

Social Media as the Source of Health Information among Netizens

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Abstract

The way Netizens access health-related information has changed with the advent of social media platforms. It has shaped how they interact with, perceive, and use the information they are exposed to. Over time, various scholars have assessed the role of health related information on social media in the decision-making and behavioural change of patients; however, certain socio-cultural contexts, Oyo State included, are yet to be fully investigated. The study identified the social media platforms Netizens in Oyo State use to get their health information, while also assessing their level of exposure to health information on these platforms. Using these findings, the study determined how best Netizens can maximise the use of the health-related information while avoiding false information on these platforms that can prompt them to make decisions that can ruin their health. A mixed-methods research design combining the descriptive survey and in-depth interviews was utilised. The sample comprised of 396 questionnaire respondents and 30 interview respondents purposively chosen across selected tertiary institutions in Oyo State, Nigeria. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS, demonstrating a high scale reliability (Cronbach's alpha= .95) and qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis. Study findings revealed that Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube were the most popular platforms Netizens in Oyo State used for accessing health-related information. Overall, 61.1 percent of Netizens were exposed to health information on social media with 2 core themes including passive and active exposure emerging from qualitative data. Based on these findings, the study recommends that social media platforms and professional medical personnel collaborate to create verified accounts where Netizens can obtain updated, accurate, and easily comprehensible health- related information. Furthermore, active engagement by public health institutions on Facebook, which was tagged the highest platform Netizens source their health-related information from, is essential to verify information and curb the spread of fake news.

Keywords: Exposure to Health Information, Health Information Source, Netizens in Oyo State, Health Information Seeking, Social Media Platforms

Introduction

Health, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024), is the state of “complete physical, mental and social well-being and not just the absence of disease or infirmity”. The health status of every individual goes a long way in determining the ability of the individual to perform effectively in his or her day-to-day activities. Prior to the late 20th century, which introduced social media to the world, health information, among other forms of information, was primarily disseminated to media audiences using the conventional media, including newspapers, radio, and television (Wartella & Stout, 2001). Communication and information sharing have since transformed with the advent of social media platforms. According to Jane et al. (2018), this shift occurred because social media platforms offer favourable avenues for disseminating health information directly to interactive audiences.

In a world where the new media, especially social media, has taken the lead as the primary form of information exchange, these platforms have increasingly become popular for the spread of health-related content (Rajshri & Jessica, 2023; Ventola, 2014). While the widespread availability of health information online is a positive development, evaluating the credibility of these information remains a major challenge. Kington et al. (2021) note that health information on these platforms is not always factual and reliable. The prevalence of health misinformation on social media platforms highlights a key risk of exposure to unverified and low quality content which can severely impair digital health literacy (Bin Naeem & Kamel Boulos, 2021).

While literature covers various areas of health information on social media, limited empirical research focus specifically on Netizens in Oyo State. This study addresses the gap by evaluating social media as the primary source of health information among Netizens in Oyo State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study identifies the key social media platforms Netizens in Oyo State use to get their health information while also assessing their level of exposure to health information on these platforms. Study findings give insight for health communication specialists, tertiary educational institutions and medical professionals aiming to optimise public health messaging and foster critical information evaluation among digital audiences.

Research Questions

To guide the study investigation and address the study objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What social media platforms do Netizens in Oyo State employ to obtain health information?
2. What is the level of exposure of Netizens in Oyo State to health information on social media platforms?

Literature Review

Rise of Social Media for Accessing Health Information

The introduction of social media has over the years facilitated the easy spread of information to a large, heterogeneous audience globally. According to Aichner et al. (2021), social media's introduction in the late 20th century opened a new pathway to interaction among individuals across the globe. Beginning with early platforms like SixDegrees, the first social media platform to exist in the late 1990s, the digital ecosystem evolved into prominent social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, X (Twitter), YouTube, and LinkedIn, among others (Shaikh, 2024). Netizens have over time used these social media platforms to access and share various contents ranging from sports, politics, health, entertainment, education, and finance, among others, delivered via text, videos, infographics, pictures, and audio formats.

Focusing on health information, Goodyear et al. (2019) observed that young people access and share health-related content such as those related to improving their physical body, diets, and workout tips. These users who constitute the vast majority of the Netizen demographic discover contents through algorithmic recommendations such as high number of likes and comments, peer recommendations, and perceived content relevance (Oguafor & Nevzat, 2025; Stuart, 2021). Empirical studies confirm a continuous increase in how these individuals refer to social media platforms as their go-to for health-related information (Chen & Wang, 2021; Fernández-Luque & Bau, 2015).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further accelerated this development as millions, including Netizens, turned to social media platforms for real-time updates regarding health protocols and virus tracking. Terry et al. (2023) highlighted that these platforms provided informational and emotional support during isolation, connecting users globally during the public health emergency. Similarly, Marar et al. (2019) found that 80% of the study participants used platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube to search for and share health information, considering the retrieved content useful for basic health awareness.

Types of Health Information Netizens Access and Share on Social Media

A substantial body of literature have shown that social media can effectively disseminate health messages and increase awareness about health issues (Latha et al., 2020; Mohammed et al., 2021; Rajshri & Malloy, 2023). Neiger et al. (2012) found that social media platforms, such as Facebook and X (Twitter) increased user knowledge regarding healthy behaviours, disease prevention, and encouraged positive lifestyle changes. Beyond public health communication campaigns, Heldman et al. (2013) asserted that social media has been utilised to support community engagement in public health efforts. Thackeray et al. (2008) reiterating this, noted that online forums and blogs establish virtual communities that provide social support, share information, and facilitate behavioural change. Social media platforms have also been used to engage communities in participatory health interventions, such as crowd-sourcing health information, conducting health surveys, and organizing health-related events (Ventola, 2014).

However, ensuring the source credibility of health information on social media platforms remains a critical challenge (Sun et al., 2022). As Yao & Sheng (2022) noted, various individuals are selective about the health information they use, not just because the information is suitable for them but mainly because the information resonates with their previous beliefs. Unfortunately, many individuals fall into the trap of scammers and peddlers of fake news who are after their selfish interests to either lead Netizens astray or to make a profit. This is why several individuals get trapped in the purchase of health products that have been advertised to them, whether they need them or not.

According to Anderson & Raine (2018), Netizens can misuse the information they are exposed to, leading to more harm than good to them. Conversely, Laranjo et al. (2015) demonstrated that the exposure of Netizens to accurate health information on social networking sites changes their health behaviour, particularly as focused in the study, where health information changed their behaviour in terms of smoking, engaging in physical activities, and weight management. Given these dynamics, questions of accuracy, source reliability and user privacy remain vital concerns. Chukwuere & Dyikuk (2023) emphasised that Netizens are moved to share health-related information on social media platforms because of the extent to which they were confident about the source's credibility.

When unverified health claims spread however, the consequences can be severe, as some individuals who have perceived the information as credible have already used it (Swire-Thompson & Laze, 2020). Lelisho et al. (2023) observed several cases during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic where individuals experienced adverse health outcomes after following inaccurate health information they were exposed to on social media.

Accordingly, Moorhead et al. (2013), stress the urgent need for systematic verification of health information and quality control mechanisms across social media platforms.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratification Theory

This study is grounded in the Uses and Gratification theory (UGT) propounded in 1974 by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumer and Michael Gurevitch. The theory focuses on the development of an understanding of why people use specific types of media, and the benefits they derive from using them (Kasirye, 2022). The theory is built on the following assumptions:

- Presence of active audiences who select their preferred content to consume.
- Awareness of the audience of their reason for selecting certain media.

Media contents consumed by audiences are typically determined by their level of interest in such media, especially in relation to the need the content will fulfil. It is paramount to note that the gratification an individual gets from a specific content is likely to be different from that of another individual, thereby highlighting their reasons for exposing themselves to this content.

In the context of health communication among Netizens, UGT provides a robust analytical framework which reveals that Netizens who have been identified as active members of the internet, use their preferred platforms to access information. In recent times, especially after the relief from the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, there has been an increase in the consciousness of individuals, including Netizens, on the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle (Nnwoka & Akoja, 2024). This has led to an increase in health-related media content distributed on the internet, including social media platforms. Whether deliberate or coincidental exposure to health information on social media platforms, audiences seek media content that fulfils their personal needs, be it for official reasons or for pleasure (Musa et al., 2015). These needs could vary across fitness, self-diagnosis and general health tips, among others. The willingness of Netizens to act on social media health information are directly tied to how well the platform satisfies their informational and trust needs. By applying UGT, this study connects user motivation directly to their platform selection, frequency of exposure and evaluation of credibility in the midst of misinformation on these social media platforms.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative research methods to identify the social media platforms and analyse health information exposure from these platforms among Netizens in Oyo State, Nigeria. The target population comprised of digital citizens within tertiary educational institutions

across the state. As noted by Sasu (2023), Netizens in Nigeria are predominantly individuals aged between 18 and 34 years. Within the Nigerian context, this demographic largely consists of university students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, as well as recent graduates in the early stages of their careers.

Institution	Student's Population
University of Ibadan	13, 405
Dominion University	758
Polytechnic of Ibadan	15,000
Aries Polytechnic	300
Emmanuel Alayande University of Education	4,200
Ibadan City Polytechnic	2,135
Oyo State College of Nursing and Midwifery	820
Federal College of Education (Special)	6,500
Total	43,118

Table 1.1: Population Breakdown across Selected Institutions (Institutional Records, 2025)

A close-ended questionnaire of 396 copies and interviews with 30 respondents made up the data obtained and analysed. This sample size was arrived at using the Taro Yamane sample size formula with an error margin of $(0.05)^2$. A multi-stage sampling technique was utilised for the selection of questionnaire respondents across the tertiary educational institutions in Oyo State. First, the target population which consisted of 43,118 respondents were categorised into four distinct strata based on their institutional type (universities, polytechnics, college of education and health/specialized institutions). The sample size of 396 was then proportionally allocated across the selected institutions based on their population size.

Institution	Student Population	No. of Respondents
University of Ibadan	13, 405	122
Dominion University	758	7
Polytechnic of Ibadan	15,000	137

Aries Polytechnic	300	3
Emmanuel Alayande University of Education	4,200	39
Ibadan City Polytechnic	2,135	20
Oyo State College of Nursing and Midwifery	820	8
Federal College of Education (Special)	6,500	60
Total	43,118	396

Table 1.2: Sample Population of Study for Questionnaire (Fieldwork, 2025)

Within each institution participants were selected using the simple random sampling across faculties and departments to ensure an unbiased representation of undergraduate and postgraduate students. To ensure the reliability of the research instrument, a pilot study of the questionnaire was conducted. This allowed for the identification and addressing of issues that may arise. The test-retest reliability test was conducted to ensure the appropriateness of the instrument used. The result of the pilot test conducted in this study is presented in Table 1.3.

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.959	40

Table 1.3: Reliability Statistics

The Cronbach's alpha reliability statistics presented in Table 1.3 for the questionnaire used in data collection of this study is .959 for 40 research instruments. The result shows that the instrument designed for this study is highly reliable.

For the qualitative data, an in-depth interview of 30 respondents were proportionally selected based on the population size of each tertiary educational institution.

Institution	Population	Proportion of Total	Raw Allocation	Final Allocation
University of Ibadan	13,405	32.96%	9.89	10
Dominion University	758	1.86%	0.56	1
Polytechnic of Ibadan	15,000	36.88%	11.06	11
Aries Polytechnic	300	0.74%	0.22	1

Emmanuel Alayande University of Education	4,200	6.39%	1.92	2
Ibadan City Polytechnic	2,135	5.25%	1.58	2
Oyo State College of Nursing and Midwifery	820	2.02%	0.61	1
Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo	6,500	13.91%	4.17	2
Total	43,118	100%	—	30

Table 1.4: Sample Population of Study for Interview (Fieldwork, 2025)

Using the purposive sampling technique, respondents were selected based on their high frequency of social media usage and engagement and their self-identified reliance on social media for health information. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, with the questionnaire data analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 12th edition, while the qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis.

Respondents who participated in the study gave their due consent to the use of their survey and interview responses for this study.

Results and Discussion of Findings

Objective 1: To identify the social media platforms Netizens in Oyo State use to get their health information.

The first objective of this study was aimed at investigating the social media platforms Netizens use to obtain health information, as well as the frequency of engaging with the social media platforms. The social media platforms investigated in this study are Instagram, Facebook, X (Twitter), TikTok, LinkedIn, and YouTube. The data obtained through the administered questionnaire are presented in Table 1.5.

Variable	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	Weighted Mean	Ranking
Instagram	89(22.5%)	92(23.2%)	132(33.3%)	83(21%)	2.53	4 th
Facebook	63.4(16%)	70.9(17.9%)	95(24.0%)	166.7(42.1%)	2.92	1 st

X	103.8(26.2%)	116.8(29.5%)	83.6(21.1%)	91.8(23.2%)	2.41	5 th
TikTok	73.26(18.5%)	97.4(24.6%)	88.7(22.4%)	136.6(34.5%)	2.73	2 nd
LinkedIn	117.6(29.7%)	98.6(24.9%)	89.9(22.7%)	89.5(22.6%)	2.38	6 th
YouTube	72(18.3%)	109(27.5%)	110(27.8%)	105(26.4%)	2.63	3 rd

Table 1.5: Social Media Platforms used to obtain Health Information (Source: Fieldwork, 2025)

The social media platforms used by the respondents in obtaining health information as investigated in this study are Instagram, Facebook, X (Twitter), TikTok, LinkedIn, and YouTube; however, the rate of usage differs. From the findings presented in Table 1.5, it was found that of the different social media platforms investigated and used by respondents in this study, Facebook is the most used social media with percentage and weighted mean of 66.1% and 2.92 respectively, followed by TikTok with percentage and weighted mean of 57% and 2.73 respectively, and YouTube with percentage and weighted mean of 54.2% and 2.63 respectively in obtaining health information. The respondents found LinkedIn to have the least usage for obtaining health information.

Qualitative analysis of data obtained from the in-depth interview conducted on respondents of the study on the type of social media platforms used for obtaining health information is presented in Figure 1.1.



Figure 1.1: Social Media Platforms used for Obtaining Health-related Information

The data as seen in figure 1.1 reveals diverse social media platforms Netizens in Oyo State use to obtain health-related information. Many respondents rely on specific platforms, with Facebook emerging as a dominant choice.

“Facebook is the social media platform I employ to source health-related information”

“Facebook or Instagram”.

“I make use of Instagram and TikTok

“I use Facebook actually”

Several individuals stated their preference for Facebook, describing it as their go-to platform for health information. Some others however stated that they relied on search engines and actual medical consultations for health information.

“Well, basically I go on Google if I need any tangible information”

“MetaAI, and we have Google search too”

“I don’t really rely on social media platforms”

Findings from quantitative and qualitative data therefore reveal that the most used social media platform in seeking health information by Netizens in Oyo State, is Facebook, followed by TikTok, then YouTube. It was found that LinkedIn is the least used social media platform among Netizens in Oyo State. This finding supports the assertion of researchers such as Li and Liu (2020) and Zhang et al. (2021), where it was reported that social media used by Netizens while seeking health-related information are YouTube, WeMedia, Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Neiger et al. (2012), however, identified Facebook and X (Twitter) as the prominent social media used in searching for health-related information. Furthermore, Li and Liu (2020) reported high usage of Facebook and X (Twitter) for obtaining health-related information. However, while Facebook is one of the most used social media platform in Oyo State Nigeria among other regions globally, X is not well used in this geographical context like others in seeking health information.

The finding reveals that while social media plays a significant role in disseminating health-related information, many individuals still rely on search engines or direct medical consultations for credibility. The popularity of certain platforms also impacts how users access health content, yet concerns over reliability remain a common theme.

Objective 2: To assess the level of exposure of Netizens in Oyo State, Nigeria, to information on social media platforms.

The second study objective was aimed at investigating the level of exposure of the respondents to health information on social media. The outcome of this investigation is presented in Table 1.6.

Question	Strongly Disagreed	Disagreed	Neutral	Agreed	Strongly Agreed
I frequently come across health information on social media	38(9.6%)	70(17.7%)	51(12.9%)	143(36.1%)	94(23.7%)
My health knowledge and behaviour have greatly	42(10.6%)	66(16.7%)	63(15.9%)	151(38.1%)	74(18.69%)

improved as a result of my exposure to health information on social media					
I actively seek out health information on social media	45(11.4%)	76(19.19%)	61(15.4%)	139(35.1%)	75(18.9%)
I constantly avail myself of health information on social media that is reliable and trustworthy	36(9.1%)	65(16.4%)	75(19%)	155(39.1%)	65(16.4%)
Social media has increased my awareness of health issues and preventive measures	46(11.6%)	62(15.66%)	64(16.16%)	142(35.86%)	82(20.7%)

Table 1.6: Exposure to Health Information on Social Media (Fieldwork, 2025)

Findings on the level of exposure of respondents to health information on social media, as presented in Table 1.6, show varying levels of exposure to health-related content on social media, ranging from daily encounters to infrequent or deliberate searches. In addition to the quantitative data analysed and presented in Table 1.6, data was obtained through in-depth interviews to ascertain the exposure of Netizens to health information on social media, as presented in Figure 1.2.



Figure 1.2: Exposure of Netizens to Health Information on Social Media

Study findings from qualitative data analysed were in tandem with the results from quantitative data analysed and presented in Table 1.6. Qualitative data analysed presented notable themes including passive exposure and active exposure which showed the varying levels of exposure to health-related content on social media, ranging from daily encounters to infrequent or deliberate searches. It was found that Netizens in Oyo State frequently come across health information on social media platforms, which has greatly improved their knowledge and behaviour. Some individuals report coming across such content regularly, often due to their browsing habits or the nature of their social media engagement. For instance, one respondent mentioned encountering health information.

“Every day (*In-depth Interview, 2025*).”

While another stated,

"I do come across the health information every day because it is a page."

This suggests that those who follow specific pages or groups dedicated to health topics are more likely to see such content frequently. Others noted their frequent exposure, such as,

“Frequently, let's say at least 2 of every content I see on Facebook.” (*In-depth Interview, 2025*).

For many users, health content appears as they scroll through social media feeds without actively searching for it. One respondent explained,

“When I'm scrolling to my Facebook, I come across a lot of information about health.” (*In-depth Interview, 2025*).

The exposure of Netizens to health information on social media has increased their awareness of health issues and preventive measures; however, it must be from reliable and trustworthy sources. Other than the type of health information Netizens are exposed to on social media as reported in this study, scholars such as Dalomba (2022) and Nanquil (2019) found that Netizens are also exposed to fake and absurd information, as well as age-inappropriate content. Since social media allows the easy spread of information, it is easier to spread fake news without knowing they are fake (Buchanan, 2020). This means that once a Netizen believes that the health information is accurate, they tend to spread the information, thereby increasing the spread of the fake health information. Based on this finding, there is a need to checkmate the content that these individuals are exposed to on these social media platforms.

Overall, the data obtained on exposure of Netizens to health information on social media highlights diverse patterns in encountering health-related content on social media. While some individuals come across it daily due to their engagement with health-focused pages or groups, others encounter it passively through their feeds. Meanwhile, some users only engage with health content when they actively search for it, demonstrating a contrast between incidental and intentional exposure to health information on social media platforms. This corroborates the finding of Warzel (2022), who reported that there are diverse information online and can only be accessed by people who are actively seeking it. These contents are accessed based on their search and interest, or suggested by the particular social media platforms to suit their searches and interests (Kapoor et al., 2018). This therefore implies that the level of exposure of Netizens to health information on social media is a function of their active search for such information. This is based on the assertion of Li and Liu (2020) that how these citizens of the Internet use social media platforms determine the information content they will typically be exposed to.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on research findings, it is evident that social media has indeed become an important source of health related information among Netizens in Oyo State. The use of platforms such as Facebook, TikTok and YouTube suggest that social media has created an avenue for health information to reach large audiences swiftly and conveniently. This has important implications for public health communication because health professionals, government agencies and educational institutions can use these platforms to reach people with timely information on disease prevention, healthy lifestyles and available health services. The exposure of these Netizens to health information is driven by both intentional information seeking and algorithm feeds recommendations with Facebook, TikTok and YouTube serving as the primary platforms. While findings revealed however that health communication on social media platforms provide accessible health advice and raise general wellness awareness, the prevalence of unverified claims poses health risks to users who rely entirely on these unvetted posts.

It is therefore recommended that to optimise the benefits of health information on social media while minimising misinformation risks, public health agencies, tertiary institutions and professional medical associations should collaborate with platform administrators to establish verified and easily identifiable accounts. These channels should publish clear, evidence-based health guidance to simplify information verification for everyday users. Given that Facebook emerged as the most frequently used platform for sourcing health information among Netizens in Oyo State, state public health bodies should maintain active interactive pages on the platform. These pages should address trending health myths and rumors, debunk viral fake news and provide verified health education. Furthermore, tertiary institutions should integrate digital health literacy training into basic media and general studies courses. Equipping students with evaluation frameworks will help them assess source credibility, identify sponsored content and avoid dangerous self-medication trends.

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