Rethinking Digital Clinics: A Communication Approach to Online Medical Consultation

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Abstract: This review examines *Digital Clinics: A Communication Approach to Online Medical Consultation* by Bolin Cao, which investigates how digital technologies are transforming doctor–patient communication and the organization of healthcare services. The book conceptualizes the "digital clinic" as a hybrid communicative space in which traditional medical authority, platform mediated interaction, and patient participation intersect. Through a communication centered framework, Cao demonstrates that online consultation does not merely extend conventional medical practice but fundamentally reshapes the communicative logic of clinical encounters. Digital platforms enable patients to access health information more easily and participate more actively in medical decision making, while physicians must adapt to new expectations related to responsiveness, digital visibility, and reputation building within platform environments. Drawing on theories from communication studies, health communication, media sociology, and platform research, the book provides a multidimensional account of the structural, relational, and cultural transformations associated with digital healthcare. This review highlights the book's theoretical richness, interdisciplinary orientation, and relevance to contemporary debates on patient empowerment, digital trust, and platform governance.

Introduction

The rapid development of digital technologies has profoundly transformed the organization of healthcare systems, the delivery of medical services, and the patterns of communication between doctors and patients. In recent years, online medical consultation has emerged as one of the most visible manifestations of this transformation (Cao et al., 2017). Against this backdrop, *Digital Clinics: A Communication Approach to Online Medical Consultation* by Bolin Cao offers a timely and comprehensive exploration of how digital communication technologies are reshaping doctor–patient interactions and redefining the communicative foundations of medical practice. By situating online consultation within the broader theoretical framework of communication studies, the book provides an insightful analysis of the structural, relational, and cultural changes brought about by the rise of digital healthcare platforms.

At its core, the book argues that the emergence of the "digital clinic" represents not merely a technological extension of traditional healthcare services, but rather a fundamental transformation in the communicative logic of medical encounters. In conventional clinical settings, medical communication is typically characterized by strong professional authority and pronounced information asymmetry. Physicians occupy a dominant position as experts, while patients often play a relatively passive role in the consultation process. However, the proliferation of digital platforms has begun to disrupt this traditional configuration. Online medical consultation environments grant patients greater access to health information and enable them to participate more actively in the consultation process. At the same time, physicians are

increasingly required to adapt their professional practices to the communicative and institutional logics of digital platforms, where visibility, responsiveness, and user experience become central elements of professional reputation and patient satisfaction.

One of the most compelling contributions of the book lies in its conceptualization of the "digital clinic" as a communicative space in which the roles, expectations, and identities of doctors and patients are renegotiated. Rather than framing online consultation simply as a technological innovation, the author emphasizes the communicative dynamics that underpin digital healthcare interactions. Within this environment, patients are no longer merely recipients of medical advice; instead, they become active participants who seek information, negotiate treatment options, and expect greater transparency and responsiveness from medical professionals. Physicians, meanwhile, must balance their traditional role as clinical experts with new demands related to service orientation, digital self-presentation, and platform mediated interaction. In this sense, the digital clinic emerges as a hybrid communicative environment that integrates elements of professional consultation, customer service, and social interaction.

The Digital Clinic as a Hybrid Communicative Space

The book is organized into eight chapters that together provide a systematic examination of online doctor–patient communication. Rather than focusing solely on technological innovation, the author approaches the digital clinic as a complex communicative environment shaped by technological infrastructures, institutional arrangements, and social expectations.

The opening chapters establish the historical and conceptual foundations of digital healthcare. The author situates online medical consultation within the broader context of the "Internet plus healthcare" initiative and the global expansion of digital health services. By tracing the development of internet healthcare platforms, the book shows how technological

innovation, policy support, and social demand have collectively contributed to the rapid growth of online medical consultation (Cao, 2025, p. 3). This historical perspective allows readers to understand digital clinics not as isolated technological phenomena but as part of a broader transformation of healthcare systems in the digital age. The book then turns to the structural characteristics of online doctor–patient communication (Cao, 2025, p.29). It identifies several major interaction models that emerge from the combination of digital technologies and institutional arrangements. These models illustrate how online consultation differs from traditional face-to-face medical encounters in terms of communication patterns, information flow, and professional roles. In addition to examining structural forms of communication, the author also analyzes the functions of online consultation platforms, including information seeking, medical advice, and psychological support.

Another major focus of the book is the role of trust in digital medical communication. In traditional clinical settings, trust is often established through institutional authority, professional credentials, and direct interpersonal interaction (Cao, 2025, p. 94). However, in online environments many of these cues are mediated by technological interfaces. The book explores how patients evaluate the credibility of physicians in digital contexts and how doctors build professional authority through platform-based reputation systems and repeated interaction with patients. The later chapters broaden the scope of discussion by examining the social implications of online medical communication. The author argues that digital consultation platforms can help bridge information gaps between doctors and patients and improve patient understanding of medical conditions. At the same time, online consultation enables the redistribution of medical resources by allowing patients to access specialists beyond their local regions. However, the book also acknowledges potential inequalities related to digital access and digital literacy.

In addition, the book discusses how online consultation environments may encourage greater patient participation in medical decision making. Digital platforms often facilitate more collaborative forms of communication between doctors and patients, enabling individuals to ask questions, seek clarification, and actively engage in discussions about treatment options. The book also explores how online consultation may be particularly useful for addressing stigmatized diseases, as the anonymity and accessibility of digital environments can reduce psychological barriers to seeking medical advice (Cao et al., 2018). The final chapters address the risks and future developments associated with digital healthcare communication. The author examines challenges such as miscommunication in text-based interactions, the limitations of remote diagnosis, and the increasing commercialization of digital healthcare platforms. The book concludes by reflecting on emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and the metaverse, suggesting that these innovations may further reshape the nature of online medical communication in the future (Cao, 2025, p. 224).

Key Arguments of the Book

One of the central arguments of *Digital Clinics* is that the emergence of digital healthcare platforms fundamentally transforms the communicative logic of medical practice. Traditional clinical encounters are typically characterized by strong professional authority and significant information asymmetry between doctors and patients. Physicians occupy the role of experts who diagnose and prescribe treatment, while patients often assume relatively passive roles within the consultation process. In contrast, digital consultation environments introduce new forms of communication that challenge these traditional hierarchies. Online platforms provide patients with greater access to health information and enable them to participate more actively in medical discussions. Patients are no longer merely recipients of medical advice; they increasingly act as

information seekers and decision-making participants. At the same time, physicians must adapt their professional practices to the communicative logic of digital platforms. In online environments, professional reputation is shaped not only by medical expertise but also by responsiveness, communication style, and user satisfaction. Doctors must therefore balance their traditional role as medical experts with new expectations related to service orientation and digital visibility.

Another key contribution of the book is its conceptualization of the "digital clinic" as a hybrid communicative space. Within this space, elements of professional consultation, customer service, and social interaction intersect. Medical communication is no longer confined to the physical boundaries of hospitals or clinics; instead, it occurs within platform-mediated environments where communication is shaped by technological interfaces and algorithmic systems. Through this conceptual framework, the book highlights the importance of communication research in understanding the transformation of healthcare systems in the digital age. It demonstrates that technological innovation alone cannot explain the rise of digital healthcare; rather, communication processes, social expectations, and institutional structures all play critical roles in shaping the development of online medical consultation.

Theoretical and practical contribution

One of the most notable strengths of *Digital Clinics* is its rich theoretical foundation. The author draws on a wide range of theoretical perspectives from communication studies, health communication, media sociology, and digital platform research. By integrating these diverse frameworks, the book provides a multidimensional understanding of digital healthcare communication. This theoretical diversity allows the analysis to move beyond simple descriptions of technological change and instead explore the deeper communicative processes

that shape doctor–patient interactions in digital environments. Another important strength of the book lies in its interdisciplinary orientation. The author successfully connects communication research with broader discussions in healthcare studies and digital media scholarship. This interdisciplinary approach makes the book particularly valuable for scholars interested in the intersection of communication, technology, and healthcare systems.

The book is also commendable for its engagement with contemporary research questions. Topics such as patient empowerment, digital trust, platform governance, and the commercialization of online healthcare services are highly relevant in today's rapidly evolving digital landscape. By addressing these issues, the book contributes to ongoing debates about the opportunities and challenges associated with the digitalization of healthcare. From a pedagogical perspective, the book provides valuable resources for students and researchers. Its clear structure and extensive theoretical discussions make it suitable for courses in health communication, digital media studies, and medical sociology. Graduate students in particular may find the book useful for identifying theoretical frameworks that can guide their own research projects.

Despite its many strengths, the book also raises several questions that could be explored further. For example, while the book provides detailed discussions of communication processes in online consultation, there could be more systematic empirical analysis of how these interactions vary across different digital platforms and healthcare systems. Future research might also examine cross-cultural differences in digital healthcare communication, as the dynamics of doctor–patient interaction may vary significantly across different social and institutional contexts. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish the overall contribution of the work. Instead, they highlight the potential for further research building on the theoretical and conceptual foundations established in the book.

Conclusion

Beyond its empirical contributions, one of the most impressive aspects of *Digital Clinics* is the richness of its theoretical framework. The author draws on a wide range of theories from communication studies, health communication, media sociology, and digital platform research. These theoretical perspectives are carefully integrated into the analysis, allowing the book to move beyond descriptive accounts of digital healthcare and toward a deeper understanding of the underlying communicative processes. For readers engaged in communication research, the book offers a particularly valuable resource for identifying potential theoretical approaches to studying digital health communication. Indeed, the book's theoretical diversity is one of its most distinctive strengths. Throughout the text, the author engages with multiple conceptual traditions, including interpersonal communication theory and platform studies. By bringing these perspectives together, the book demonstrates how communication scholarship can contribute to interdisciplinary research on digital healthcare. For scholars and graduate students seeking theoretical inspiration, the book provides a rich repertoire of conceptual tools that can be applied to a wide range of research topics. Equally noteworthy is the book's engagement with cutting edge research questions and methodological approaches. The topics addressed in the book reflect some of the most pressing issues in contemporary digital health communication, including patient empowerment, platform governance, digital trust, and the integration of emerging technologies into healthcare systems. By combining theoretical reflection with empirical observation, the author successfully bridges the gap between conceptual inquiry and real world practice.

From a pedagogical perspective, *Digital Clinics* also offers considerable value for teaching and research training. The breadth of topics covered in the book makes it an excellent

resource for students interested in health communication, digital media studies, and the sociology of medicine. In particular, the book's extensive theoretical discussions provide a useful starting point for students who are searching for appropriate theoretical frameworks for their own research projects. The author's ability to synthesize diverse theoretical perspectives into a coherent analytical framework is especially commendable. In addition, the book's forward-looking orientation encourages readers to think critically about the future development of digital healthcare communication. As emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and immersive media continue to reshape the digital landscape, the questions raised in this book will become increasingly important for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

In conclusion, *Digital Clinics: A Communication Approach to Online Medical Consultation* represents a significant contribution to the growing field of digital health communication research. Through its comprehensive analysis of online doctor–patient interaction, the book sheds light on the complex ways in which digital technologies are transforming medical communication and healthcare delivery. By combining theoretical richness, empirical insight, and forward-looking analysis, the author provides readers with a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with the digitalization of healthcare. For scholars and students in communication studies, the book offers both intellectual inspiration and practical guidance. Its wide range of theoretical perspectives and its engagement with cutting edge research topics make it an invaluable resource for anyone seeking to explore the communicative dimensions of digital healthcare. As digital technologies continue to reshape the landscape of medicine, *Digital Clinics* provides an essential foundation for understanding the evolving relationship between communication, technology, and health in the digital age.

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