

Health Information Seeking Behaviour of Nigerian Undergraduates on Social Media

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Abstract. This study investigated the utilization of social media as sources of health information among undergraduates. It examined ways undergraduates use social media in seeking health information, the kinds of health information they seek and the frequency of seeking health information on social media. Survey research design was adopted in which questionnaire was distributed to a sample size of 200 undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan. The study found that undergraduates use social media as sources of health information. However, students do not seek health information from social media on a regular basis but do so only when the need arises. It was found that students are not active in health information seeking, rather they come in contact with health information on social media only when such information are sent to them or when they appear on their social media pages or when their online friends tag them to the information. Preventive healthcare information was found to be the common kind of health information undergraduates are mostly interested in. The study concluded that social media are veritable tools for undergraduates to get health information that can enhance their well being. It recommended that undergraduates should be active and intentional about seeking health information on social media. They should use them as tools for connecting with health specialists, developing and participating in health support groups and other activities that can enhance their health and wellbeing.

Keywords: Health information seeking, Preventive health information Social media, Undergraduates

1. Introduction

Health information is a vital resource for individuals and communities. When people have relevant and sufficient health information, they can make informed decisions and adopt lifestyles practices that will support good health. Non-communicable

diseases (NCDs), such as diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease and chronic respiratory illnesses, are presenting global health challenges especially in developing countries and are affecting people at younger ages (Friedrich, 2015; Islam et al, 2014). The World Health Organisation (WHO) predicts that Africa will experience largest increase in NCD deaths (Atueyi, 2017, Targurum et al , 2015). In Nigeria, Onyemelukwe (2013) reported a trend of increase in non-communicable diseases in the last fifty years and WHO country profile (2014a) reported that NCDs present a new challenge for the Nigerian health system and they accounted for 24% of total deaths in the country (World Health Organisation, 2014b).

Most non-communicable diseases (NCDs) have been linked to the lifestyle patterns and choices of individuals (Chandola, 2012; Sharma & Majumdar, 2009); and they can be prevented when people have the right information and adopt healthy practices from early stages of life. Mahmood, Ali and Islam (2013) affirm that increasing the public's knowledge of health issues by disseminating information will influence their attitude and behaviour towards optimal healthy living, prevention and treatment of non-communicable diseases. Given the impact of non-communicable diseases in Nigeria, there is need to disseminate health information to as many as possible to really influence the adoption of healthy practices among the populace.

Social media, which are worldwide information dissemination channels, are internet based tools and services that allow users to engage with each other, generate content, distribute and search for information online (Nwafor et al., 2013). These are highly interactive platforms enabled by the internet and web 2.0 in which users can connect with each other, generate, modify, share and discuss contents in the form of text, audio, video and images. Social

media usage is very popular among youths and undergraduates and they are becoming major channels of information and communication for them. Researches have established that young people and college students are the top users of social media; they actively post status updates, send messages, post pictures and videos and make comments on posts (Eke et al., 2014; Syn and Kim, 2016; Yeboah and Ewur, 2014; Yonker et al., 2015). Social media has affected youth's choice of information sources. Among youths, there is now a high reliance on social media for quick and recent information compared to conventional media like television, radio, newspaper and magazines. Blogs, Facebook, Twitter seem to be the first places young people go to for information. Despite the high usage of social media by youths and undergraduates, it not clear if they use social media for seeking health information. Oyelami, Okuboyejo and Ebiye (2013) pointed out that the health situation could be different in Nigeria if the populace are aware of the availability of health information on the social media and take advantage of it. Hence, this study examined undergraduates' utilisation of social media for seeking health information. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- What is the social media usage pattern by undergraduates?
- How do undergraduates utilise social media for seeking health information?
- What kinds of health information do undergraduates seek on social media?
- How frequently do undergraduates seek health information on social media?

2. Review of Literature

Scholars believe that increasing the public's knowledge of health issues by disseminating information will influence their attitude and behaviour towards optimal healthy living, prevention and treatment of lifestyle or non-communicable diseases (Mahmood et al., 2013). When people have relevant and adequate health information, they can make informed decisions and assume lifestyles that will support good health. Given the increasing incidence of non-communicable diseases in Nigeria which are associated with lifestyles, there is need to widely disseminate health information to as many as possible using all media platforms, including social media, in order to influence the adoption of healthy practices among the populace.

Social media are internet-based applications and sites that enable user-generated contents, making for highly interactive communication between and

among users based on users' interests. Ventola (2014) describes social media as: *Internet-based tools that allow individuals and communities to gather and communicate; to share information, ideas, personal messages, images, and other content; and, in some cases, to collaborate with other users in real time* (p. 491)

Social media provide personalized networks of users in which there is multiplicity of sources, spaces, information formats (text, pictures, audio and videos) and these make possible the sharing of information as well as group interactions (Dunu and Uzochukwu, 2015). Social media is characterized by interactivity, user-generated content, prompt access to information, immediate feedback, and multi-directional communication making for a change from a "one-way conversation" to a "multi-way conversation". In this process, the users participate as not just as consumers of web information and content but as both creators and distributor of web contents (Ajilore and Adekoya, 2016).

Social media usage is very popular among youths and college students. They are major channels of communicating information for them. Seventy-two percent (72%) of all college students, according to Lenhart et al., (2010) in Roy and Joshi (2014), have a social media profile with 45% accessing a social media platform at least once a day. Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Google+, YouTube, Yahoo, BBM, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Pinterest and Wikipedia are some of the social media platforms used by youths. A study by Eke et al. (2014) revealed Facebook, Google+, WhatsApp, 2go, Yahoo, YouTube as the most used social media among undergraduates of University of Nigeria, Nsukka while Badoo, Friendster, LinkedIn, Delicious, Orkut, Bebo, MySpace had low usage among the students. Edogor et al. (2014) submit that youths use variety of social media and have more than one social media account. They state that at times an individual may have up to five social media accounts and their use of these varies. Youthful people use social media for making new friends, to express their opinion on issues of everyday life, communicating with families and friends, updating status, sharing pictures and videos, for entertainment, information sharing, checking news feeds, for establishing and maintaining intimate relationship, cybercrime, monitoring events and activities (Edogor et al., 2014; Eke et al., 2014; Yeboah and Ewur, 2014).

Social media has affected youth's choice of information sources. Among youths, there is now a high reliance on social media for quick and recent

information compared to mainstream media like television, radio, newspaper and magazines. Blogs, Facebook, Twitter seem to be first place young people go to for information. Edogor et al. (2014) expressing their fear on this trend pointed out that “the rate at which young people cling to the use of social media is quite alarming, and this leaves people to wonder whether the new channels of communication would utterly displace or at least reduce the youth’s patronage of other mass media”(p.56).

A study by Yilma et al. (2016) examined the sources of health information for college students from developing countries. Adopting survey design and employing questionnaire, 49 undergraduate students in Malaysia between the ages of 19 and 24 were surveyed. Findings indicate that a higher percentage of the students (85.7%) have used the internet to seek health information and the Internet is their first choice to get health information with 76% noting that they prefer the internet as their primary source of health information. A significant finding was that two-thirds of online health information seekers use social media for health information. The dominant social media used for health information were Facebook (55%), followed by YouTube, (19%), Twitter (2%) and Google Plus+(2%).

Roy and Joshi (2014) investigated the trends in health information sharing by college students on social networking sites. Using convenient and stratified sampling method, 350 undergraduate students from a large South East American university were selected for the study. Results showed that 33% of students were likely to follow health-related topics on Twitter. Most of the students were unlikely to share sensitive health information about themselves on social media. Kinds of health information students were likely to share included diet and nutrition, and physical activity whereas students were unwilling to share on social media health information such as diabetes, depression, birth control, sexually transmitted diseases. However, students were more likely to share health information such as pregnancy, cancer about their relatives and friends on social media.

Zhang’s (2013) research which focused on college students revealed an unfavourable perception and attitude to the use of social media for health information. Zhang examined students’ uses and perception of social networking sites (SNS) for health and wellness related information. Employing the interview method, 38 undergraduates from a major university in Texas who were major users of SNS

formed the study sample. Findings indicate that only few students (26%) use social media for health and wellness information suggesting that it is not a widespread/popular use for students.

3. Methodology

The study was carried out using a cross sectional survey research design in which data was collected at a single point in time from the population (Balasubramanian and Baladhandayuthan, 2011). The study population was made up of undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria. At the time of data gathering, the population of Lead City University was approximately two thousand (2000) students (as given by the Admissions and Records Office).

Convenient sampling technique was used to select a sample of two hundred and fifty (250) undergraduates (male and female), from the three faculties – Faculty of Art, Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of Applied Sciences. Students eligible to participate in the study were those from non-health related programmes. Students from nursing department were excluded. Recruitment of respondents involved word of mouth explaining the nature and objective of the study to the students. Participation in the survey was voluntary; only students who gave their verbal consent were given the questionnaire to fill.

The survey instrument used was a self-designed questionnaire based on literature and previous studies examined (Obasola and Agunbiade, 2016; Syn, and Kim, 2016; Zhang, 2011). The questionnaire was anonymous and it included questions on respondents’ demographic characteristics, time spent on social media daily, ways students get health information on social media, kinds of health information sought, pattern of seeking health information. All questions were close ended.

Reliability of the instrument was ascertained through a pre-test. Twenty copies of the questionnaire were distributed to undergraduates at Babcock University and from their responses, some items in the instrument were modified. Cronbach’s Alpha test was then conducted and it yielded a coefficient index of 0.940 indicating the reliability of the instrument. A total of two hundred and fifty (250) copies of questionnaire were self-administered but only 220 copies were retrieved while only 200 were found valid for data analysis. This represents a response rate of 80%.

4. Results and Discussion

The results are displayed in tables and figures with appropriate discussions.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1: Gender and Age Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	72	36.0
Female	128	64.0
Sub Total	200	100
Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18 – 23	125	62.5
24 – 29	63	31.5
30 – 35	12	6
Sub Total	200	100

Gender distribution in Table 1 reveals a higher percentage of female respondents (n=128; 64%) to male respondents (n=72; 36%) in this study. Also, the undergraduates between the age range of 18 – 23 were more represented (n=125; 62.5%) than other age ranges.

Frequency of Seeking Health Information on Social Media by Undergraduates

The students were asked about their frequency of using social media to seek health information. Their responses presented in Table 1 indicate that very few of the students (5%) use social media to seek health information on a daily basis while majority (32.5%) use social media for this purpose sometimes.

Table 2: Frequency of Seeking Health Information on Social Media

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not at all	35	17.5
As the need arises	48	24.0
Sometimes	65	32.5
Often	37	18.5
Daily	10	5.0
Missing	5	2.5
Total	200	100.0

This finding indicates that seeking health information on social media is not the primary purpose for which undergraduates utilise social media. They rather use social media for social interaction, posting pictures and comments, and information sharing. The studies of Johnson et al. (2016) and Zhang (2011) corroborates this that only a few students use social media for health information and young people do not approve of social media as channels for seeking health information. In Zhang’s study, only 26% of the students interviewed used social media for health information, inferring that they are not widely used source for health information among students. However, it was revealed in this study, that when they have need for health information, students employ social media platforms.

5. Conclusion

Social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, are sources of health

information for undergraduates. The platforms provide opportunities for undergraduates to interact with health information. However, undergraduates do not seek health information on a regular basis from social media but do so sometimes and when the need arises. Also, undergraduates are not active seekers of health information on social media. They access health information only when such appear on their social media pages or such are shared and they are tagged by their social media friends. Undergraduates value preventive healthcare information more than any other kind of health information (treatment of health conditions and locations for healthcare services). This is based on their high search for this kind information on social media. This means that undergraduates are more interested in information on practices to be adopted to remain healthy and be able to carry out their day to day activities. Undergraduates’ low search for information on places for healthcare services suggests the practice of self-care and medication.

Recommendations

Since this study affirms undergraduates' utilisation of social media as sources of health information, public health professionals and health communicators should set up accounts on various social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram) to reach undergraduates with health information since they are major users of social media. This will furnish young people with accurate information with which they can make informed health decisions. This will in turn lead to a reduction in non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and obesity that are now increasingly occurring even among youths. Health communicators in developing health messages and programmes targeted at students and young populations should dwell more on preventive health messages. This is based on students' high preference for preventive health messages in comparison with other kinds of health information as revealed in this study.

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