

# Interactive Communication With the Public: Qualitative Exploration of the Use of Social Media by Food and Health Organizations

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To examine the use and impact of social media on 2-way communication between consumers and public organizations in the food safety and nutrition area.

**Methods:** In-depth qualitative study conducted between October, 2012 and January, 2013, using semi-structured interviews in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Sixteen professionals worked on the public interface within 5 national organizations with a role in communicating on food safety and nutrition issues in this thematic analysis.

**Results:** Five main themes were identified: gradual shift toward social media-based queries and complaints; challenges and limitations of social media to deal with queries and complaints; benefits of using social media in query and complaint services; content redesign driven by social media use; and using social media to learn more about consumers.

**Conclusion and Implications:** Social media penetrated and brought new opportunities to food organizations' interactions with the public. Given the increasing use of social media by the public, food organizations need to explore such new opportunities for communication and research.

**Key Words:** social media, 2-way communication, public engagement, online monitoring, food (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2015;47:104-108.)

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## INTRODUCTION

The process of communicating health-related food messages to the public has traditionally been depicted as a 1-way, top-down flow of information in which public authorities and experts seek to convey objective scientific information to the lay public.<sup>1</sup> This model has been criticized primarily because it gives little consideration to public perceptions and interpretations of scientific messages, which are

influenced by a multitude of social, cultural, and individual factors.<sup>2,3</sup> A more inclusive 2-way communication model with interactive processes has been widely encouraged by food regulators and academics.<sup>4-6</sup> This model suggests that communication practitioners need to engage with the public to discover their level of knowledge, attitudes, behavior patterns, and information needs. To this end, communication channels that facilitate listening, feedback, partici-

pation, and dialogue are considered a key resource not only to ensure that the public's voice is being heard but also to provide substantive input that will improve the organization's information services and communication outcomes.<sup>2,7,8</sup>

Traditionally, interaction with the public has occurred through channels such as telephone and e-mail. With the recent proliferation of social media channels (eg, Facebook, Twitter), food safety and nutrition communicators have more opportunities than before to enable interactive communications with the public.<sup>9,10</sup> An increasing number of public organizations have set up social media accounts in recent years. However, it is evident that many organizations tend to use social media as a 1-way communication tool, neglecting to embrace the social and interactive capabilities of these platforms.<sup>11,12</sup> So far, the potential role of social media in the day-to-day practice of engagement and interaction with the public in relation to food risks and benefits has not been examined.

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This study aimed to increase understanding of the adoption and use of social media by food and health organizations for 2-way communication with the public. It explored the extent to which social media have reshaped and expanded dimensions of interactive communication between the public and food and health organizations in relation to food safety and nutrition issues.

## METHODS

### Study Design and Sampling

Food agencies and food associated public organizations are important actors in interacting with people regarding food safety and nutrition issues as the main developers of public awareness and education campaigns. The researchers decided to interview those individuals within such organizations involved in direct interactions with the public. Ethical approval was sought and granted by the Brunel University Research Ethics Committee. Organizations targeted included food safety agencies, food-related health promotion organizations, and organizations with a role in helping consumers make healthier food choices. To be included, the organization had to be operating at a national level and actively using at least 1 social media channel to communicate with the public. Following these criteria, a convenience sample of 5 organizations in the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland were selected. The researchers first contacted the communication manager in each organization and asked whether they would be interested in participating in the study. Additional participants were recruited until saturation of findings in each organization was achieved. In total, 16 people (2–4 people from each organization) participated: 3 marketing and communication managers, 3 information managers or officers, 3 social media managers, 4 social media operators, 1 media relations manager, and 2 advice line executives.

### Interview Procedure and Data Analysis

The research team developed a protocol for semi-structured interviews. The 4 main interview questions were: *How*

*does your organization hear from the public in relation to food safety and healthy eating issues? What is your organization's commitment in dealing with queries and comments? How have social media influenced the way your organization interacts with the public? Have social media brought any changes to your organization's responsiveness to the public's needs?*

The interviews took place between October, 2012 and January, 2013. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. An inductive thematic analysis approach was implemented to analyze the data<sup>13</sup> with Nvivo 10 (QSR International Pty Ltd, Victoria, Australia, 2012), qualitative data analysis software used for data management. The lead author who interviewed the Irish participants first carried out preliminary coding with a sample of transcripts using the technique of constant comparison to merge similar codes and introduce new codes. This allowed for the generation of a coding framework that was then applied to the remaining transcripts. The process of constant comparison was continued and the coding framework was revised iteratively as required. To test inter-coder reliability, a second researcher was invited to code a sample of 20% of the interview transcripts. Inter-coder agreement was 85.7%. Any conflicting codes were discussed between the 2 coders until consensus was achieved. After discussion amongst the research team, codes were finalized and themes were built up by merging codes.

## RESULTS

All interviewed organizations had incorporated into their communication strategy at least 3 social media channels; Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube the most commonly used. Five main themes emerged from the data in relation to the use and impact of social media on 2-way communication.

### Gradual Shift Toward Social Media–Based Queries and Complaints

Many of the interactions between food and health organizations and the public were triggered by consumers' information-seeking needs or complaints. Some interview participants

indicated that consumer queries were increasingly coming into their organizations through Facebook and Twitter, with a reduction in telephone queries. An information manager suggested that:

*...We would expect to see a reduction in the amount of calls that would be coming through the helpline ... If you've got a Facebook or a Twitter account, there's an implicit kind of statement, as an organization, that you are there to answer these kinds of queries and to interact at any time of the day. So that is, you know, we get things through these channels quite a lot.*

Similarly another organization reported, "Certainly there were more telephone queries when I started with the organization just 6 years ago. But social media has kind of grown; the phone has kind of eased off." However, participants recognized that social media are not used by everyone, and in some organizations, consumers' queries and complaints were still mainly coming in through e-mail and telephone.

### Challenges and Limitations of Using Social Media to Deal With Queries and Complaints

Participants identified a number of challenges in using social media to handle consumer-initiated interactions. The first challenge lay in social media operators' capabilities to cope with queries. In some organizations, Facebook and Twitter accounts were operated by communication professionals or employees with a food science background but no query service training. Hence, at times they did not have the necessary skills or expertise and so many required the support of helpline staff or particular information resources to address queries. Second, several participants revealed the difficulty of communicating via Twitter responses because of the limitation of 140 characters per post:

*... Sometimes I have to send a few tweets to one person. And people ask a lot more questions because they haven't got the space, so they keep coming back and coming back again.*

Privacy and confidentiality were raised by participants as another

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