

Visual trust, expertise and emotion: helping health professionals navigate social media

What happens when doctors post on Instagram or when patients search for treatment tips on TikTok? The TRAVIS project (Trust and Visuality in Everyday Digital Practices) addresses one of today's most complex health communication challenges: how visual content in social media shapes trust between professionals, patients, and platforms.

Working across Estonia (Tallinn University), Finland (Tampere University), Austria (Salzburg University), and the UK (University of Oxford), TRAVIS researchers have explored how people assess credibility, expertise, and empathy in health-related digital visual content. This research has extended out from academic circles, finding health professionals in their own professional domains.

In Finland, TRAVIS researchers Asko Lehmuskallio and Jenni Niemelä-Nyrhinen published an article in a journal by Duodecim, an organization that plays a key role in the Finnish healthcare system (bringing together the association of doctors, publishing a journal, and being responsible for the current care guidelines), unpacking how visual culture affects professional communication and patient relationships.

In Estonia, TRAVIS researchers collaborated with the Estonian Family Doctors' Association, ensuring that findings were accessible to general practitioners. Two nationally distributed articles in *Lege Artis* and *Perearst* by Jaana Davidjants and Katrin Tiidenberg examined how health expertise is performed visually on social media. It showed how lab coats, stethoscopes, clinical settings, and medical diagrams function as visual signals of credibility. Yet these same cues can be co-opted by non-experts. The *Perearst* article highlighted why young people often turn to social media for (mental) health information. Limited access to mental health care, relatable first-person narratives, and quick responses from peer-to-peer support networks on platforms like Facebook all contribute to young adults' reliance on social media for health advice.

As further highlighted in TRAVIS researcher Marius Liedtke's interview with the Austrian newspaper *Salzburger Nachrichten*, young people can be prone to diagnosing themselves with mental illnesses based on TikTok content, a process closely connected to the platform's algorithmic environment and creator's competent use of its affordances, vernacular genres and appeals to

users' life-worlds. Trust in health communication is not just about accuracy – it's about resonance, relevance, and relatability. Together with Austrian pupils of different age, TRAVIS researcher Maria Schreiber reflected how they evaluate and trust medical content in an interactive school workshop format “Muckis, Medien und Mental Health” [Muscles, Media and Mental Health].

TRAVIS researchers also collaborated with the Estonian Association of Young Family Doctor's, organizing a lively discussion on the risks and opportunities that social media holds for health professionals, while UK TRAVIS researcher Josie Hamper participated in a workshop at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, offering critical perspectives on social media with a diverse range of FemTech (women's health technology) designers, developers and researchers.

By providing tools and language for critically engaging with visual culture, the TRAVIS project helps health professionals and healthtech innovators better understand the complex ecosystem of digital health and wellbeing. In a world where memes can shape health behavior and trust hinges on visual performance, TRAVIS hopes to empower professionals to connect, inform, and care more effectively in digital spaces.



Photo by: TRAVIS project team

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