



Scrolling To Health: Evaluating Nutrition Guidance on Social Media

An Update from Students



International Life Sciences Institute India

K-FFIG

**ILSI India Knowledge Center on Functional Foods,
Gut Health and Immunity**

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Contents

Foreword.....	5-6
1. Introduction.....	7
2. Social Media Users.....	8
3. Evidence-Based Information on Social Media	9-11
• Why Evidence-Based Information is Important?	9
• What is the Prevalence of Evidence-Based Information on Social Media?.....	10
• What Factors Contribute to the Spread of False/Misleading and.....	10
Incomplete Information?	
4. Risks of Misinformation or False Nutrition Information on Social Media....	12-19
• The Potential Consequences of False Information or Misinformation.....	12
• Few Examples of the Negative Impact of False Information on Health.....	14
• How False Information Impacts Different Age Groups.....	15
5. How to Look for Evidence-Based Information on Social Media.....	18-20
• Importance of Verifying Information and Fact-Checking.....	18
• Tips for Identifying Reliable Sources of Information.....	19
6. Ensuring Science-Based Nutrition Information on Social Media:	21-25
Steps to be taken to Promote Evidence or Science-Based Information	
• Social Media Platform's Role in Ensuring Science-Based Information	21
• Content Creators' Role in Ensuring Science-Based Information.....	23
• Nutrition Experts' and Organizations' Role in Ensuring Science.....	23
Based Information	
• Government's Role in Ensuring Science-Based Information	24
• Press and News Media Role in Ensuring Science-Based Information	25
• User's Role in Ensuring Science-Based Information.....	25
7. Key Points/ Recommendations.....	26
• Key Points	26
• Recommendations.....	26
• Conclusion.....	26
References.....	27-28
• Journal References Used by Students.....	27
• Student References.....	28

Foreword

Social media has emerged as a significant contributor in influencing dietary choices, providing global users with easy access to information about nutrition through various Platforms. They connect users with health experts, influencers, and organizations, raising awareness about healthy living. With billions of active participants, these platforms play a crucial role in sharing important health information and promoting positive changes in eating behaviors.

A recent survey has revealed that India had 862.08 million social media users as of 2023, which equals 59.90% of the country's population. India is also the country with the second-largest number of social media users in the world. China tops the list with 1.07 billion users. The United States is on the third spot with 308.3 million users. It is expected that around 1.3 billion Indians will use social media platforms by 2029 and will lead the list pushing China to the second spot with 1.27 billion users. 1.24 billion people in India are on the internet as of 2024. That means 69.5% of Indian internet users are also expected to use social media. Reports from GWI suggest that an average social media user visits around 6.7 different social platforms every month. They also spend around 2 hours and 20 minutes daily on these platforms.

This significant number emphasizes how crucial social media is as a primary resource for consumers looking for diet and health information. Particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, food and nutrition-related topics have attracted a lot of attention, and many people use these platforms for health management, curiosity, or interest.

According to Datareportal, most users of prominent platforms, like Facebook, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger, are aged from 18 to 34 years. Around 72.9% of social media users are in the age group 18-64 years (Male 49.3% and Female 23.6%). 25.2% (Male 17.9% and Female 7.3%) are in the age group 35-64 years. The penetration is only around 1.8% in age group 65 and above.

Nevertheless, this accessibility carries certain risks. While trustworthy accounts provide science-based recommendations, the prevalence of misinformation emphasizes the necessity of critically assessing sources. When utilized wisely, social media can serve as an important tool for public

education, supporting evidence-based practices, and enhancing overall health outcomes. Its capacity to both inform and mislead signifies a double-edged sword, highlighting the importance of carefully navigating online content.

Since 2022, ILSI India and K-FFIG have been hosting Essay Writing Competition during National Nutrition Month to encourage students to dwell on emerging areas in nutrition and health. The first competition focused on the “Role of Gut Microbiome in Health and Immunity and Food-Based Approaches for Strengthening It”. The 2023 theme was “Personalized/Precision Nutrition for Better Health and Longevity”. In September 2024, the competition centered on the timely topic of “Scrolling to Health: Evaluating Nutrition Guidance on Social Media”.

The responses received from participants in this year’s competition offer valuable insights into how the younger generation perceives the benefits and risks associated with social media. It is commendable that they recommended potential strategies for enhancing the value of social media for both users and content creators. Keeping in view the good inputs received from students, ILSI India decided to bring out a Report based on views of students. Some of the best entries were selected for preparing the Report. This document, “Scrolling to Health: Evaluating Nutrition Guidance on Social Media”, addresses the complex intersection of nutrition information and the rapidly evolving digital landscape. As pointed out by students, social media, while an influential tool for disseminating dietary advice which is evidence-based, often becomes a tool proliferation of misleading information and has to be handled with care.

This Report presents detailed analysis, evaluates the challenges posed by misinformation on social media, its effects on various age groups, and strategies for promoting credible, science-based nutrition guidance. The insights provided are intended to empower individuals, professionals, and policymakers to effectively navigate and reduce the risks associated with unverified contents encountered online.

This compilation is a step towards fostering a digital environment where evidence-based knowledge is prioritized, leading to more informed public health decisions and the promotion of overall societal well-being.



Dr. B. K. Nandi
Chairman, ILSI India



Dr. B. Sesikeran
Chairman, ILSI India K-FFIG

1. Introduction

Dietary recommendations to address the specific nutritional needs of individuals at different stages of life are crucial for maintaining healthy life. For children and adolescents, proper nutrition supports growth, development, and cognitive function. In adults, balanced diets help maintain energy levels, manage weight, and reduce the risk of chronic diseases and help in healthy ageing. For older adults, dietary recommendations focus on preserving mental and physical health and managing conditions such as diabetes, and preventing age-related illnesses. Users may easily find lifestyle recommendations, recipes, and health advice on social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. By advocating for particular diets (such as keto, veganism, or intermittent fasting) and healthful behaviors, influencers, dietitians, and fitness specialists help to shape trends.

It needs to be noted that certain seemingly harmless diets may take a turn for the worse and cause adverse effects requiring hospitalization (Stephane Guyenet, 2023). Researchers have also found that information posted by verified organizations may not entuse users to interact with it and articles that are most likely to be shared or retweeted on social media platform (Ellis et al., 2024) are usually those that have many 'likes' but are not of sound quality.

Health professionals, influencers, and organizations that provide age-appropriate nutrition recommendations have a greater audience thanks to social media. Platforms can, for instance, promote healthy lifestyle choices for young individuals, highlight dietary advice for elderly or children, and offer advice on how to manage age-related illnesses. Social media can either support evidence-based dietary guidelines or encourage trends that might not be appropriate for all age groups. Therefore, the use of social media for guidance on eating habits can encourage the adoption of good eating habits, but following the advice requires careful thinking to make sure that the content is in keeping with dietary recommendations that have been supported by science or that it is evidence based.



2. Social Media Users

The Digital October Global Statshot Report for 2024 indicates that there are now 5.22 billion active social media accounts worldwide, representing an increase of more than 250 million over the past year. The report also shows that the global number of monthly active users across social media platforms includes approximately 2.30 billion for WhatsApp, about 2.25 billion for Facebook, and roughly 2.00 billion for Instagram.

As regards India (Statista, 2024), it had 862.08 million social media users in 2023, accounting for 59.90% of the country's population. This makes India the nation with the second-highest number of social media users worldwide. WhatsApp leads as the most popular platform, used by 83% of internet users, followed by Facebook and Instagram, which have market shares of 80.6% and 71.7%, respectively. According to a January 2022 survey, 31% of social media users in India were aged between 18 and 25. They used six to nine different social media sites at once. On the other hand, nearly 50% of the participants who were 56 years of age or older stated that they had never used social media. Notably, social media has become a significant knowledge source across both urban and rural areas, highlighting its extensive reach and growing influence throughout the country (Statista, 2022).

Extensive reach of social media platforms not only illustrates the progressive digital infrastructure but also warrants concern regarding the kind of data or content being accessed on daily basis by users



3. Evidence-Based Information on Social Media

“In this digital era, finding a needle in the haystack has proved to be far easier than accessing reliable nutrition information on social media. With no clinical trials backing their claims, many influencers and bloggers, have claimed a one-way ticket to viral fame by releasing the next revolutionary diet, promoting a fad or fear-mongering in the name of generating awareness. Therefore, bridging knowledge gaps of consumers and users of social media with respect to critical examination of nutrition information is need of the hour.”

Ms. Itu Dutta,
M.Sc. Food and Nutrition
Institute of Home Economics, University of Delhi

Why Evidence-Based Information is Important?

Evidence-based information refers to knowledge and recommendations that is derived from scientifically validated studies, research, and data, rather than anecdotal or unsupported claims (Physiopedia cited on 26 Nov, 2024). Research suggests that only about 20-30% of health-related information on social media is based on scientific evidence (Mandal et al., 2022). It involves making decisions based on the strongest available, peer-reviewed research, particularly in areas like healthcare, nutrition, and public policy. This type of information is essential for several reasons:

- 1. Accuracy and Credibility:** Evidence-based content is reliable because it is supported by research, human clinical trials, meta-analysis, and expert consensus.
- 2. Informed Decision-Making:** It empowers individuals to make more informed choices regarding their health, nutrition, and well-being by offering scientifically supported recommendations.
- 3. Health and Safety:** Using evidence-based practices helps reduce the spread of misinformation, ensuring that individuals follow effective, safe and scientifically proven health practices.
- 4. Public Health Impact:** It plays a pivotal role in public health campaigns, providing clear guidelines for addressing widespread health issues, such as obesity, heart disease, and diabetes.

What is the Prevalence of Evidence-Based Information on Social Media?

While social media platforms are increasingly being used to disseminate health and nutrition advice, the prevalence of **evidence-based information** varies significantly. Many experts, health organizations, and professional influencers use platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and X to share research-backed content on nutrition, fitness, and wellness. However, the widespread nature of social media also means that evidence-based information can sometimes be drowned out by misinformation or sensationalized claims.

Some factors contributing to the rise of evidence-based content on social media include:

- 1. Greater Awareness of Health:** As awareness about the significance of health and wellness grows, there has been an increase in professional dietitians, nutritionists, and healthcare professionals providing evidence-based advice and guidance.
- 2. Collaboration with Experts:** Reputable health and wellness brands often collaborate with scientists, doctors, and researchers to share evidence-based advice on their social media channels.
- 3. Availability of Scientific Research:** Availability of discoveries, and scientific advancements related to nutrition and health enables individuals and organizations to readily share the latest studies through Social media.

However, even with credible sources available, it remains difficult to ensure that all content on social media are grounded in evidence. Many users turn to influencers, who may not consistently provide accurate or scientifically validated information.

What Factors Contribute to the Spread of False/Misleading and Incomplete Information?

The widespread occurrence of **misinformation or false information** on social media is a major issue and a cause of concern, especially regarding health and nutrition.

Multiple factors contribute to the dissemination of misleading or inaccurate content:

- 1. Lack of Regulation:** Social media platforms frequently do not have robust regulations or oversight to check the quality and accuracy of health-related information. This allows unverified or erroneous data to propagate easily.
- 2. Influencer Culture:** Various influencers, often without formal qualifications in health or nutrition, may endorse dietary fads, supplements, or methods that lack a scientific basis, primarily because they are popular or profitable. They are motivated by financial incentives, could even deliberately mislead their followers in order to benefit themselves. The proliferation of non-specialists, such as influencers and wellness bloggers, contributes to the spread of misinformation. Unlike registered

dietitians and certified nutritionists, these individuals may lack the expertise necessary to provide sound nutritional advice. Research suggests that approximately 40% of individuals follow health advice from influencers without verifying the information, demonstrating a concerning trend (Gupta & Mehta, 2021).

3. **Echo Chambers and Confirmation Bias:** Social media algorithms prioritize content that resonates with users' existing beliefs. This can lead to the reinforcement of false or misleading concepts as users are shown more similar content.
4. **Viral Trends and Sensational Headlines:** Attention-catching titles or exaggerated claims are more likely to go viral, often without proper scientific validation. Such trends can foster widespread misinformation.
5. **Misinterpretation of Research:** In some cases, research findings are misrepresented or taken out of context, leading to the spread of inaccurate health advice. Even well-intentioned individuals may accidentally share false information if they do not fully comprehend the studies they cite.
6. **Student-Driven Misinformation:** A study conducted by Priyanka Harjule (2023) indicated that 62.4% of students share misinformation, driven by factors such as self-expression, socializing, and the nature of the information itself. Students who engage with social media for more than 12 hours are at a heightened risk of disseminating inaccurate information.

Social media plays a significant role in shaping health-related decisions. While evidence-based information is vital for encouraging healthier choices, the vast reach of these platforms also facilitates the rapid spread of inaccurate and misleading information. A recent study by Dennis et al. (2024) reported that content posted by influencers and brand accounts tends to have the lowest accuracy, whereas posts from qualified nutritionists are held to higher standards. Similarly, Dennis et al. (2023) also found that much of the online nutrition-related information is often inaccurate and of poor quality. This puts consumers seeking health and nutrition advice online at a considerable risk of being misinformed.

To ensure that social media becomes a reliable source for health and nutrition guidance, it is imperative to prioritize evidence-based practices and encourage critical evaluation of shared content. This approach can help mitigate the risks associated with misinformation while promoting informed and healthier decisions.

4. Risks of Misinformation or False Nutrition Information on Social Media

“One of the most significant risks of social media nutrition advice is that most of it is generalized information. Influencers without education in nutrition often share what worked for them personally, offering advice like, “Take this supplement to lose X kgs of weight” or “Eat this X grams of protein per day.” However, nutrition science is highly individualised. What works for one person may not work for another person and adopting such generalised not a research base recommendations can sometimes cause harm.”

Ms. Fashtana Khan,
M.Sc. Foods, Nutrition and Dietetics
College of Home Science Nirmala Niketan

The Potential Consequences of False Information or Misinformation

A study conducted in India highlighted that misinformation on social media contributes significantly to poor dietary choices, with 65% of respondents acknowledging they have been influenced by false nutritional information online (Rani et al., 2022). A study on X revealed that 14.9% of tweets related to nutrition contained untrue information, often from non-expert sources (Batheja et al., 2023). An analysis of Australian Instagram accounts found that 44.7% of nutrition-related posts were inaccurate, with posts from non-professionals background (Denniss et al., 2024).

As mentioned earlier social media platforms often lack rigorous fact-checking, and information can be quickly disseminated without proper verification. This can lead to widespread misconceptions about diets, supplements, and health practices that might not be backed by scientific evidence. Consumers, especially those who are not well-versed in nutrition, may follow misleading advice, leading to poor dietary choices that can affect their long-term health.

Some of the Potential Consequences Include:

- 1. Nutritional Inadequacy and Deficiencies:** “Nutritional inadequacy” refers to a nutrient intake that falls below the estimated average requirement, while “nutritional deficiency” entails significantly diminished levels of one or more nutrients, impairing the body's ability to function properly and consequently increasing the risk of various diseases, including cancer, diabetes, and heart disease (Donato et al, 2022). Many diets popularized on social media such as extreme low- carb or low-fat diets often lack the necessary balance of essential nutrients. People who adopt these diets without consulting a professional may develop deficiencies in vital nutrients like iron, calcium or vitamins.

A study conducted in 2023 (Kreft et al., 2023) revealed that 96% of participants turned to YouTube for nutrition information, with "What to Eat in a Day" content being the most favored (83%). However, only 17% of participants actively sought nutrition information on social media, while 54% engaged passively when such content appeared in their feeds. Registered dietitians were trusted most for accurate information (64%), and relatability (87%) was a key factor in choosing to follow influencers. Yet, only 16% trusted the claims made by social media health influencers. Despite 91% of participants understanding the concept of evidence-based nutrition, 77% struggled to evaluate the accuracy of social media nutrition content, with females reporting significantly more difficulty than males (Kreft et al., 2023).

This trend raises concerns, as social media content often inspires individuals to replicate influencers' eating habits without considering their unique dietary needs. Such content frequently promotes fad diets advocating drastic changes, including the elimination of entire food groups. When followed without medical or professional supervision, these diets can lead to long-term nutritional inadequacies and serious health issues.

- 2. Increased Risk of Chronic Diseases:** Misleading information regarding the advantages of certain diets, such as extreme low-carb (Keto diets) or high-fat diets, may elevate the likelihood of developing chronic diseases like heart disease, diabetes, and gastrointestinal problems. Research presented at the 2018 European Society of Cardiology Congress indicated that those adhering to low-carb diets had an elevated risk of premature death, especially from coronary heart disease, stroke, and cancer. This highlights the dangers of adopting such diets without expert guidance.
- 3. Psychological Impacts:** False assertions about quick weight loss or "miracle" foods can lead to body image issues, disordered eating patterns, or anxiety surrounding food. Social media influencers promoting unrealistic body standards can intensify these psychological effects. Findings from 50 studies across 17 countries suggest that using social media is associated with body image issues, eating disorders or unhealthy eating patterns, and negative mental health, primarily through the processes of social comparison, internalization of the thin or fit ideal, and self-objectification (Alexandra Dane and Komal Bhatia, 2023).

In 2019, Rounsefell et al. emphasize that being exposed to specific kinds of nutrition guidance on social media is associated with a rise in disordered eating behaviors among younger individuals. A review carried out by the Department of Biomedical Informatics, Columbia University where they compiled the resources gathered from PubMed, CINAHL, EMBASE, PsycINFO, and ACM Digital Library concluded that the chief outcome of following social media as a source of nutrition information runs the risk of adolescents and young adult centred societies being misled in a manner that they consume the wrong set of nutrients and get impacted psychologically by idealized (in some cases edited) images of fit bodies (Chau et al., 2018).

4. **Financial Consequences:** Incorrect information about costly "superfoods" or "supplements" could lead individuals to invest money in products that offer little or no actual health benefits.
5. **Confusion and Anxiety:** Constant exposure to conflicting and incorrect nutrition advice can create confusion and anxiety about food choices, causing individuals to make uninformed dietary choices.
6. **Exacerbation of Chronic Conditions:** People with existing health conditions (e.g., diabetes, heart disease) may follow misleading advice that worsens their condition, such as incorrect recommendations on blood sugar control or cholesterol management. For example, recommendations that advocate for the complete removal of carbohydrates could result in perilous swings in blood sugar levels for those with diabetes. Misinformation about dietary supplements might also result in dangerous interactions with medications that have been prescribed.

The Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA) issued by the ICMR-National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) are grounded in thorough research that considers aspects like body weight, age, and activity levels, specifically for the diverse Indian population. Dietitians rely on these guidelines to customize nutritional suggestions, ensuring that individual needs are adequately addressed. Regrettably, social media influencers frequently ignore these critical details, offering generalized guidance that fails to recognize the vast variety in health profiles, particularly in a diverse nation like India, where lifestyles, genetic backgrounds, and health situations can be quite different.

Recommending a specific product without factoring in aspects like RDA values, personal health issues, allergies, or intolerances may lead to unintended and potentially harmful side effects. This concern is particularly relevant for seniors, whose digestive systems and metabolism may not handle certain ingredients or supplements well, thereby increasing the risk of negative reactions. Thus, it is crucial for individuals to critically assess the origins of nutritional information they come across online, making sure the guidance they adhere to is trustworthy and backed by scientific evidence.

Few Examples of the Negative Impact of False Information on Health are Discussed Below:

- ✓ Many social media influencers and online wellness accounts promote supplements or natural remedies with claims like **"boosts metabolism," "fights cancer," or "prevents aging."** These claims are often unproven and may encourage consumers to forgo medical treatment or healthy dietary practices in favor of ineffective products. Studies indicate that the promotion of certain dietary supplements on social media does not always align with evidence-based practices, leading consumers astray (Kumar & Singh, 2022).
- ✓ Some of the influencers emphasized **usage of spinach in diet for the treatment of Iron Deficiency anaemia** but they do not know the fact that spinach contains

trace levels of iron and it is not the rich source. The rich source of iron is Bathua leaves, Amaranth leaves etc. Besides there are absorption factors.

- ✓ False claims about certain **"superfoods"** can lead individuals to neglect the importance of a balanced diet. Promoting one food, like spirulina, as a cure-all might make people overlook other essential nutrients and health practices.
- ✓ Unverified or fraudulent cancer treatment methods, such as **herbal remedies or untested therapies**, can delay individuals from seeking proper medical care. This can result in the progression of the disease, potentially leading to worse outcomes and lower survival rates.
- ✓ **Claims like depression (mental health conditions) can be "cured" by diet alone or through unverified "natural remedies"** can prevent people from accessing effective therapies, leading to worsening symptoms and prolonged suffering.
- ✓ **Quick fixes for weight loss, such as the use of products or unrealistic fitness regimens**, can result in unhealthy weight loss methods (e.g., starvation or excessive exercise), which may lead to eating disorders, metabolic damage, and long-term health complications.
- ✓ **Advocating Detox trends in social media which promise to "cleanse" the body and promote rapid weight loss** can misguide the users as the body's natural detoxification system (liver, kidneys, etc.) does not require special diets or expensive products, and the emphasis on "cleansing" can promote unhealthy dietary habits or fasting practices. A survey conducted by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that while keto dieters initially lost weight, many regained it after stopping the diet, emphasizing the potential dangers of following trends without understanding the science behind them. In 2019, BMC Public Health published a study showing that many individuals who followed detox diets experienced electrolyte imbalances, fatigue, and other health issues, often as a result of misleading claims spread by influencers.

These examples demonstrate the serious consequences of following false health information, highlighting the importance of relying on credible, evidence-based sources for health and wellness advice.

How False Information Impacts Different Age Groups

"The attractiveness of easily digestible content can often outweigh the necessity for scientific correctness, which results in spread of misinformation. This highlights the issue of the masses being unable to differentiate facts from fiction."

Ms. Hirak Shah,
M.Sc. Foods, Nutrition and Dietetics
College of Home Science Nirmala Niketan

According to Datareportal, most users of prominent platforms, like Facebook, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger, are aged from 18 to 34 years. Around 72.9% of social media users are in the age group 18-64 years (Male 49.3% and Female 23.6%). 25.2% (Male 17.9% and Female 7.3%) are in the age group 35-64 years. The penetration is only around 1.8% in age group 65 and above. A report by The British Medical Journal reveals that health misinformation spreads more rapidly on social media than factual information, driven by algorithms that prioritize sensational content. This phenomenon is particularly concerning for vulnerable age groups, as it can significantly impact their well-being and decision-making.

● Impact on Children and Adolescents (13-19 years)



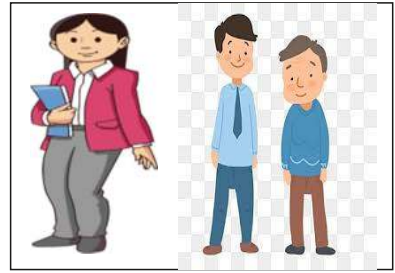
Young people are particularly vulnerable to misleading information on social media due to their developing sense of self and desire to fit in. Promises of rapid weight loss or specific body types can result in unhealthy dietary practices, including restrictive eating or skipping meals.

This age group is prone to peer pressure, body image concerns, and self-experimentation. Social media platforms showcase idealized bodies, "clean eating" habits, and "wellness" trends, often promoted by influencers or celebrities. A study published in the Journal of Adolescent Health found that exposure to idealized fitness images on social media was associated with increased body dissatisfaction and negative affect in adolescents. This may also lead to issues such as eating disorders (e.g., anorexia or bulimia) and poor body image. Adolescents are also at risk of consuming supplements promoted by influencers without understanding potential side effects or risks.

● Impact on Adults (20-60 years)

For adults, social media frequently serves as a primary resource for quick fixes to weight loss or fitness ambitions. However, adhering to broad, unverified advice can result in

nutrient deficiencies, particularly for individuals with pre-existing health issues such as diabetes or hypertension. The danger is heightened by the fact that nutritional needs can differ widely among individuals, influenced by factors like age, activity levels, and underlying health concerns. Adults are also susceptible to social media's influence on nutrition and health. **The constant stream of information can:**



- o Create confusion about nutrition facts and best practices.
- o Fuel anxiety about food choices and health risks.
- o Encourage fad diets or quick fixes.

A survey conducted by the International Food Information Council found that 70% of adults use social media to gather health and nutrition information. However, only 24% of respondents considered the credibility of the source.

• Impact on Elderly (Above 60 years)



Senior citizens often have distinct nutritional requirements due to the aging process and age-related health challenges, are also susceptible to misleading dietary advice. If nutritional guidelines neglect to consider these elements, malnutrition or deteriorating health can ensue.

Many older adults may be prompted to adopt generalized recommendations without regard for their specific needs, such as the necessity for tailored nutrient levels or sensitivities to certain foods or supplements. This highlights the significance of personalized nutritional advice, especially for this demographic. **Senior citizens may be more vulnerable to misinformation due to:**

- o Limited digital literacy.
- o Trust in online sources.
- o Health concerns and anxiety.

Social media can perpetuate misinformation about:

- o Anti-aging remedies.
- o Unproven health supplements.
- o Fad diets for chronic disease management.

A study published in the Journal of Gerontology found that older adults were more likely to share and believe health misinformation on social media.

Misleading false nutrition information on social media is a significant risk to public health, affecting individuals across all age groups. To reduce these risks, it is crucial to advocate for media literacy and to motivate individuals to seek advice from qualified healthcare professionals or registered dietitians before making any significant changes to their diet or supplement regimen.

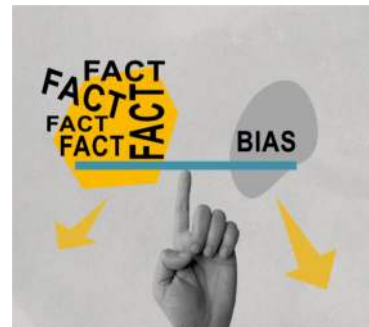
5. How to Look for Evidence-Based Information on Social Media

“Educating the public on how to identify reliable information and the dangers of false claims is crucial for safeguarding public health in the digital age. Let's harness its potential to foster a healthier digital landscape. By working together, we can create a social media environment that supports healthy relationships with food and our bodies.”

Ms. Umra Khan,
B.Sc. Home Science, Lady Irwin College

Importance of Verifying Information and Fact-Checking

- ✓ **Preventing Misinformation Spread:** Fact-checking helps avoid sharing false or misleading information that could negatively impact health. It is important to differentiate between opinion posts and those presenting facts. Evidence-based content is always supported by reliable research, data or expert consensus.
- ✓ **Ensuring Accuracy:** It is important to remember that the number of likes or shares a post receives is not an indicator of its credibility. Verifying claims ensures that the information is evidence-based, rather than just opinion or speculation. The source should always be checked, supporting research or expert endorsements be examined and cross-reference with other trusted platforms to confirm the validity of the information be looked at before accepting accuracy.
- ✓ **Identifying Bias:** Fact-checking can help reveal any hidden agendas or biases behind certain health recommendations. Evidence-based information typically avoids emotional language and sensationalism.
- ✓ **Reducing Health Risks:** Fact-checking can prevent individuals from following potentially harmful advice, which may lead to reduce the risk of diet-related health issues or chronic diseases.



By adhering to these recommendations, individuals can better manage their social media use and ensure they are receiving reliable, evidence-supported information about nutrition and health.

Tips for Identifying Reliable Sources of Information

- ✓ **Check the Credentials of the Author:** Always look for information shared by qualified experts, such as registered dietitians (with a B.Sc. or M.Sc. in Nutrition), healthcare professionals, or researchers with relevant experience, who base their recommendations on scientific evidence rather than personal stories.



- ✓ **Look for Reputable Accounts:** Identify and follow accounts known for disseminating evidence-based information such as accounts of research organizations like WHO, UNICEF, Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, government health agencies like Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), Indian Council of Medical Research, National Institute of Nutrition etc. Scientific journal are often reliable sources of information.

- ✓ **Look for FSSAI-Verified Certification and Hallmark:** Users should look at FSSAI-verified certification and hallmark on the products. FSSAI ensures the presence of all nutrition in precise amount being mentioned by the manufacturer on the label. Along with this it also reviews the contaminants and adulteration present in products and takes strict action to manufacture if found guilty.



- ✓ **Evaluate the Date:** Ensure the information is recent and up-to-date, as nutrition and health guidelines can evolve over time.
- ✓ **Look for Scientific References:** To assess the validity of scientific claims, it is crucial to reference reliable sources such as peer-reviewed studies, clinical trials (RCTs), meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and official guidelines from health authorities. Platforms like PubMed, Google Scholar, and JSTOR provide access to peer-reviewed studies, while databases like ClinicalTrials.gov and Cochrane Library specialize in clinical trials and meta-analyses. Guidelines from reputable organizations like the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), World Health Organization (WHO), and National Institutes of Health (NIH) offer evidence-based recommendations.

University websites, such as Harvard and Stanford, are also valuable for accessing academic research. Government health reports and resources from platforms like ICMR and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), USA are essential for authoritative health data. For comprehensive research, tools like PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Scopus are excellent for locating scientific studies across multiple disciplines. These resources help ensure that the information is scientifically valid and up to date.

- ✓ **Cross-Check Information:** Compare the information with that from other reputable sources. If multiple trusted platforms align, the content is more likely to be

accurate. Verifying advice with multiple trusted sources or consulting a healthcare professional, especially for chronic conditions are beneficial.

- ✓ **Watch Out for Red Flags:** Be cautious of sensational headlines, overly persuasive language, or lack of references to scientific studies. These are often signs of unreliable sources. Phrases like “Quick Fix”, “Miracle Cure” or “Lose 10 Kgs in 15 Days” are often indicators of misleading content. Nutrition is complex and any advice that promises dramatic results with minimal effort should be treated with caution.
- ✓ **Look at Social Media Features:** Some platforms flag potentially misleading content or provide fact-checks through third-party verifiers.
- ✓ **Investigate Scientific Consensus:** Reliable information supported by evidence typically represents a consensus among specialists. If a post presents an isolated finding, it is wise to wait for confirmation from multiple trusted sources.
- ✓ **Find out Expert's Comments:** Sometimes, experts share their insights on trending content in the comments or responses, offering further explanations or rectifying false information.
- ✓ **Interviews and Webinars:** Participate in or look at live chats, Q&A sessions, or webinars featuring subject matter experts can also help in identifying reliable sources of information

By integrating these approaches, the chances of being deceived by incorrect or unconfirmed information on social media can be minimized. Focus on locating reliable, evidence-supported content.



6. Ensuring Science-Based Nutrition Information on Social Media: Steps to be taken to Promote Evidence or Science-Based Information

“Social media can also be a powerful tool for promoting positive health campaigns. Organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) and the American Heart Association use social media to spread evidence-based information on healthy eating, exercise, and mental well-being.”

Ms. Yashvi Saxena,
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To improve the spread of evidence-based nutrition information, a collaborative strategy involving specialists, regulatory bodies, social media companies, and the public is essential. By collaborating with nutrition experts, initiating campaigns to enhance public knowledge, implementing government regulations, and employing sophisticated fact-checking tools and algorithms, a more reliable and informative digital environment can be created. Encouraging the sharing of information by qualified healthcare professionals and promoting transparency about the sources of information will further help reduce misinformation. These joint efforts will empower individuals to make informed, scientifically-backed health decisions and ultimately contribute to a healthier community.

Few specific roles to be played by different stakeholders are recommended below:

1. Social Media Platform's Role in Ensuring Science-Based Information

Social media platforms play a crucial role in ensuring that the nutritional information shared on their networks is accurate, trustworthy, and based on solid scientific evidence. To fulfill this duty, platforms can adopt several significant strategies:

- **Content Supervision Fact-Checking and Verification:** Following steps can be taken to identify and counter misinformation on social media:
 - ✓ *Develop AI-powered fact-checking tools.*
 - ✓ *Collaborate with third-party fact-checking organizations to validate nutrition claims shared on their sites.*
 - ✓ *Work with nutrition and health organizations to promote scientifically accurate content in users' feeds.*
 - ✓ *Add badges to the profiles of qualified professionals, such as licensed dietitians, to differentiate them from non-experts. Posts by dietitians who are badge holders would boost the credibility of the evidence-based*



information shared, facilitating users in recognizing reliable sources and diminishing the impact of misinformation.

- ✓ Incorporate account verification features, to enhance the security of health-related content.
- ✓ Adjust Algorithms to prioritize credible, science-based nutrition information over sensational or misleading content especially from trusted sources. This includes promoting dietary guidelines or nutritional recommendations that align with the latest scientific consensus. This would help ensure that users are more likely to encounter trustworthy content.
- ✓ Issue warnings and advise content creators to take down harmful misinformation especially when flagged by users.

The above would help ensure that only scientifically validated information is disseminated, enabling users to access trustworthy and precise health guidance.

- **Community Guidelines / Code of Ethics:** Platforms should **develop clear and comprehensive guidelines/Code** of Ethics for its content creators, specifying that only evidence-based information should be shared in health and nutrition-related content, and that **unsupported or misleading posts will be flagged or removed**. An article published in the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietitians recommends “code of ethics” for all nutritionists and practicing dietitians to follow (SarahKlemm, 2021). Similarly, a code of ethics to be followed for any and every food-related post applicable even to well-established companies would be right step towards a better future.
- **Implementing Community Reporting and Feedback Systems:** Social media platforms should establish **comprehensive community reporting and feedback systems** to maintain the accuracy and dependability of the nutrition information shared within their networks. **Users should have the ability to report any content they find misleading, harmful, or scientifically incorrect**. These reports should trigger a **detailed review process**, allowing platforms to **quickly identify and rectify erroneous or potentially dangerous nutrition information**.

Alongside reporting, **platforms can motivate users to participate in informed discussions** that confront misinformation and provide evidence-based counter-arguments. This strategy cultivates a more knowledgeable and critical community where users can work together to evaluate and refute misleading assertions, ensuring that credible nutrition information is emphasized while the dissemination of false or harmful guidance is reduced. By integrating both reporting systems and proactive community interaction, platforms can improve the overall quality and trustworthiness of nutrition-related content.

- **User Empowerment and Control:** Social media platforms can provide tools for users to filter and customize the type of health and nutrition information they receive. These tools should help users find reliable sources while avoiding potentially harmful content.
- **Promoting Positive Behavior, Transparency in Content:** Social Media Platforms may encourage individuals to obtain information from qualified nutrition specialists, or offer features that enable users to connect with certified experts for guidance as this

can aid in directing people toward reliable sources. The influencers and content creators should be to **disclose their sources of information**, especially when discussing health and nutrition. This promotes trustworthiness and accountability in the information being shared.

2. Content Creators' Role in Ensuring Science-Based Information

Content creators who create contents for social media have a crucial duty to ensure that the information shared online is based on scientific proof and trustworthy sources. To foster a more accurate and knowledgeable online environment, they can take following actions:



- **Share Evidence-Based Information:** As responsible citizens and being concerned about public health matters, content creators should only share evidence-based information and engage in discussions that prioritize accuracy over popularity, helping to set standards for trustworthy content.
- **Community Guidelines/Code of Ethics:** Content creators should adhere to Community Guidelines / Code of Ethics developed by the Social Media Platforms.

3. Nutrition Experts' and Organizations' Role in Ensuring Science-Based Information

Research shows that health professionals' engagement on social media has positively influenced dietary habits, particularly in terms of increasing awareness about balanced nutrition (Sharma and Gupta, 2023). Engagement of and collaboration between experts such as nutritionists, dietitians, and health organizations is essential to create and share content that is backed by scientific research, ensuring that the public receives accurate and up-to-date nutrition information. By working together, these professionals can develop educational resources that help individuals make informed decisions about their health and diet. Following steps can be taken:



- **Create and Share Credible Content:** Nutrition experts, dietitians, and health organizations should lead by example, they can run **campaigns promoting nutrition literacy**, teaching people to spot misinformation and seek science-based advice. They can **share well-researched, evidence-based nutrition content** on social media. **By creating informative videos, infographics, and articles**, they can educate the public about healthy eating habits and debunk myths. They can also

host Webinars, Q&A sessions, or live discussions on social media platforms to directly interact with users, address their concerns, and offer scientifically-backed advice.

One example of a very useful campaign is the initiative that began on June 3, 2018, started by nutritionists, registered dietitians, and educators. This campaign specifically targets the proliferation of fraudulent nutrition courses and misleading fad diets often found online. The campaign uses the hashtags #CANQC (Campaign Against Nutrition Quacks) and #canqcindia to raise awareness and educate the general public. By leveraging these hashtags and spreading knowledge about the dangers of unverified nutrition information, the initiative aims to empower individuals to make informed, scientifically-backed decisions regarding their health and diet.

- **Collaborate with Influencers:** Nutritionists and health organizations can **collaborate with social media influencers who share the same commitment to evidence-based information.** This partnership can amplify the reach of credible nutrition messages and counteract misinformation.
- **Advocating for Policy Changes:** Nutrition organizations and health organizations can work with social media platforms and governments to implement policies that regulate the spread of health misinformation. This could include promoting clearer guidelines for sharing nutrition-related content and enhancing transparency in advertising and sponsored posts.

4. Government's Role in Ensuring Science-Based Information

- **Algorithms Development and Adjustments:** Social media's widespread use in modern culture has resulted in an abundance of information, both true and false. To address this, governments could collaborate with tech companies to develop algorithms that verify the accuracy of nutrition-related content. These algorithms would cross-check health claims against trusted sources, flag false or misleading information, and hold content creators accountable by suspending accounts that repeatedly spread inaccurate advice.
- **Develop Guidelines:** National bodies such as **FSSAI** (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India) and **National Health Authorities** (such as ICMR- National Institute of Nutrition) can significantly contribute to prevention of dissemination of unverified or deceptive nutritional information on social media. By formulating guidelines that mandate platforms to oversee and limit such content, these organizations can ensure that only scientifically supported and credible nutritional guidance is shared. Such regulations would direct content creators to provide accurate scientific advice and shield the public from dangerous misinformation. This level of oversight would enable individuals to more easily recognize reliable health information versus unverified claims, cultivating a more beneficial online atmosphere.

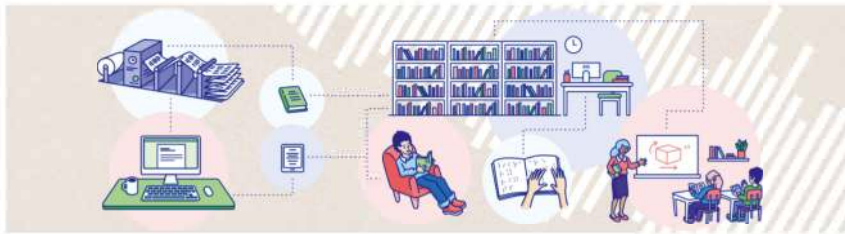


5. Press and News Media Role in Ensuring Science-Based Information



The press and news media, as the fourth pillar of Indian democracy, must work in collaboration with the government to address the spread of misinformation on social media. By thoroughly analyzing and exposing misleading information, they can play a critical role in educating the public and ensuring accountability. This joint effort can help maintain trust and integrity in the information ecosystem while empowering citizens with accurate knowledge.

6. User's Role in Ensuring Science-Based Information



"Let us realise that social media can be a useful tool for information sharing, but it should not be solely relied upon, for evidence-based knowledge. One will have to do their part from their own end to ensure that the information provided to them is legit and ready to follow."

Ms. Zikra Syed,

Post Graduate Diploma in Dietetics and Applied Nutrition
College of Home Science Nirmala Niketan

People who use social media for getting information have to use this tool very carefully. They should:

- **Verify information, checking the credibility of sources, and being sceptical of popular but unverified claims.**
- **Report misleading or false content, helping to prevent its spread to a wider audience.**
- **Check the facts before sharing the information further.**

"By fostering critical thinking skills and striving for reliable information, users can scroll into a journey of health for enhanced health outcomes and avoid confusion."

Ms. Tanvi Jayant Chipkar,

Research Scholar (UGC-JRF)- Food and Nutrition

By taking these steps, it can be ensured that social media becomes a platform where science-based nutrition information is widely accessible, promoting healthier choices and minimizing the harm caused by misleading claim.

7. Key Points / Recommendations

Key Points

- **The Dual Role of Social Media:** Social media influences dietary habits among various age groups, providing opportunities for disseminating credible nutrition guidance while also posing risks from misinformation.
- **The Significance of Evidence-Based Information:** Recommendations backed by scientific research are crucial for making well-informed health choices, safeguarding public health, and minimizing the adverse effects of misinformation.
- **Dangers of Misinformation:** Incorrect nutrition guidance can lead to deficiencies in essential nutrients, the onset of chronic illnesses, mental distress, financial repercussions, and confusion regarding healthy eating practices.
- **Factors Contributing to Misinformation:** Elements such as influencer culture, sensational reporting, lack of regulation on platforms, echo chambers, and the misinterpretation of scientific findings contribute to the proliferation of false information.
- **Tackling the Challenge:** Solutions entail verifying claims, encouraging the dissemination of expert-driven material, utilizing fact-checking resources, regulating social media platforms, and enhancing public awareness.

Recommendations

- **For Social Media Platforms:** Regulate content related to nutrition, improve algorithms to promote evidence-based information, and cooperate with health organizations to boost credible messaging.
- **For Content Creators:** Verify the facts and share evidence-based information only.
- **For Experts and Organizations:** Proactively share trustworthy content, collaborate with influencers, and spearhead public awareness campaigns to combat misinformation.
- **For Governments:** Implement guidelines on health-related content to limit the spread of misinformation.
- **For Users:** Assess contents critically, give preference to sources based on evidence, and report misleading claims.

Conclusion

While social media serves as a strong instrument for distributing nutrition advice, it is equally susceptible to spreading harmful misinformation. This dual nature necessitates a united effort from content creators, users, professionals, platforms, academia (nutritionists, dietitians, medical community, R&D organizations, health organizations) and government to ensure that reliable, evidence-based information prevails in online environments. By means of guidelines, education, and collaboration, it is feasible to cultivate a more informed and healthier society while addressing the threats posed by misleading content.

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