

Social Media Posts: A Key Influencer of Health-Related Behavior among Nigerians

To the Editor,

Social media is a widely known source of information on issues pertaining to health.^[1,2] Between January 12, 2020, and February 21, 2020, we conducted a randomized online survey to obtain information from the Nigerian public on the impacts of health-related posts they see on social media on their behavior. The study tool used was an e-questionnaire (Google Form). Participation in the survey was completely voluntary, anonymous, and harmless. We also obtained approval to conduct the survey from the Research Committee, Department of Community Health, Aminu Musa Habib College of Health Science and Technology, Yauri, Nigeria.

A total of 235 Nigerian adults aged 18–45 years participated in the survey. All, except one (who had primary school education), of them had tertiary and/or secondary school education. The majority (89.4%, 211/235) of them reported that they had been influenced in one way or the other by what they see on social media; of which 79.6% (168/211) of them identified that they were enlightened, through social media, on issues pertaining to health matters. Furthermore, 68.7% (145/211) of them identified that they have made major health decisions based on what they saw on social media. Virtually, all (97.2%, 205/211) of those respondents who reported that they have ever been influenced by what they see on social media indicated that they were happy to engage themselves with health-related posts on social media, of which 41.5% (85/205) of them found pictures to be more engaging [Table 1].

From our survey findings, we observed that posts on social media are sources of information that has the capacity to influence the formation, modification, and termination of health behavior among Nigerians.

The social media community is a virtual world free for all where people share, express, or exchange ideas, information, expressions, and feelings. Pertinently, on social media platforms, myriads of health-related information fly around, of which some of those health-related information are pro-health and on safe practices while some are unsafe and misleading.^[1,2] This shows that health-related posts on social media are not completely reliable.

With the on-going trend of misleading posts (e.g., fake news) on social media, there is an urgent need for the formulation and enforcement of public health regulations that will protect the public from misleading information, especially those pieces of information which when consumed can generate negative behaviors/habits.^[3] Based on the above, we recommend

Table 1: Influence of social media on the respondents

Questions	Frequency, n (%)
Have you ever been influenced by what you see on social media? (n=235)	
Yes	211 (89.8)
No	24 (10.2)
In what way (s) were you influenced? (n=211)*	
Started a new habit	77 (36.5)
Dropped an old habit	77 (36.5)
Changed the way I viewed my health	67 (31.8)
Enlightened me about health, generally	168 (79.6)
Have you considered trying out things you see on social media? (n=211)	
Yes	197 (93.4)
No	12 (5.7)
No response	2 (0.9)
Have you made any major health decisions based on what you saw on social media? (n=211)	
Yes	145 (68.7)
No	66 (31.3)
Are you happy to engage a health-related post on social media? (n=211)	
Yes	205 (97.2)
No	2 (0.9)
No response	4 (1.9)
What kind of content do you find more engaging? (n=205)	
Text	46 (22.4)
Pictures	85 (41.5)
Animation	32 (15.6)
Videos	41 (20.0)
No response	1 (0.5)

*Multiple response apply. n: Number of eligible respondents

that: (i) national, regional, and local regulatory agencies should formulate and enact policies and laws that will regulate health-related posts on the media– mass media and social media; (ii) managers and administrators of social media should censor all health-related posts on social media, if practically possible; (iii) social media users should always ensure that they cautiously check for the validity and reliability of health-related information posted on social media before consumption; (iv) the dissemination of unsafe and misleading information should be widely discouraged and considered socially unacceptable.

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There are no conflicts of interest.

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