

ENGAGEMENT OF NUTRITIONISTS/DIETITIANS IN SOCIAL MEDIA: A POTENTIAL TO MEET CONSUMER'S QUEST FOR HEALTHY NUTRITION INFORMATION AND SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

Background: The increasing consumer's quest for nutrition related information and services on social media platforms creates a tussle between the trained nutritionists/dietitians and their unqualified counterparts –“the quacks” in delivering these information to the targeted audience.

Objectives: This study was designed to identify the effective strategies that nutrition and dietetic professionals can employ to curb the growing menace of “quackery” in various social media platforms.

Methodology: This study employed a narrative review design to extract relevant content from identified articles, synthesize and present a deep analysis on the top novel strategies to ensure effective social media engagement of dietitians/nutritionists.

Results: This study identified that the adoption of the following strategies will enhance the dissemination and delivery of credible and evident based nutrition information and services to the consumers or clients on social media. These strategies include: enlightenment of consumers/clients and proper guidance for evidence-based choices, official endorsement and regulation of the activities of social media registered dietitians/nutritionists, targeting intervention to address the needs of active social media users, participation in social media marketing training and engagement of social media personalities/influencers.

Conclusion: It is therefore essential that all social media nutritionists/registered dietitians and her governing body adopt these effective strategies to improve, reach, increase profitability of online nutrition services rendered and consequently obliterate the dangers information disseminated by quacks may have on the consumers.

Keywords: *Nutritionists/dietitians, social media, consumers, nutrition information and services*

INTRODUCTION

A profession is a disciplined group of individuals that created, adopted and adhered to ethical standards (1). Professionals are governed by codes of ethics, and commitment to competence, integrity and morality, altruism, and the promotion of the public good within their expert domain and accountable to those they served and to society (2).

Dietitians are regulated healthcare professionals licensed to assess, diagnose, and treat nutritional problems⁽³⁾. A registered dietitian (RD) or registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN) is a dietitian who meets all of a set of special academic and professional requirements, including the completion of a bachelor's degree with an accredited nutrition curriculum, an internship at an approved health-care facility, foodservice organization, or community agency, and satisfactory performance on a registration exam⁽³⁾. On the other hand, nutrition/dietetic quacks are individuals who do not possess the aforementioned professional qualifications but promote products, treatments or plans that claim to provide a benefit to the health of the consumer without proof of effectiveness or safety.

Social networking has become part of the daily life experiences for an increasing number of people (4). According to Nche (5), “without doubt, social media currently seem to take the centre stage in the field of information and communication technology (ICT). In the same vein, Adaja and Ayodele (6) observed that one of the breakthroughs in information and communication technology in the 21st century was the discovery and emergence of the new media which have facilitated the creation of the different platforms for social interaction.”

Social media has dramatically changed how people get information, connect, and communicate. In 2013, it was reported that “1 in 4 people worldwide use social media and the total number of people using social networks increased from 1.47 billion in 2012 to 1.73 billion in 2013, an 18% increase” (7). Social media depend on mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content.

The practice of quackery in the nutrition and dietetics field have greatly increased with emergence of

information and communication technology particularly the social media. Consumer use of the internet for health information is large and growing; in excess of 50 million people seek health information online, with likely consequences for the health care system and more than 70,000 websites provide health information (8,9). Consumers can access online health information directly from credible scientific and institutional sources as well as unreviewed sources of unknown credibility (10). The common social media platforms include blogs, facebook, twitter and instagram.

Blogs (short for weblogs) allow people to share experiences, knowledge or feelings by writing series of posts, usually listed in a reverse chronological order (11). Readers need to visit the author's website to get the content. This passive and unidirectional method is meant to provide advice rather than promote conversation. Current platforms allow anyone to be a blogger regardless of academic or professional skills. Worldwide, the number of blogs exceed several millions and those involving food and nutrition are virtually countless. Again, the content of a blog is unsupervised and readers just follow what the blogger has to say (12).

Twitter is a social media platform that allows unregistered users to read small messages up to 140 characters (13). Registered users can also post comments in a conversational-like fashion. It can be seen as an interaction microblog in which messages or other linked contents can be spread or retweeted, engaging in an online dialogue that can be massively amplified. The authenticity of an author's tweet (@) is theoretically guaranteed by the system, and hashtags (#) serve as keywords for users' search. The paucity of information contained in 140 characters has raised concern about its quality (13).

Instagram has become one of the most popular photo sharing applications worldwide⁽¹⁴⁾ and particularly since the introduction of Instagram Stories and Instagram Live which allows for immediate engagement with users. Instagram facilitates parasocial interactions, where imaginary social relationships and interpersonal interactions between the lifestyle personality and the social media user occur (15).

Facebook is a website which allows users, who sign-up for free profiles, to connect with friends, work colleagues or people they do not know online (16). It is the most populous social networking site with approximately 2.65 billion users in 2018 (17). It allows users to share pictures, music, videos, and articles, as

well as their own thoughts and opinions with however, many people they like. "Facebookers" can post almost anything to their "timeline", a snapshot of what is happening in their social circle at any given time, and can also enter private chat with other friends who are online.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a narrative review design to extract relevant content from identified articles, synthesize and present a deep analysis on the top novel strategies to ensure effective social media engagement of dietitians/nutritionists.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The integration of information technology into healthcare is changing the traditional perception of healthcare in many ways and with significant influence on how health services are accessed and delivered. Social media platforms are novel avenues with high reach potential of dissemination that can be used by health care professionals to improve knowledge translation of evidence-based health information to health consumers and patients. The growing use of social media by patients and health professionals has been widely advocated in the scientific literature⁽¹⁸⁻²⁰⁾. The poor utilization of social media channels in nutrition information dissemination and service delivery by nutritionist and dietitians has led to the emergence of "quacks". However, the menace of quackery in nutrition/dietetic field on social media platforms can be effectively addressed, if the following strategies are adopted:

Consumer's enlightenment and guidance for evidence-based choices

The assessment of credibility in the online environment is often much more complex than in previous media contexts due to the multiplicity of sources embedded in the numerous layers of online dissemination of content (21). The difference between social media platforms and traditional media channels is that users of social media platforms become content creators, not just content reviewers. In order to capitalize on the positive aspects of health on the Internet, a health promoting and empowering strategy should be directed towards strengthening the ability of individuals to screen and evaluate different information sources in relation to their own interests and needs⁽²¹⁾. This therefore develops in an individual, a critical consciousness in relation to different sources of information and an ability to select from competing sources of knowledge rather than a strategy aimed at safeguarding specific forms of expert knowledge.

Recognition of social media nutritionists or Registered Dietitians by the governing body

The influence of social media dietetic practice in helping health consumers make informed decisions to improve health through diet remains unknown in scientific literature. Thus, dietetic professional associations should recognize the role of social media RDs' professional practice (22) and feature a repertoire of their members who are active on social media such as Twitter (23) and blogs (12, 24). This can be in form of an issuance of a certificate to operate as a social media dietitian or publishing authorized names by a central body which will periodically evaluate the content of their posts.

Targeting specific nutrition interventions to address the interest of the social media audience

Benefits of using social media for health promotion include increased reach and interaction (25). Identifying a target audience and tailoring a suitable health message remains important for health promotion design for both traditional and social media campaigns (26). Nnamonu (27) aptly expressed that "while the internet is the chief host of social media sites, the youths are the most predominant clients". Hence, social media have become overwhelmingly common among youths in the country. Similarly, Umekachikelu (28) asserted that "many Nigerians including the rich and poor, educated and illiterate, young and old, Muslims and Christians now enjoy the services of the social media, however, the youths are the major players in this sector, as they have being tagged as the digital age." Health and nutrition interventions have traditionally struggled to reach and engage with large numbers of people on social media because they do tackle the consumer's interests (29). Nutrition quacks have successfully thrived in these regard as they engage their audience in trendy health issues suited for the social media population.

Engagement of social media personalities or influencers

Social media personalities, or "Influencers", have more recently been identified as being a strategic and powerful avenue for product promotion and information dissemination (30). Social media Influencers can be defined as individuals or groups of individuals who can shape attitudes and behaviors through online channels(31). What makes these Influencers so successful appears to be their capacity to engage with users and develop a level of trust: (32, 9).

Social media Influencers have overtaken traditional celebrities in their ability to influence purchasing behavior, as users find them more credible and relatable (33). According to Nielsen's (34) report of

"Global Trust in Advertising and Brand Messages", 92% of the survey participants stated that they would trust word of mouth from celebrities above any other form of advertising. Thus engaging these social media personalities to rate the products/services or comment on their opinion towards the registered dietitian's brand will increase the level of coverage of information disseminated to targeted audience through their active following and reactions in forms of "likes" and "love" response (33).

Social media marketing training

According to Horrigan, (35) 78% of internet users research products online and 78% of mobile or smart phone users check e-mail by mobile. Besides that, almost 40 million Americans, or 17% of the population, have bought products or requested for services online, and until 2010, consumer e-commerce may account for 15 to 20 percent of all United States retail sales (36). Social media marketing programs normally put efforts into creating content that will attract attention from users which they will share to their social networks (37). Thus, participation in courses/training related to social media marketing trainings will equip the social media dietitian/nutritionist to enable them generate traffic, grow customer base and improve the profitability of products/services offered on social media.

CONCLUSION

This study have revealed that social media is touted as a novel avenue for health professionals and non-governmental organization to disseminate evidence-based health information or service due to its interactive nature and high-reach potential. However, quacks have leveraged on the unregulated nature of social media as well as the low and ineffective utilization of the social media platform by nutritionists/dietitians to promote and advertise/market products, treatments or plans that claim to provide a benefit to the health of the consumer without proof of effectiveness or safety. Therefore, addressing the menace of quackery posed by self-acclaimed food/nutrition experts will require adopting awareness/campaign strategies that will empower the social media audience to independently screen the credibility of nutrition related information available on social media platform. Also the involvement of the central nutrition and dietetic body/arm to publicly endorse and regulate the activities of social media nutritionist/dietitians is of essence. Acquisition of proficient social media marketing skills and engagement of social media influencers or personalities will increase the consumer's base and improve the profitability of products and services rendered.

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