Misguided Relief: Prevalence and Patterns of Symptom Management Misinformation for Breast Cancer on Instagram

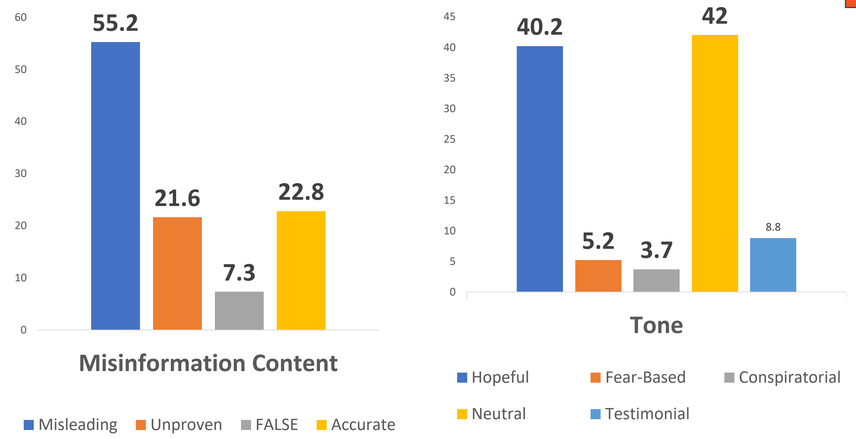
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Background

- Patients with breast cancer (BC) experience a range of treatment-related symptoms that significantly impact quality of life.
- While social media platforms have become popular sources of health information, their unregulated nature enables the rapid dissemination of health-related misinformation.
- Objective: **Evaluate the prevalence, characteristics, and engagement patterns of misinformation related to BC symptom management on Instagram.**

Method

- A content analysis of publicly available Instagram accounts
- Searches using BC-related and symptom-specific hashtags (e.g., #cancerfatigue) were conducted 06/17/2025-6/28/2025
- Searches were done in incognito mode
- Two coders independently reviewed each post.
- **Inclusion criteria:**
  - Posts were eligible if in English and publicly accessible
  - Referenced symptom management in the context of BC
  - Therapeutic claim.
  - First 30-50 eligible posts
- **Exclusion criteria:**
  - Posts unrelated to cancer or lacking health-related content
- For each symptom category, posts were studied for their **content**, perceived **risk** level, **creator type**, emotional **tone**, follower count, **engagement** and **type of misinformation**.
- Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis



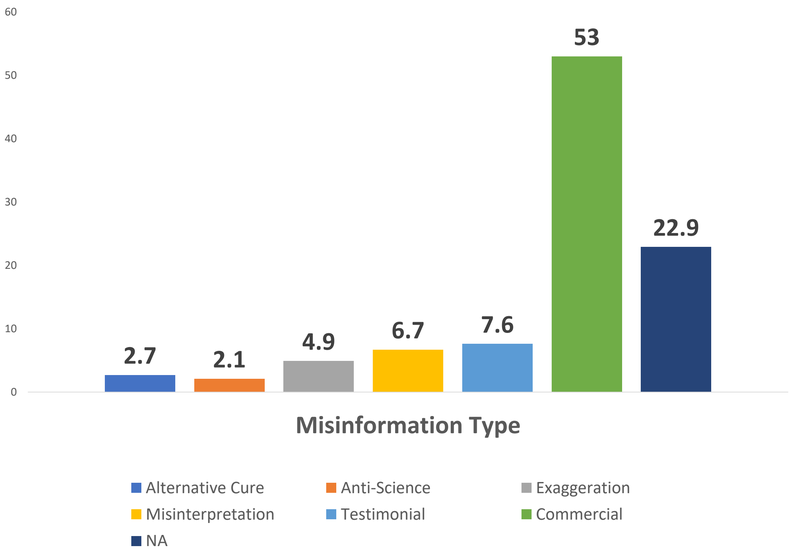


Figure 1-3: Characterization of Instagram Content on Breast Cancer Symptom Management

Result

- **Total posts= 328 posts.**
  - Fatigue (n = 46), Brain fog (n = 45), Hair loss (n = 46), Nausea (n = 48), Neuropathy (n = 51), Cancer pain (n = 44),Insomnia (n = 48).
- Content type:
  - **Misleading content was the most prevalent**, comprising 55.2% posts (n=181)
  - Accurate information was infrequent, with only 22.8% posts (n=75).
  - Thematic analysis:
    - 30% of posts referenced evidence-based interventions
    - 50% promoted non-evidence-based therapies
    - 20% of posts offered oversimplified advice, such as using ginger for nausea or turmeric for recurrence prevention.
- Additionally, **48.4% of the creators were influencers**, compared to healthcare professionals, who comprised only 15%.

Discussion

- Misinformation was widespread, with over half of Instagram posts on BC symptom management categorized as misleading and often driven by commercial intent.
- Most content was generated by non-medical influencers, while accurate, clinician-created information represented a minority and had low engagement.
- This pattern highlights a significant risk of patients encountering low-quality guidance during active treatment and survivorship.

Future Directions

- Increase engagement from oncology professionals and institutions on social media to provide accurate, evidence-based symptom management information.
- Develop accessible, shareable educational content and explore partnerships with patient advocates to counter misinformation effectively.

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