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Social Media as a Source of Nutrition Information: A Narrative Review of Credibility and Misinformation

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ABSTRACT

One of the sources of nutrition information widely used by people today is social media. The present literature review focuses on exploring what kind of nutrition information can be found online in social media and discusses the credibility issues associated with this topic. The existing literature indicates that the information shared via social media becomes popular rapidly since social media enables users to share any content with large audiences. While it provides the necessary opportunity to increase awareness regarding various nutrition issues, it also makes users more exposed to information that may be unreliable, which can lead to misconceptions about healthy eating practices and potentially harmful dietary choices. There are a number of factors that play a key role in this process, such as the visual attractiveness of content, the level of accessibility to the material, and the influence exerted by content producers. What is more, it was noticed that usually users fail to assess the information critically they come across online. For instance, their perception of some nutritional concepts may depend on presentation styles and popularity. Such aspects as evidence-based arguments are often ignored. Therefore, it appears necessary to improve the level of health literacy among users in the digital environment and encourage nutrition experts to share. Methodology: In conducting this narrative review, an attempt was made to collate and summarize existing literature regarding the role of social media as sources of nutrition information with emphasis on misinformation and credibility. Extensive searches in electronic databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, and Scopus were undertaken to identify eligible studies. Keywords used in searching for suitable literature included, among others, social media, nutrition information, health communication, misinformation, credibility, dietary behavior, etc. Reference lists from relevant studies were reviewed as well. Eligible studies had to address any of these issues: the use of social media as sources of information regarding health or nutrition, credibility or misinformation in the context of social media information dissemination, and user perceptions and behavior in accessing social media information. This study included only quantitative and qualitative studies and reviews of peer-reviewed literature in English regarding this topic. Considering that this was a narrative review, there was no specific systematic inclusion criterion nor any meta-analysis done. Identified articles were thematically organized into several domains.

Keywords: Social media, Nutrition information, Credibility & misinformation

INTRODUCTION

Social media as an information environment:

Social media (SM) has become an important part of our daily life that supports a wide range of activities such as shopping, education, communication, and online engagement. It can be described as an accessible digital tool that allows users to publish and exchange information, collaborate, and build social connections (Siddiqui and Singh, 2016). With advancements in digital technologies, SM is increasingly recognized as an important source for assessing and sharing the information. Previous research indicates that undergraduate students actively use social media as a source of information, which highlights a shift from interpersonal communication to information-oriented use (Kim *et al.*, 2014).

A key characteristic of SM is the predominance of user-generated content, where users can simultaneously

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act as both producers and consumers. YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram, among other SM platforms, primarily consist of UGC. This dual nature allows users to generate and circulate content based on their personal experiences, opinions, and beliefs (Luca, 2015; Chua *et al.*, 2018). UGC generally includes brand-related materials, which play a significant role in increasing product awareness and influencing consumer decision-making (Kim and Johnson, 2016). This type of content can be created in various forms, like short videos including Instagram reels and YouTube Shorts, which are currently the most widely consumed form. In contrast, long-form videos are shared on platforms like YouTube, which are typically used for detailed explanations (Lucassen and Schraagen, 2011). As a result of UGC, users may find it difficult to distinguish between evidence-based information and personal beliefs.

Due to the open nature of SM, information can spread widely and reach a large audience in the shortest period of time (Oyighan and Okwu, 2024). Platform-specific algorithm-driven features such as hashtags, sharing, liking, and virality enhance the speed and reach of information dissemination (Narayanan, 2023). Additionally, low barriers and minimum gatekeeping make these platforms highly accessible and allow information to circulate widely and effectively among users. SM usage patterns vary considerably depending on age, gender, and educational qualification. Data from the Pew Research Center indicates that individuals aged from 18 to 29 years are the most active users on SM, with nearly 90% reporting regular usage of SM. Gender-based differences have also been observed, with women constantly showing higher SM usage than men. Recent studies indicate that 68% of active users are women compared to 62% of men (Pew Research Center, 2016). Table 1 summarizes the demographic patterns in social media usage discussed.

These worldwide trends are also observed in the Indian context, where studies show that SM usage among college-going youth is widespread and part of their daily routine (Jha *et al.*, 2019). Indian studies support this by suggesting that young students spend significant time on SM, with approximately 93% of students reporting daily usage for 1-2 hours (Sikarwar and Agrawal, 2025). Nowadays, people purposefully use SM for seeking information. Research indicates that individuals, particularly young adults, rely on SM due to their ease of access and convenience. Among undergraduate students, SM platforms like YouTube, Wikipedia, and blogs serve as a platform for attaining information related to academic content, health, and everyday lifestyle updates (Kim *et al.*, 2012). Beyond academic purposes, Gen Z uses SM for searching health-related information such as dietary preference, physical experience, and reproductive health issues. However, studies highlight that young adults don't verify the authenticity of information they are seeking frequently, which increases their exposure to misleading and unverified content (Devi *et al.*, 2024). This reliance on SM for seeking information with limited verification practices raises concern about user's ability to distinguish between credible information from misleading content.

Role of Social Media in Health Communication:

Social media plays a significant role in health communication by promoting health-related behaviors such as dietary and physical activities. It provides ease of accessibility and opportunities for interacting with others. These interactions involve health influencers and health professionals that allow users to exchange health care information. Additionally, SM has been recognized as a platform used for public health surveillance that allows real-time monitoring of trends and health-related concerns (Moorhead *et al.*, 2013). The interactive nature of these platforms also contributes to improving health awareness. It has become an important medium for health awareness, as it enables the rapid dissemination of health-related information. Health educators and public health stakeholders increasingly use SM to communicate

Table 1 : Demographic Patterns in social media Usage reported in literature

Demographic Factor	General trend reported in literature—key findings	References
Age	Higher social media usage among young adults.	Pew Research Center (2016); Jha *et al.* (2019)
Gender	Comparable usage between men and women, with slightly higher participation reported among women.	Pew Research Center (2016)
Education	Lower usage among individuals with lower educational attainment.	Pew Research Center (2016)
Student population	Frequent and habitual usage, especially for information-seeking purposes and entertainment	Sikarwar and Agrawal (2025)

messages related to physical activity, preventive measures, and disease management.

Several studies support the use of SM for health awareness activities. For instance, Mohammed *et al.* (2021) reported that a significant proportion of health educators and students use SM platforms for health awareness purposes in Saudi Arabia, particularly to promote healthy lifestyles and preventive measures. Studies suggested that Facebook and YouTube are more frequently used platforms for educational purposes related to health. Whereas platforms like Twitter and Instagram are more commonly used to observe trends in health-related behaviors and to design awareness campaigns to improve health knowledge (Ghahramani *et al.,* 2022).

However, along with these benefits, several challenges are also associated with the use of SM. Studies noted that these platforms can facilitate the spread of misleading and harmful health information, which makes it difficult for users to distinguish between credible information and misinformation. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, platforms like YouTube were identified as concerning sources for the spread of health-related misinformation (Mohammed *et al.*, 2021). While SM offers significant opportunities for improving health awareness, its effectiveness largely depends on users' ability to understand health information and identify credible sources. Stellefson *et al.* (2020) highlights that the role of health educators is transforming in the digital era, and emphasizes the importance of e-health literacy for effective engagement with online health content.

Nutrition Information on Social Media Platforms:

SM platforms include a wide variety of nutrition-related content that commonly focuses on diet, health, fitness, and body weight management. Studies suggested that SM platforms are majorly used for sharing information related to dietary practices aimed to improve health, enhance physical appearance, and reduce body weight (Sindu, 2018), followed by posts related to recipes and food preparation videos. Studies have observed that "what I eat in a day" posts and recipe videos are the most preferred form of nutrition information, particularly among females (Kreft *et al.*, 2023). Whereas studies reported that nutrition-related content frequently combines informative messages with strong visual representations of fitness, attractive body images, and lifestyle, which can influence perception of user's dietary practices (Kabata *et al.,* 2022). The major categories of nutrition-related content commonly encountered on social media platforms are summarized in Table 2.

The dependency on SM for nutrition-related confirmation can be shaped by various factors. One of the key factors is personal health and body-related concerns. Studies show that individuals generally watch content related to weight management, body image improvement, and skin care-related dietary advice. (Sindhu, 2018; Kreft *et al.*, 2023). Also, demographic characteristics are an important factor, particularly age and gender. Research indicates that young adults are more likely to use SM nutrition information as compared to older populations (Kreft *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, female users are more engaged with content related to recipes, diet plans, weight management, and body image that reflects their higher involvement in online nutrition content (Al-Bisher and Al-Otaibi, 2022).

SM influencers and content creators play a significant role in shaping nutrition information-seeking behavior on digital platforms. Sidhu (2018) noted that influencers frequently share content related to fitness, weight management, dietary practices, and body transformation. Such content gains popularity due to its motivational and practical appeal.

Research has also observed that this content on SM platforms strongly depends on visual appeal. Influencers

Table 2 : Types of Nutrition-Related Content Commonly Encountered on Social Media

Content type	Description	Key references
Diet and weight management	Content focusing on to calorie control, dieting, body weight management	Sindhu (2018); Kreft *et al.* (2023)
Recipe and food preparation	Includes "What I eat in a day", cooking videos and meal preparation content	Kreft *et al.* (2023)
Fitness and gym nutrition	Protein intake, supplements, workout diets associated with physical activity and exercise	Kreft *et al.* (2023)
Influencer lifestyle content	Visually appealing body image–based nutrition messages	Kabata *et al.* (2022)
Commercial promotion	Sponsored posts, branded food product, promotion of dietary supplements	Klassen *et al.* (2018)

commonly combine nutrition messages with aesthetic presentation, which enhance user's interaction with the content (Kabala *et al.*, 2022).

Due to the open nature of SM, anyone can share such information, which significantly influences food choices and dietary behaviors. Studies indicate that food brands and lifestyle influencers use SM to communicate with their users, leading to high levels of interaction and content sharing (Klassen *et al.,* 2018). This active sharing further enhances the reach and impact of such content. However, as a result of this open nature of SM, influencers may share misleading or scientifically unsupported nutrition information including promotion of fad diets. Such practice may negatively affect health and increase the risk of nutritional deficiencies (Byrne *et al.*, 2017). In contrast, registered dietitians and nutrition professionals are considered as the most reliable and accurate source for seeking such information, as they provide evidence-based guidance. And their presence on SM has become increasingly important in countering misinformation and promoting accurate nutrition information.

Nutrition Misinformation on Social Media:

Nutrition misinformation on SM has become a significant concern due to the unrestricted and user-generated nature of digital platforms, where both accurate and inaccurate information can coexist (Suarez-Lledo and Alvarez-Galvez, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2019). Misinformation refers to inaccurate or incomplete information that is shared unintentionally, whereas disinformation involves intentional dissemination of false information with the intention of misleading the users (Diekman *et al.,* 2023).

Due to a lack of effective gatekeeping, it allows individuals to widely share nutrition advice without formal training or accountability. This facilitates the spread of misinformation that shapes public perception of diet and health (Diekman *et al.*, 2023). Studies have reported that, due to a lack of accuracy and scientific evidence, a considerable proportion of online nutrition-related health information reflects the widespread presence of misinformation in digital media (Denniss *et al.,* 2021).

Common types of misinformation include false health claims, promotion of fad diets, unnecessary restriction or elimination of entire food groups, and misleading dietary supplements use (Katool, 2022). Influencers frequently spread or promote non-evidence-based practices such as extreme calorie restriction or elimination of specific food without any medical justification.

The impact of nutrition misinformation on dietary behavior is substantial, particularly in young adults. Katool (2022) reported that college students face difficulty in distinguishing credible nutrition information from misleading content.

Prolonged exposure to such misinformation has been associated with unhealthy dietary behaviors and adverse nutritional outcomes (Katool, 2022; Byrne, 2017). Moreover, misleading health information on SM can continue to influence users' perceptions even after corrective information is provided, which highlights the challenges of countering misinformation effectively (Vraga and Bode, 2020).

In the absence of strong regulatory guidelines on SM platforms, health professionals, including nutrition scientists, registered dietitians, and healthcare providers, play a critical role in promoting health literacy and critical evaluation skills, which are essential to mitigate the impact of misinformation and supporting informed dietary decision-making (Diekman *et al.*, 2023) (Fig. 1).

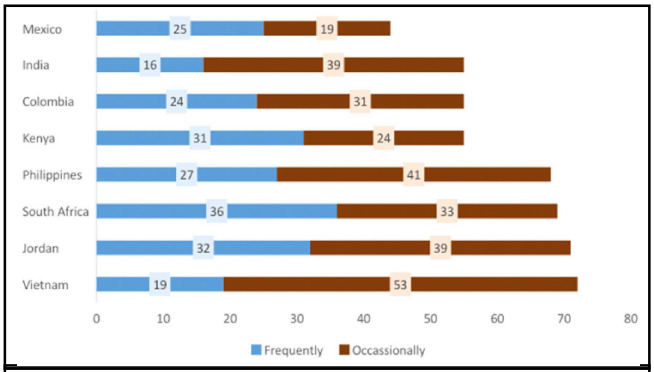

Fig. 1 : Frequency of exposure to misinformation in selected countries
(Source: Adapted from Pew Research Center, 2019)

Credibility of Online Nutrition Information:

The increasing dependency on SM for nutrition-related information has raised concerns regarding the credibility of online content. Credibility is commonly described as a perceptual construct, referring to the extent to which information is perceived by users as trustworthy and expert, rather than an objective measure of information quality (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007). In the context of online information, credibility assessment focuses on perceived quality, reliability, and accountability of content from the user's perspective (Flanagin and

Metzger, 2007; Eysenbach, 2008). Unlike traditional media, online platforms often lack professional gatekeeping, allowing individuals to share health information regardless of expertise, which complicates user's ability to evaluate accurately.

Research has shown that undergraduate students frequently use SM as a source of information, however, their credibility evaluation practices are often informal or cue-based rather than systematic (Wang *et al.*, 2025). Studies have shown that students rarely verify the credibility of sources. Instead, they rely on surface-level cues such as writing, tone, style, author identity, recency of information, peer reaction (Kim *et al.*, 2014).

Flanagin and Metzger (2007) further emphasized that credibility judgments vary depending on the source and type of content. It also observed that information content is often perceived as a more credible source than commercial or entertainment material. Additionally, studies have reported that perceived credibility of online posts is influenced by recency and activity level, where the frequently updated or recently posted content are often judged as more reliable content (Westerman *et al.*, 2014).

Overall, existing literature suggests that individuals tend to rely on perceptual cues rather than critical evaluation of content, thereby increasing their susceptibility to misinformation.

Perception of nutrition information among consumers:

Users' interpretation, evaluation, and response to online content shapes their perception of nutrition information on SM. With increasing reliance on these platforms for health information, understanding how consumers perceive the credibility of such content has become crucial. Unlike traditional sources, SM content is largely user-generated, and due to a lack of formal gatekeeping, it requires individuals to actively evaluate information quality.

Research among undergraduates demonstrates that users generally rely on multiple cues when they are forming perceptions of the credibility of information available on digital platforms. Kim *et al.* (2014) found that instead of systematically verifying scientific references, students often evaluate nutrition and health-related content based on surface-level indicators such as tone and style of writing, recency of information, and peer reactions.

Research shows that this is due to the absence of professional gatekeeping, increasing user's dependency on heuristic cues, including familiarity with the source, and consistency with a prior belief (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007). This can limit critical assessment of scientific accuracy, particularly in the context of nutrition information.

Wathen *et al.* (2002) explained that users often form quick judgments using surface aspects such as visual appearance and source cues before engaging in deeper content evaluation.

In the context of nutrition, this dynamic creates a situation in which visually appealing content and influencer-generated messages may be perceived as more credible than the information provided by qualified experts. This gap between perceived and actual credibility has important implications for dietary decision-making and consumer response to nutrition information.

Conclusion:

Recently, social media has emerged as an important source of nutrition information due to its widespread use and easy accessibility. Taking these findings together, it can be concluded that social media is increasingly used as a source of nutrition information, while also raising concerns regarding the accuracy and reliability of such content.

The findings reveal that the majority of users do not verify the sources from which they consume information and tend to make quick judgments instead of carefully assessing the accuracy of the content. This emphasizes the need to improve digital health literacy and ensure careful evaluation of information available online.

Additionally, this suggests the need for further research to better understand how exposure to nutrition-related information on social media may influence the dietary choices and everyday behaviours of individuals.

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