in the field of health communication, and thus make greater contributions to the overall health of society and the well-being of individuals.

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Note

1. Associate Professor Shaohai Jiang is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication and New Media at the National University of Singapore (NUS), where he serves as Associate Editor for Patient Education and Counseling and Journal of Applied Communication Research. He is a member of the editorial boards of Communication Monographs, Health Communication and other international journals. He received the 2024 Early Career Scholar Award from the Health Communication Section of the National Communication Association (NCA) and the 2023 Early Career Award from the Chinese Society for Communication Research, and was recognized by Stanford University as one of the top 2% of scientists in the world in 2023 and 2024.

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