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Research Article

Use of Social Media as a Source of Nutritional Information Among Health Science Students at Benghazi University

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ABSTRACT

Social media is challenging as an information-sharing community because there is no formal review process before the information is published. University students rank among the most engaged users of social media and have demonstrated difficulty in assessing credible information on the internet. The study aims to explore the use of social media as a source of nutritional information among health science students at Benghazi University, Libya. A Descriptive, cross-sectional study was conducted between January and May 2024. The study sample consisted of 434 health science students (377 females and 57 males). Data were collected using an online, self-administered questionnaire via Google Forms. A chi-square test was utilized to analyze the relationship between demographic characteristics and the use of social media for sourcing nutrition information. Results indicated that 81.6% of students utilized nutrition information, with 25.8% actively following a specific diet. Participants primarily searched for general nutrition tips and disease-specific dietary information. Approximately half of the respondents (50.5%) considered social media platforms to be their most reliable source of nutrition information. Statistical analysis revealed a significant correlation between gender and several factors, including social media usage, preferred content types, qualifications of followed pages, and the perceived accuracy and helpfulness of the information. Additionally, the students' specific faculty was significantly associated with their use of social media for nutrition information and their perception of page credibility. This study has shown that social media is the most common source of nutritional information among students. This study indicates that Facebook is the preferred social media platform among a majority of students.

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1. Introduction:

Social media refers to any internet-based platform focused on community contribution, interaction, sharing of content, and/or collaboration, which is utilized for online social networking (1). Social media are widely popular across different age groups. However, the recent rise in popularity of social media platforms has introduced a new option for finding information online. Consequently; can be considered the social media as the most influential part of receiving information about their daily needs. As a social media have become more mainstream, their impact has extended to the health domain (2). Social media in health fields have experienced growing participation of users and are increasingly considered a credible form of communication. Recently, interest in nutrition, sports, and a healthy lifestyle is become vast and searching for nutritional information online is also become prevalent. (3) Evidence from the study found that a majority of participants (>70%) utilized internet-based platforms for dietary information. (4).

College students, in particular, have been found to be at risk for being exposed to a wide dissemination of unreliable and misleading health information through social media due to their lack of skills to properly judge online health information. The evidence shows that college students are especially vulnerable to negative consequences from seeking health information online because they lack the necessary skills to evaluate the information accurately (5). Furthermore, Medical students play a crucial role in shaping the future of healthcare, and their understanding of nutrition is vital for promoting healthy lifestyles among patients.

The increased use of social media for nutrition information by health science students raises concerns about exposure to uncontrolled and perhaps inaccurate content. However, there is limited research on how students at the University of Benghazi use and analyze this content. This study attempts to fill that gap by presenting relevant evidence on digital nutrition knowledge. It will also assist create educational and public health policies that promote the use of trustworthy nutrition information.

The aim of this study is to investigate the pattern of social media use as a source of nutrition information among medical students in the University.

Specific Objectives:

1- Explore the type of nutrition information gathered.

2- Understand whether the students consider the social media as a reliable source of nutritional information.

3- How students rate the accuracy of the information obtained from the social media.

2. Methodology:

2.1. Study design:

A Descriptive, cross-sectional study was undertaken between January to May 2024 in Benghazi university.

2.2. Study Population

Medical undergraduate students who were enrolled in Benghazi University in Libya were conducted among 434 students including Medical, Dental, public health, pharmacy, and biomedical science.

2.3. Sampling and sampling technique

A stratified sampling technique was employed; The study population was stratified by academic discipline, where each health science faculty (Medicine, Pharmacy, Dentistry, and Public Health) constituted a distinct stratum. Students were then selected from each stratum to ensure representation across all faculties. the sample size was 434 student (377 female and 57 male). The percentage and number of students from every faculty represented in the sample were calculated according to the total number of students given by the register office of each faulty.

2.4. Data collection procedure and tools

Data were collected using online self-administered questionnaire using Google forms was made available online. The questionnaire had been sent out electronically to student groups that were connected to the faculties that

were being targeted. Participants received explicit information regarding the study and provided informed consent prior to their participation. The questionnaire took roughly 10 minutes to complete and consisted of 18 multiple-choice and open-end questions. Each questionnaire was coded with a unique number representing each respondent. The data in the questionnaire classified into sections: Socioeconomic characteristic: This comprises information on age, sex, faculty, academic year, family information like paternal and maternal occupation and monthly family income. Utilizing social-media related data: This segment measures students‟ regular social media usage, regardless of whether using a computers or mobile devices.

2.5. Data analysis and statistics used

The data was checked manual for completeness and analyzed by using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS, ver.23) software. Descriptive statistics in form of frequencies, percentages, range, means, and standard deviations were used. The chi-square test was used to investigate the associations between demographics characteristics and use of social media for nutrition information.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Benghazi University, informed consent was obtained from to protect the confidentiality of the collected data, all questionaries and participants were anonymous.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Participants

The average age was 23.8 ± 2.39 years (with a range of 18–36), and the majority of participants were aged between 24 and 29 years (53%), followed by those aged 18 to 23 years (44%). Close to half of the students were from the Faculty of Medicine (49.3%), with the largest segment being in their fourth year of study (45.9%). In terms of socioeconomic status, 43.8% of participants indicated a monthly family income of over 2000, while 40.1% reported an income between 1000 and 2000. Regarding parental occupations, most fathers were either employed (37%) or engaged in other types of work (50.9%), while the majority of mothers were housewives (53.5%) or teachers (37.3%). A comprehensive overview of the demographic and socioeconomic details can be found in Table1.

3.2. Using of social media

3.2.1. Availability of Internet Access Among Participants:

Figure (1) illustrates the distribution of internet access among participants, showing that the majority (388; 89%) reported easy and fast connectivity.

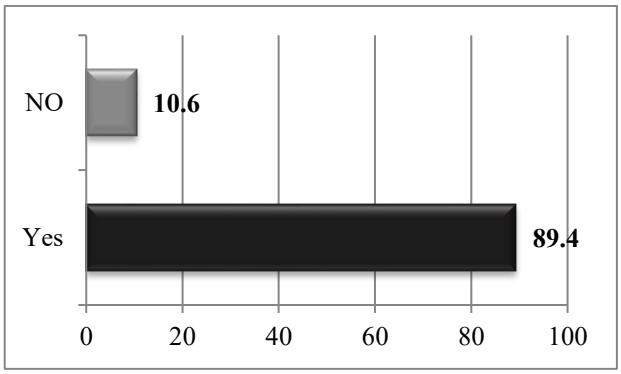


Figure1: Distribution of internet access *speed and ease* among participants

3.2.2. Online searching for nutritional information:

The Figure (2) illustrates that a majority of students, specifically 293 (67.5%), expressed an interest in seeking nutrition information online.

3.2.3 Frequency of using as a source of nutrition information:

The results revealed that (n=76,17.5 %) of students always use social media platforms as a source of nutritional information, while the largest proportion of students (n=330, 76%) indicated that they occasionally rely on social media for such information and only (n=28, 6.5%) of students reported never utilizing social media as a source of nutritional guidance. there also is compelling international evidence that the higher education sector has

been an enthusiastic adopter of social media. (6)

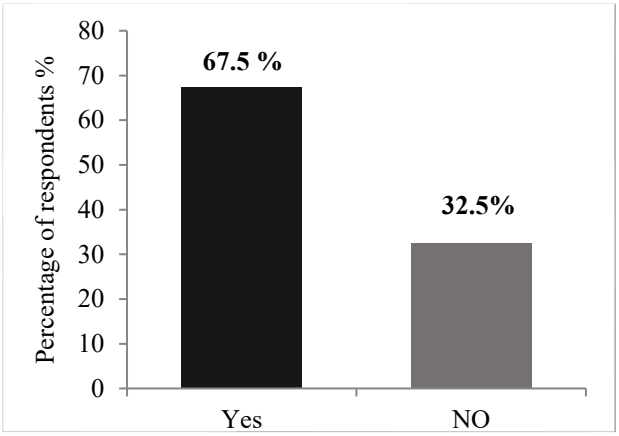


Figure 2. The distribution of students is based on their interest in searching for nutrition online.

3.2.4. Most common platform used by student: The data presented in Figure (4) indicates that Facebook is the preferred social media platform among a majority of students (n=224, 51.6%), Instagram is reported to be used by (n=106, 24.2%) of the students, followed by TikTok (n=67, 15.4%) of the students, while Snapchat used by (n=20, 4.6%) of the students. Twitter sees a smaller percentage of usage at (n=17,3.9%).

These findings are consistent with previous research, which reported that Facebook is extensively utilized throughout adults, although Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok are more widespread among younger users (7).

Table1. Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Participants:

Variable	Category	N (%)
Gender	Female	377 (96.9)
	Male	57 (13.1)
Age group (years)	18-23	191 (44)
	24-29	230 (53)
	30-36	13 (3)
Faculty	Medicine	214 (49.3)
	Public Health	54 (12.4)
	Dentistry	83 (19.1)
	Pharmacy	42 (9.7)
	Biomedical Sciences	41 (9.4)
Year of study	First year	44 (10.1)
	Second year	51 (11.8)
	Third year	91 (21)
	Fourth year	199 (45.9)
	< fourth year	49 (11.3)
Monthly family income	< 1000	70 (16.1)
	1000-2000	174 (40.1)
	< 2000	190 (43.8)
Father's occupation	Employee	159 (37)
	Teacher	37 (8.5)
	Medical profession	17 (9.3)
	other	221 (50.9)
Mother's occupation	Employee	29 (6.7)
	Teacher	162 (37.3)
	Medical profession	8 (1.8)
	Housewife	232 (53.5)

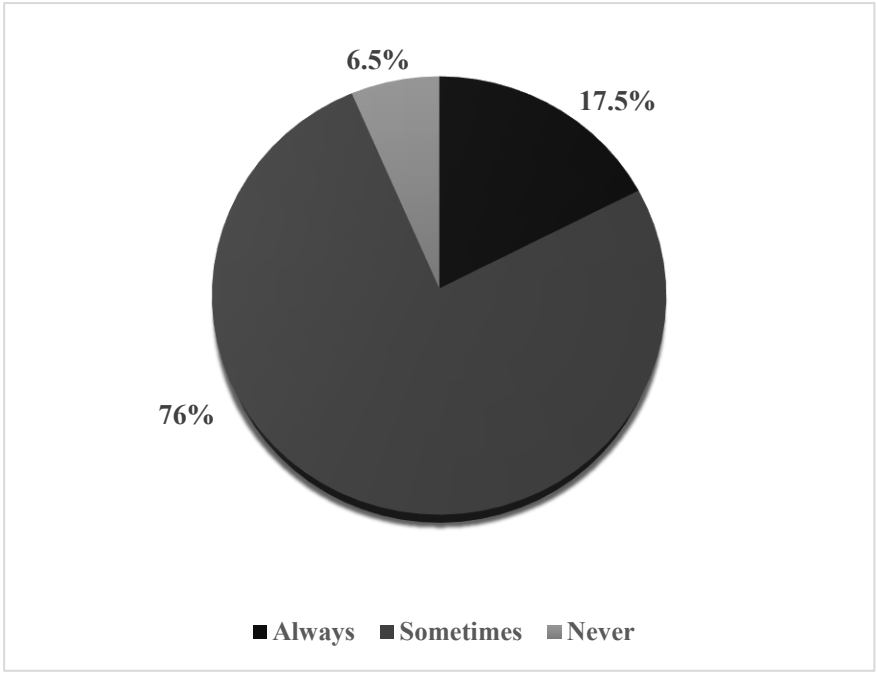


Figure 3. Frequency of using as a source of nutrition information

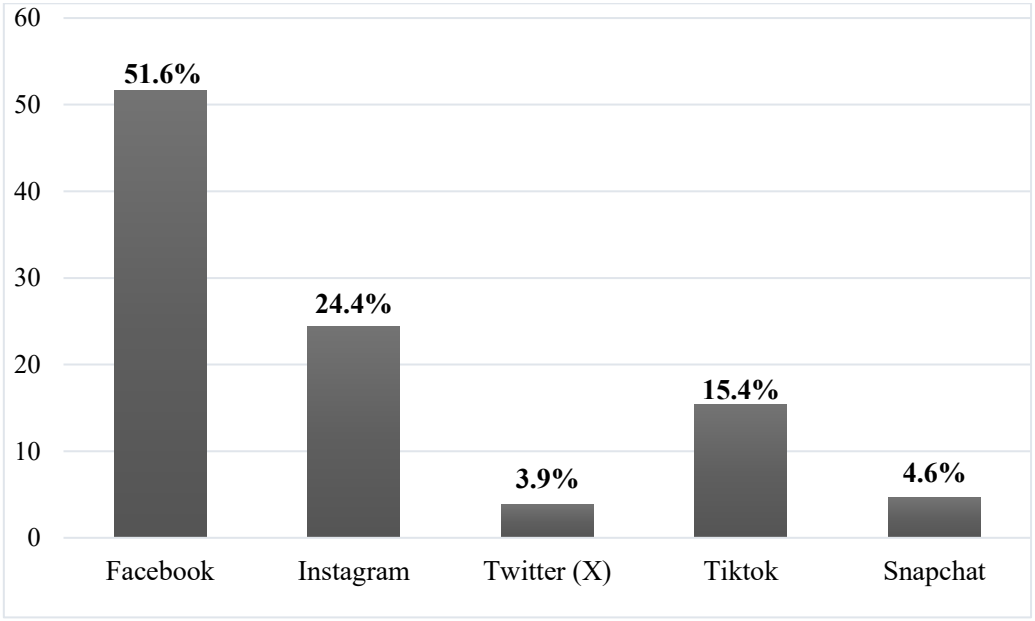


Figure 4. Distribution of the most commonly used social media platforms for accessing nutrition related information.

3.2.5. *The type of content preferred by participants:*

The preferences of students in regards to their choice of media consumption. A substantial majority of students (n= 324, 75%) reported a preference for short-form video. In comparison, a smaller proportion of students, representing (n=89,20.5%) of the total, expressed a preference for reading written information. The remaining students exhibited a preference for other sources of media consumption. This pattern is consistent with recent empirical research demonstrating a considerable change in digital media consumption among university students toward brief, visually engaging formats. For instance, Omar and Dequan noticed that TikTok users are most often motivated by entertainment and information-seeking behaviours, with short-form video material being particularly effective in catching attention and sustaining engagement among young people (8). Similarly, Kaye et al found that TikTok has moved beyond entertainment into an informal learning tool, particularly among Generation Z users, who increasingly rely on short videos for quick and accessible information learning (9).

3.2.6. *Type of nutrition information searched:*

A sum of (n=110, 25.3%) students reported seeking general tips on healthy eating, while a comparable percentage (n=108,24.9%) searched for disease-specific nutrition information. A significant proportion of students also searched for captions of posts/pictures(n=71,16.4%), recipes (n=68,15.7%), and "what I eat in a day" posts/videos (n=41, 9.4%). Notably, only (n=36, 8.3%) of the students searched for scientific articles (Table.2). This result is in line with the Vraga et al. (2019) study, which found that young adults mostly use social media platforms to get general nutritional advice (10). In particular, students indicate a strong preference for engaging and easily consumable formats such as food photographs, “what I eat in a day” material, and recipe-based postings, which coincides with the present findings. Furthermore, available evidence reveals that only a tiny proportion of students actively examine scientific articles for nutrition advice, demonstrating a persisting gap between academic knowledge and public information-seeking behavior (11)

Table 2. The type of content preferred by participants

Type of information	Frequency
Scientific Articles.	36 (8.3%)
Captions of posts / pictures	71 (16.4%)
General tips on healthy eating	110 (25.3%)
Recipes	68 (15.7%)
what I eat in a day post / video	41 (9.4%)
Disease specific nutrition information pertaining to condition	108 (24.9%)
Total	**434**

3.2.7. *Type or qualification of the page followed:*

Whether it concerns the people they choose to follow, a significant proportion of participants show different preferences. In particular, the research shows that 33% of users follow physicians, 29.5% follow nutritionists, 29% follow influencers, 5.5% follow health coaches, and 2.3% follow athletes. This finding was comparable with a result obtained previously in a South-western University in the United States by (10) where 15% of participants reported that receiving nutrition related information from healthcare specialists, 31% from doctors, 21% from nutritionists, 8.9% of respondents listed the personal trainer as a source of nutrition information. Moreover, a study carried out in Saudi Arabia wherein 23.7% of the population did not trust their online health care providers. (12)

3.2.8. Rate the accuracy of data:

The analysis showed that a small percentage (n=21,4.8%) of students considered the information obtained from social media to be very accurate, while (n=34,7.8%) found it to be inaccurate. The majority of students (n=379, 87.3%) expressed that the accuracy of

information depends on the source. This aligns with Pew Research Centre research demonstrating that trust in online information is heavily reliant on the perceived reliability of the source rather than the platform itself. (13)

3.2.9. Apply the nutrition information:

In terms of application and utilization of the nutrition advices, it can be observed that 11.5% of the surveyed students exhibited a lack of interest in nutritional information. Furthermore, a majority of the students, accounting for 81.6%, indicated that they occasionally utilize such information, with a mere 6.9% stating that they consistently implement it in their lives. This practice reflects the growing awareness among population study of the credibility of nutritional content across social media platforms. Klassen et al. (2018) also found that although young adults often seek nutrition information via social media, its influence on lasting dietary habits is still limited and variable. (14)

3.2.10. More useful source of information:

The finding documented that approximately half of the students surveyed (50.5%) deemed social media platforms as the most reliable source of nutrition information. In comparison, 44.7% of students placed their trust in visiting nutritionists, with only 4.8% relying on alternative sources for information. This pattern indicates the significant divert in the searching of nutrition information toward the social media platforms where it characterized by their convenience and easy accessibility nature.This finding somewhat conflicts with Kreft et al. (2023), who observed that although social media is frequently used source of nutrition information, students typically place more trust in qualified health care providers like dietitians, indicating that professional credibility is a critical factor influencing trust in nutrition information. (15)

3.2.11. Determinants of social media use for nutritional information:

Table 2 displays the relationship between demographics and aspects of utilizing social media for nutritional information among participants. Significant associations were identified between several demographic variables and outcome measures. Gender showed a significant correlation with social media usage for nutrition information ($p = 0.009$). favored content types ($p < 0.001$), qualifications of followed pages ($p = 0.010$), perceived informational accuracy ($p < 0.001$), and the information deemed most helpful ($p = 0.001$), this pattern is consisting with prior study in Saudi Arbia wherein social media usage for nutrition information is frequently found to be significantly predicted by female gender (16). These findings reveal that male and female significantly varied in their interactions with nutrition-focused social media content. Faculty was notably linked to the use of social media for nutrition information ($p = 0.002$) and the credibility of followed pages ($p = 0.001$), this is in the line with previous study that demonstrating that the student's field effect on their interaction with the online nutrition content (17). Indicating that students' educational history might affect their dependence on social media and their selection of information sources. Additionally, the academic year was notably linked to the chosen type of content ($p = 0.001$) and the type of information viewed as the most beneficial ($p = 0.010$), indicating that the advancement in education might affect students' preferences and perceptions regarding nutritional information.

The strong correlation between academic year and seeking for nutrition information on social media constitute a novel contribution to the literature; since the prior studies (18,19) have examined the educational level rather than academic year. In contrast these associations, age showed no significant correlation with any of the outcome variables ($p > 0.05$), indicating similar behaviors in social media nutrition information across various ages in the sample. Likewise, no associations were identified between various demographic factors and the commonly used medium, as all p-values exceeded the significance threshold.

Overall, the findings indicate that factors such as gender, academic department, and grade level have a more significant influence on social media behaviors regarding nutrition information than age.

4. Conclusions:

This study observed that social media represents a primary source of nutrition information for students, exhibiting considerable variation contingent upon the qualifications of the followed sources. The results additionally indicate that the participants had a hard time deciding out how reliable the information was and finding qualified experts. Students usually search for general nutrition topics and topics about specific diseases. These results show that healthcare professionals need to use social media, share reliable sources of information, and make videos and other engaging content. The increasing preference for multimedia content indicates a transformation in educational methodologies, necessitating further research to comprehensively understand students' utilization of social media for health information.

Limitations:

This study has a several limitations. First: The cross-sectional design precludes the verification of causal relationship. Second: The results may not be as applicable to other groups because the participants were restricted to medical college students. Third: The accuracy rating was based on the students' subjective opinion of the evaluation of nutritional information on social media, rather than an objective comparison with evidence-based dietary standards. As a result, perceived and real accuracy may differ. Finally: Self-reporting questionnaires that may have response and social desirability bias were used to collect the data.

Recommendations:

Based on the results, this study introduces a subsequent recommendation:

- Public health authorities and educational institution to create and implement organized nutrition media literacy.
- Rise in public awareness of the critical importance of consulting reliable and contextually relevant sources for health-related information; it also recommends the healthcare professionals to have an informed and active social media presence.
- Encourages incorporating nutrition information into content that users already enjoy viewing, such as videos, to increase engagement.

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Conflicts of interest

No conflict of interest.

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