

A Conception of a Women's Disease: The Representation of HPV on Instagram by Physicians

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The present study aimed to examine how Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is represented on Iranian physicians' Instagram pages and to analyze the dominant themes, discursive frameworks, and gendered assumptions embedded in these representations.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative study employed thematic analysis to investigate HPV-related content published on Instagram by healthcare professionals. The study population consisted of physician-managed Instagram accounts actively producing educational content about HPV. Using purposive sampling, 25 Instagram pages were selected, and a total of 500 posts, including images, videos, reels, captions, and archived stories, were analyzed. Data were coded and categorized through qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis procedures. To enhance credibility, independent coding was conducted by two researchers, and themes were continuously compared and refined throughout the analytical process.

Findings: The findings indicated that HPV was predominantly represented as a women-centered disease. The most common themes included "HPV as a threat to women's health," "HPV as a cause of cervical cancer," and "women's responsibility for prevention and disease management." Furthermore, medical risk discourse and individual responsibility discourse emerged as the dominant discursive frameworks. Gender analysis revealed that women were primarily portrayed as the main victims of the disease and as the principal agents responsible for prevention and control, whereas men's roles in transmission, prevention, and disease management were largely marginalized. The results suggest that physicians' Instagram content contributes to the reproduction of a social perception of HPV as a predominantly female disease.

Conclusion: The study demonstrated that physicians' Instagram representations of HPV extend beyond health education and actively participate in the social construction of disease meanings. The strong emphasis on women's bodies, cervical cancer, and female responsibility creates a gendered understanding of HPV that may influence public attitudes toward sexual health and disease prevention.

Keywords: Human Papillomavirus, HPV, Media Representation, Instagram, Physicians, Sociology of Health, Health Discourse, Gender.

1. Introduction

Health and illness are not merely biological phenomena that can be understood exclusively through biomedical knowledge. Rather, they are social and cultural constructs whose meanings emerge through communication processes, symbolic interactions, institutional discourses, and media representations. Individuals' understandings of diseases, perceptions of risk, and responses to health information are shaped not only by scientific evidence but also by the ways diseases are portrayed and discussed within society. Media institutions play a crucial role in constructing public knowledge by selecting specific aspects of reality, framing health issues, and disseminating narratives that influence attitudes and behaviors. Consequently, representations of diseases contribute significantly to the formation of social meanings, moral judgments, and collective understandings regarding health and illness (Afsharkohan & Sharafi, 2015). Within this broader framework, social representations become central mechanisms through which individuals and communities make sense of health threats and assign meanings to disease experiences. Research on health-related social representations has demonstrated that media narratives shape how diseases are categorized, understood, feared, and managed within particular cultural contexts (Joffe & Bettega, 2003).

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed the landscape of health communication. Social media platforms have altered the traditional flow of medical information by enabling direct interactions between experts and the public. Unlike conventional media, social networking platforms facilitate continuous engagement, user participation, and the rapid dissemination of information. Among these platforms, Instagram has emerged as one of the most influential spaces for health communication, particularly in societies where visual communication plays a significant role in public engagement. Healthcare professionals increasingly use Instagram to educate audiences, disseminate preventive messages, establish professional identities, and shape public perceptions of health-related issues. The growing phenomenon of health communication through Instagram has been described as the "Instagramification" of health, wherein medical knowledge is transformed into visually appealing, accessible, and highly shareable content (Khojir, 2025). Systematic reviews further indicate that healthcare professionals have become prominent actors on Instagram,

using the platform to influence public attitudes and behaviors related to health and disease (Amon et al., 2024).

The increasing influence of social media on health communication has created new opportunities as well as new challenges. On the one hand, these platforms facilitate health education and increase access to medical information. On the other hand, they contribute to the social construction of disease meanings by embedding health messages within broader cultural, emotional, and ideological frameworks. Information circulated through social media rarely remains neutral. Rather, it is often shaped by assumptions about gender, morality, responsibility, risk, and identity. As a result, diseases become more than biomedical conditions; they become symbolic phenomena that reflect and reproduce social values and power relations. Understanding how diseases are represented in digital environments is therefore essential for comprehending the social dimensions of health communication.

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) provides a particularly important case for examining these issues. HPV is among the most prevalent sexually transmitted infections worldwide and is associated with a wide range of health outcomes, including genital warts and several forms of cancer. Public health organizations emphasize the significance of prevention, vaccination, early diagnosis, and public awareness regarding HPV. Despite affecting both women and men, public discussions about HPV frequently focus on women, especially because of the virus's association with cervical cancer. This emphasis has contributed to the widespread perception of HPV as primarily a women's health issue. However, epidemiological studies demonstrate that HPV is also prevalent among men and that men play a substantial role in the transmission and circulation of the virus (Shahi et al., 2022). The discrepancy between epidemiological realities and public perceptions raises important questions regarding how HPV is represented in media and public discourse.

The sociology of health suggests that diseases are embedded within broader cultural systems that assign meanings to bodies, behaviors, and social identities. Diseases associated with sexuality often acquire symbolic significance that extends beyond their medical characteristics. Anthropological perspectives emphasize that societies classify diseases according to cultural understandings of purity, danger, morality, and social order. Such classifications shape public attitudes toward disease and influence processes of stigmatization and social labeling (Anvari, 2019). Because HPV is transmitted primarily

through sexual contact, it is particularly vulnerable to moral judgments, misconceptions, and stigma. Consequently, public understandings of HPV are often intertwined with broader cultural anxieties concerning sexuality, gender roles, and reproductive health.

Research focusing on HPV-related health culture has demonstrated that public perceptions of the disease are influenced by social beliefs, misinformation, and cultural sensitivities surrounding sexual health. In many contexts, discussions about HPV remain constrained by cultural taboos and limited public awareness, creating conditions in which stereotypes and misconceptions can flourish (Soltanizadeh et al., 2020). These dynamics make HPV an especially relevant subject for investigating the processes through which health-related meanings are produced and reproduced in social media environments.

Media representation studies have repeatedly shown that portrayals of disease influence public perceptions, emotional responses, and health-related behaviors. Representations of illness can educate audiences, encourage preventive action, and promote awareness. At the same time, they can reinforce stereotypes, marginalize particular groups, and contribute to stigmatization. Research examining the representation of AIDS in Iranian television demonstrated that media narratives simultaneously function as educational tools and mechanisms for reproducing social stereotypes concerning disease and affected populations (Bichranlou et al., 2017). Similarly, studies investigating the representation of mental disorders in Iranian cinema revealed that cultural narratives and symbolic portrayals significantly influence public understandings of illness and contribute to the construction of social identities associated with disease (Azad et al., 2022). These findings suggest that media representations are not passive reflections of reality but active participants in shaping social knowledge.

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the representation of health conditions within digital media environments. Studies examining obesity and diabetes representations on social media have shown that online discussions contribute to the creation of specific narratives concerning responsibility, lifestyle, and risk factors (Lenzi Romana & Lazzetta, 2023). Research on aging has similarly demonstrated that representations of dementia and Alzheimer's disease shape perceptions of aging and influence anxieties regarding future health outcomes (Marhankova Hasmanova, 2023). Investigations into the representation of COVID-19 in traditional and digital media environments have further highlighted the role of

communication platforms in constructing public understandings of disease, uncertainty, and social responsibility (Sadeghi & Fathi, 2022; Zakeri Nasrabadi et al., 2024). Collectively, these studies emphasize that disease meanings are continuously negotiated through communication processes and media representations.

From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, representations are inseparable from power relations. Discourses do not merely describe reality; they actively produce and organize it. Language, visual imagery, and communicative practices shape how social phenomena are understood and evaluated. Critical discourse theorists argue that communication practices contribute to the reproduction of ideological assumptions and social hierarchies by privileging certain interpretations while marginalizing others (Fairclough, 2020). In the context of health communication, the ways diseases are framed can influence perceptions of responsibility, vulnerability, legitimacy, and social worth. Consequently, analyzing representations of HPV requires attention not only to informational content but also to the broader discursive structures through which meanings are constructed.

Foucauldian perspectives offer additional insights into the relationship between health communication and power. According to this perspective, knowledge and power are mutually constitutive, and visibility functions as a mechanism through which particular forms of knowledge become authoritative. Public attention is directed toward certain issues, populations, and bodies while others remain invisible. Through these processes, institutions participate in constructing "regimes of truth" that define what is considered normal, risky, or problematic (Kermani & Delavari, 2016). The relationship between visibility and power is particularly relevant in digital environments, where algorithmic systems and communication practices influence which narratives receive greater exposure and legitimacy (Royan et al., 2016). In the case of HPV, repeated emphasis on women's bodies and women's health may contribute to gendered constructions of disease that shape public perceptions regarding responsibility and risk.

The role of healthcare professionals within social media environments further intensifies these dynamics. Physicians occupy positions of authority and credibility, making their representations of disease especially influential. Information provided by medical professionals is often perceived as trustworthy and scientifically grounded. Consequently, physician-generated content has substantial potential to shape public understanding of health issues. However,

professional authority does not eliminate the social dimensions of communication. Physicians, like all communicators, operate within broader cultural and institutional contexts that influence the ways health information is framed and presented. Therefore, examining physician-generated content provides valuable insights into the intersection of medical expertise, media communication, and social meaning-making.

Another important dimension of contemporary health communication concerns misinformation and information quality. Social media users are increasingly exposed to competing narratives, conflicting claims, and inaccurate health information. Exposure to misinformation has been shown to influence health-related attitudes, risk perceptions, and information-seeking behaviors (Kim & Hong, 2023). In this context, healthcare professionals play a critical role in counteracting misinformation and providing reliable information. Nevertheless, even accurate medical information may contribute to unintended social consequences if it reproduces narrow assumptions regarding gender, responsibility, or vulnerability. Therefore, understanding how physicians communicate about HPV involves examining not only the accuracy of information but also the social meanings embedded within that communication.

Health communication is also fundamentally emotional. Public responses to disease-related information are shaped not only by cognitive assessments but also by emotions such as fear, anxiety, shame, hope, and trust. Communication strategies frequently employ emotional appeals to attract attention, increase engagement, and motivate behavioral change. Research has demonstrated that emotional dynamics significantly influence perceptions of legitimacy, credibility, and risk in digital communication environments (Joachim et al., 2024). Furthermore, studies have highlighted the role of emotions such as horror, disgust, and abjection in shaping public attitudes toward health conditions and vulnerable populations (Houston, 2023). Because HPV is associated with sexuality, bodily vulnerability, and cancer-related fears, emotional dimensions are likely to play an especially significant role in its representation.

Despite the growing volume of HPV-related content on social media platforms, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how healthcare professionals represent the disease in digital environments. Existing research has primarily focused on epidemiological, clinical, and educational dimensions of HPV, while relatively little is known about the symbolic and discursive processes through

which physicians contribute to the social construction of the disease. Moreover, few studies have examined whether physician-generated content reinforces gendered assumptions regarding responsibility, vulnerability, and prevention. Given Instagram's widespread popularity and physicians' increasing influence as health communicators, investigating these issues is essential for understanding the broader social implications of digital health communication.

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to examine how Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is represented on Iranian physicians' Instagram pages and to analyze the dominant themes, discursive frameworks, and gendered assumptions embedded within these representations.

2. Methods and Materials

The present study employed a qualitative approach and utilized qualitative content analysis to examine the representation of Human Papillomavirus (HPV) on physicians' Instagram pages. The purpose of the study was to identify meaning patterns, discursive frameworks, and modes of representing this disease within social media environments, as well as to investigate how notions related to gender, health, and the female body are constructed in physician-generated content. The study population consisted of all active Instagram accounts belonging to gynecologists and obstetricians, infectious disease specialists, dermatologists, and general practitioners in Iran who produced educational content related to HPV. Purposive sampling was employed to select the sample. In the first stage, a list of relevant Instagram pages was compiled by searching keywords such as "HPV," "genital warts," "Human Papillomavirus," "women's health," and "HPV vaccine." Subsequently, based on criteria including a minimum of 10,000 followers, continuous activity during the previous year, publication of HPV-related educational content, and a clearly identifiable professional identity, 25 Instagram pages were selected. From the content published on these pages between March 2024 and March 2025, a total of 500 posts, including images, videos, reels, captions, and archived stories related to HPV, were selected and analyzed as units of analysis. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved and the principal themes were repeatedly observed.

Data collection instruments consisted of a data extraction checklist and a media content coding form designed on the basis of theoretical foundations drawn from media representation studies, the sociology of health, the social

construction of disease theory, and gender studies. During data collection, all selected posts were fully downloaded and archived. Information regarding content type, primary topic, visual characteristics, keywords, disease framing, emphasis on the gender of affected individuals, persuasive strategies, treatment and prevention recommendations, and audience interaction patterns was systematically recorded. In addition, the complete text of captions and the spoken content of videos were transcribed and converted into textual form to facilitate more detailed analysis. To enhance data credibility, the coding process was conducted independently by two researchers, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. Furthermore, to ensure research validity, continuous data review, constant comparison of codes, and simultaneous examination of textual and visual elements were employed.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis based on the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke. In the first stage, the data were repeatedly reviewed to enable researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. Initial codes were then extracted from textual and visual data and organized into meaningful units. In the subsequent stage, similar codes were grouped into subthemes and the relationships among them were examined. The subthemes were then integrated into higher levels of abstraction, resulting in the formation of overarching themes. Throughout the analytical process,

particular attention was given to identifying patterns of HPV representation, the attribution of disease to women or men, portrayals of the female body, strategies of fear appeal or reassurance, emphasis on individual responsibility in prevention and treatment, and the role of medical discourse in shaping public perceptions of the disease. Finally, the resulting themes were organized and analyzed using MAXQDA 2024 software, and the final interpretive framework of the study was developed based on the relationships among the extracted themes.

3. Findings and Results

In this study, 500 HPV-related posts from 25 physician-managed Instagram pages were analyzed. Of the pages examined, 56% belonged to gynecologists and obstetricians, 20% to dermatologists, 12% to infectious disease specialists, and 12% to general practitioners. In addition, 68% of the pages were managed by female physicians and 32% by male physicians. Among the 500 analyzed content items, 41% were published as reels, 27% as image posts, 18% as educational videos, and 14% as archived stories. The average number of followers across the analyzed pages was 186,542, and the cumulative views of the selected content exceeded 24 million, indicating the substantial influence of these pages on public perceptions of HPV.

Table 1

Frequency Distribution of the Main Themes of HPV Representation on Physicians' Instagram Pages

Main Themes	Frequency	Percentage
HPV as a Threat to Women's Health	158	31.6
HPV as a Cause of Cervical Cancer	124	24.8
Emphasis on Women's Individual Responsibility for Prevention	86	17.2
Medical Education and Public Information	61	12.2
Emphasis on Vaccination and Screening	42	8.4
Representation of HPV as a Disease Affecting Both Women and Men	18	3.6
Addressing Social Stigma and Misconceptions	11	2.2
Total	500	100

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that the most dominant pattern of HPV representation on the examined pages was the portrayal of HPV as a threat to women's health, accounting for 158 cases or 31.6% of all analyzed content. The second most frequent theme emphasized the relationship between HPV and cervical cancer, representing 24.8% of the content. These findings suggest that physicians on Instagram primarily employed a framework that defined HPV in relation to the female body and women's health

risks. In contrast, representations of HPV as a disease affecting both women and men accounted for only 3.6% of the content, indicating limited attention to men's roles in disease transmission, prevention, and management. Furthermore, the relatively small proportion of content addressing social stigma and correcting misconceptions suggests that physicians focused primarily on the biological and medical dimensions of HPV, while its social and cultural aspects received comparatively less attention.

Table 2

Frequency of Discursive Frameworks Used in the Representation of HPV

Discursive Framework	Frequency	Percentage
Medical Risk and Fear Discourse	176	35.2
Individual Responsibility Discourse	118	23.6
Educational and Awareness-Raising Discourse	94	18.8
Disease Prevention and Control Discourse	63	12.6
Women's Empowerment Discourse	29	5.8
Gender Equality in Health Discourse	20	4.0
Total	500	100

The results presented in Table 2 show that medical risk and fear discourse constituted the most prevalent discursive framework, accounting for 35.2% of the content analyzed. Within this framework, HPV was primarily associated with concepts such as cancer, infertility, threats to reproductive health, and severe physical consequences. The second most common framework was individual responsibility discourse, representing 23.6% of the content, which emphasized personal health management, periodic testing, regular physician consultations, and adherence to preventive behaviors. In contrast, gender equality in health discourse accounted for only 4% of the total content, indicating limited

attention to the shared roles of women and men in disease transmission and control. This pattern suggests that physicians predominantly relied on risk-oriented and warning-based communication strategies and were less inclined to challenge traditional gender assumptions or redefine gender-related responsibilities associated with HPV. Additionally, the relatively low prevalence of women's empowerment discourse indicates that most content focused on disseminating medical information rather than enhancing women's agency, critical awareness, and decision-making capacity regarding sexual health.

Table 3

Subthemes Related to the Representation of Women in Physicians' Instagram Content

Subtheme	Frequency	Percentage
Woman as the Primary Victim of the Disease	142	28.4
Woman as Responsible for Disease Prevention and Control	128	25.6
Woman as Requiring Continuous Screening	97	19.4
Woman as an Informed Agent in Health Management	62	12.4
Woman as a Source of Disease Transmission	39	7.8
Woman as an Equal Partner in Sexual Relationships	32	6.4
Total	500	100

The analysis of subthemes related to the representation of women presented in Table 3 indicates that the dominant image of women on physicians' Instagram pages was "woman as the primary victim of the disease," accounting for 28.4% of all cases. In many posts, women were portrayed as the group most severely affected by HPV and as those facing the greatest risk of serious consequences. The theme "woman as responsible for disease prevention and control" ranked second with 25.6%, indicating that responsibility for disease management was largely attributed to women. In contrast, representations of women as equal participants in sexual relationships and sexual health accounted for only 6.4% of the content. This finding suggests that the majority of medical narratives on Instagram continue to revolve

around the female body and disproportionately attribute responsibility for the disease and its consequences to women. From a sociological perspective, such a pattern may contribute to the reproduction of the notion of HPV as a "women's disease," whereby HPV is represented not as a shared public health issue affecting both sexes, but primarily as a threat associated with women. The findings further indicate that although some physicians attempted to adopt a more balanced approach by emphasizing education, vaccination, and awareness-raising, the dominant representational pattern remained centered on the feminization of the disease and the emphasis on women's responsibility and vulnerability.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the representation of Human Papillomavirus (HPV) on Iranian physicians' Instagram pages and analyzed the dominant themes, discursive frameworks, and gendered assumptions embedded in these representations. The findings revealed that HPV was predominantly represented as a women-centered disease. The most frequently observed themes were "HPV as a threat to women's health," "HPV as a cause of cervical cancer," and "women's responsibility for prevention and disease management." In addition, the dominant discursive frameworks were medical risk discourse and individual responsibility discourse. Gender analysis further demonstrated that women were primarily portrayed as the principal victims of the disease and the primary actors responsible for prevention and control, while men's roles in transmission, prevention, and disease management remained relatively invisible. These findings indicate that physician-generated content on Instagram contributes not only to health education but also to the social construction of HPV as a predominantly female disease.

One of the most important findings of the study was the overwhelming emphasis on women's health in HPV-related content. More than half of the analyzed posts framed HPV through its association with women's bodies, cervical cancer, and reproductive health. Although this emphasis is partially justified because cervical cancer is one of the most serious consequences of HPV infection, the findings suggest that such representations may unintentionally obscure the broader epidemiological reality that HPV affects both women and men. Previous medical studies conducted in Iran have reported a substantial prevalence of HPV among men and highlighted their significant role in transmission dynamics (Shahi et al., 2022). However, the limited representation of men in Instagram content indicates a disconnect between epidemiological evidence and media representation. This finding supports the argument that media and communication processes selectively emphasize certain aspects of health phenomena while marginalizing others, thereby contributing to socially constructed understandings of disease (Afsharkohan & Sharafi, 2015).

The predominance of women-centered representations can also be interpreted through the sociology of health and cultural classification theories. Diseases associated with sexuality often become embedded within broader cultural narratives concerning morality, purity, responsibility, and gender. According to cultural approaches to disease

classification, societies assign symbolic meanings to illnesses that extend beyond their biological characteristics (Anvari, 2019). HPV, because of its association with sexual behavior and reproductive health, appears particularly vulnerable to gendered interpretations. The findings suggest that physicians' Instagram content reproduces existing cultural assumptions that position women as the primary site of reproductive responsibility and sexual health surveillance. Such representations contribute to the normalization of a gendered understanding of HPV, in which women become more visible and accountable than men.

Another significant finding was the dominance of the "HPV as a cause of cervical cancer" theme. This result is understandable given the strong medical relationship between HPV and cervical cancer. However, the near-exclusive focus on cervical cancer may contribute to a narrowing of public understanding regarding the broader health consequences of HPV infection. While awareness of cervical cancer is undoubtedly important, an exclusive focus on this outcome may reinforce the perception that HPV is solely a women's issue. Previous studies examining media representations of disease have similarly shown that selective emphasis on particular manifestations of illness can shape public understanding and produce incomplete or distorted perceptions of health risks (Azad et al., 2022; Bichranlou et al., 2017). Therefore, although cervical cancer remains a legitimate focus of public health communication, more balanced representations may be necessary to improve public understanding of HPV as a shared public health concern.

The findings also revealed that women were frequently represented as the primary agents responsible for prevention, screening, vaccination, and disease management. This pattern reflects the broader dominance of individual responsibility discourse observed in the analyzed content. The discourse of individual responsibility encourages personal health management and preventive behavior, which are important objectives in public health communication. Nevertheless, when responsibility is disproportionately assigned to one social group, communication may inadvertently reinforce inequalities and stereotypes. The strong emphasis on women's responsibility found in this study mirrors broader social expectations concerning women's roles in family health management and reproductive care. Similar observations have been reported in studies examining representations of health-related behaviors and disease prevention in media environments, where responsibility is often individualized and assigned to

specific populations rather than distributed across broader social systems (Soltanizadeh et al., 2020).

The dominance of medical risk discourse constitutes another noteworthy finding. More than one-third of the analyzed content relied on narratives emphasizing danger, cancer risk, reproductive threats, and severe health consequences. This finding suggests that physicians frequently use fear-based communication strategies to increase audience awareness and encourage preventive action. Such strategies are common in health communication because perceived risk often motivates behavioral change. However, excessive reliance on fear-oriented messaging may produce unintended consequences, including anxiety, stigma, and emotional distress. Research on emotional dimensions of communication has demonstrated that fear, uncertainty, and perceived vulnerability play a central role in shaping public reactions to health information (Joachim et al., 2024). Similarly, studies examining the social dimensions of disease communication indicate that fear-based narratives may contribute to processes of exclusion, stigmatization, and social anxiety (Houston, 2023). Consequently, while risk communication is necessary, its effectiveness may be enhanced when balanced with empowering, supportive, and stigma-reducing messages.

The findings regarding limited attention to stigma reduction are particularly important. Only a small proportion of posts addressed misconceptions, social prejudice, or stigma associated with HPV. This suggests that physicians primarily focus on biomedical education while paying less attention to the social and psychological consequences of disease labeling. Such a pattern is consistent with previous research demonstrating that medical communication frequently prioritizes biological explanations while underemphasizing social experiences of illness (Bichranlou et al., 2017). However, given the cultural sensitivities surrounding sexually transmitted infections, addressing stigma is particularly important in HPV communication. Failure to confront misconceptions and social prejudice may discourage testing, vaccination, treatment seeking, and open discussion of sexual health concerns.

The study's findings also support theoretical perspectives derived from critical discourse analysis. From this viewpoint, media representations are not neutral reflections of reality but active processes of meaning construction. The dominance of particular themes and narratives reflects underlying assumptions about gender, health, risk, and responsibility. According to Fairclough, discourse contributes to the production and reproduction of social

realities by legitimizing certain interpretations while marginalizing others (Fairclough, 2020). In the present study, the persistent emphasis on women's vulnerability and responsibility constructs a particular version of reality in which HPV becomes primarily associated with female bodies. This representation may influence public attitudes toward disease prevention and reinforce gendered assumptions concerning sexual health.

The findings are also consistent with Foucauldian perspectives on visibility, knowledge, and power. Foucault's framework suggests that what becomes visible within public discourse is shaped by institutional and cultural mechanisms that determine which subjects deserve attention and which remain invisible. Previous discussions of visibility and power have highlighted the role of discourse in directing public attention toward specific groups and issues while excluding others (Kermani & Delavari, 2016; Royan et al., 2016). In the context of HPV communication, women's bodies become highly visible, while men's involvement remains largely hidden. Such asymmetrical visibility contributes to the production of a gendered regime of knowledge in which responsibility for disease prevention is disproportionately assigned to women.

The results further align with recent studies examining disease representations in digital media environments. Research on the representation of obesity and diabetes on social media demonstrated that online platforms frequently construct narratives emphasizing personal responsibility and individual behavior (Lenzi Romana & Lazzetta, 2023). Similarly, studies investigating social representations of aging and dementia found that communication processes influence how individuals interpret risk, vulnerability, and future health outcomes (Marhankova Hasmanova, 2023). Investigations into COVID-19 representations in social networks have likewise shown that digital media play an active role in constructing collective understandings of disease and social responsibility (Sadeghi & Fathi, 2022; Zakeri Nasrabadi et al., 2024). The present findings extend this body of literature by demonstrating that similar representational processes are evident in physician-generated Instagram content concerning HPV.

The role of Instagram itself should also be considered when interpreting the findings. Contemporary health communication increasingly occurs within highly visual and engagement-driven digital environments. Instagram encourages the production of concise, visually appealing, and emotionally engaging content, which may incentivize communicators to focus on simplified narratives and

recognizable risk categories. Research on Instagram health communication suggests that healthcare professionals often adapt their messages to platform-specific communication norms, emphasizing visibility, engagement, and audience reach (Amon et al., 2024; Khojir, 2025). Consequently, the gendered framing observed in this study may reflect not only medical assumptions but also the communicative logic of social media platforms themselves.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of examining physicians as influential actors in the construction of public health knowledge. As trusted sources of information, physicians occupy a privileged position in shaping public perceptions of disease. Their messages influence not only what audiences know but also how they understand risk, responsibility, and social identity. In an era characterized by information overload and widespread misinformation, professional health communication has become increasingly important. Studies examining social media health information have demonstrated that exposure to online content influences health-seeking behaviors, risk perceptions, and public attitudes toward disease (Kim & Hong, 2023). Therefore, understanding the representations embedded within physician-generated content is essential for evaluating the broader social consequences of digital health communication.

Overall, the findings indicate that Iranian physicians' Instagram content predominantly constructs HPV through a gendered framework that emphasizes women's vulnerability, responsibility, and health risks while minimizing the role of men. Although these representations possess substantial educational value, they also contribute to the social construction of HPV as a female disease. A more balanced approach that highlights shared responsibility, addresses stigma, incorporates social dimensions of health, and acknowledges the roles of both women and men may contribute to more accurate public understanding and more effective disease prevention efforts.

The present study has several limitations. First, the analysis was restricted to Instagram pages managed by Iranian physicians and therefore does not capture representations of HPV on other social media platforms such as Telegram, X (Twitter), YouTube, or TikTok. Second, the study focused on content produced by healthcare professionals and did not examine audience interpretations, comments, or user engagement patterns. Third, because the study employed a qualitative thematic approach, the findings emphasize interpretive depth rather than statistical generalizability. Finally, the content was collected during a

specific time period, and representation patterns may evolve as public awareness, medical guidelines, and social media communication practices change over time.

Future studies should compare HPV representations across different social media platforms to identify similarities and differences in communication patterns. Researchers may also investigate audience responses to HPV-related content and examine how users interpret gendered messages regarding disease responsibility and prevention. Comparative studies involving different countries and cultural contexts would provide valuable insights into the influence of social norms on health communication. In addition, future research could explore the relationship between exposure to HPV-related social media content and actual health behaviors, including vaccination uptake, screening participation, and information-seeking practices.

Healthcare professionals should adopt more balanced communication strategies that emphasize the shared roles of women and men in HPV transmission, prevention, and disease management. Public health campaigns should complement biomedical information with content addressing stigma, misconceptions, and social barriers to prevention and treatment. Educational materials should avoid unintentionally reinforcing gender stereotypes and instead promote inclusive understandings of sexual health responsibility. Furthermore, health communicators should combine risk awareness messages with empowering and supportive narratives that encourage informed decision-making while reducing fear and social anxiety. Such approaches may contribute to more effective health promotion and a more comprehensive public understanding of HPV.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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