

EFNEP Graduates' Perspectives on Social Media to Supplement Nutrition Education: Focus Group Findings From Active Users

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify ways to effectively use social media to communicate nutrition-related information to low-income populations.

Methods: The authors conducted 4 focus groups with female Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program graduates who used social media at least twice a week (n = 26 total). Transcripts were analyzed using the constant comparative method to identify key themes.

Results: For participants, page content, page maintenance, and networking opportunities with others were important aspects of a nutrition education social media page. Trust emerged as a central theme, because participants expressed a need for reliable information from known, credible sources and safe places to share ideas.

Conclusions and Implications: Using social media to provide nutrition-related messages may be an effective way to encourage sustained positive behavior changes resulting from educational programming and to engage participants beyond class time. Establishing the trustworthiness of the social media site is essential to its use among low-income participants.

Key Words: social media, nutrition education, EFNEP (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2014;46:203–208.)

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INTRODUCTION

Nutrition educators use a variety of educational strategies designed to help individuals adopt nutrition-related behaviors linked to improved health. Because of the widespread and increasing use of social media, nutrition educators have begun to consider it as a potential tool for better engaging participants and communicating information that encourages positive health outcomes.^{1–3} Social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter allow users to develop and exchange ideas.^{4,5} Once geared

primarily to a middle class, young adult population, social media is increasingly accessible across the US, regardless of education, income, or race and ethnicity.^{6,7} Furthermore, although people in rural areas are less likely to have Internet access and less likely to use the Internet to seek health information,⁸ recent studies suggest that access to the Internet and bandwidth is becoming less of a limiting factor for nutrition education efforts in rural areas.^{9,10} Thus, social media have the potential to be an effective tool for nutrition educators. In fact, in the journal's editorial

column, former associate editor Dr Teri Burgess-Champoux noted that “social media provides opportunities to explore innovative approaches to participant recruitment and intervention delivery to diverse audiences.”¹¹ Chou et al⁷ further noted that the effective use of social media could potentially narrow the health disparities gap.

Governmental agencies and programs have already begun developing educational materials to guide health care professionals in using social media.^{12–15} In 2010, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention began incorporating social media into their health communication efforts, later creating a toolkit based on lessons learned that includes advice on how to increase social media participation and develop science-based messages.¹² The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children program and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program both cited this toolkit on their Web sites, encouraging local agencies to use it.^{13,14} The US Department of Agriculture also developed a social media toolkit with strategies spe-

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cifically tailored to communicating with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program recipients.¹⁵

Despite increasing interest in using social media to communicate health and nutritional information, little research has assessed participants' willingness to use social media to receive nutrition education messages.¹⁶⁻²⁰ Lohse¹ found that Facebook was an effective tool for recruiting low-income women to nutrition education projects, but that study did not evaluate the content of the messages or the best way to structure education efforts via social media. Stroeve et al¹⁹ raised questions about the value of using social media as a strategy to communicate health information with low-income populations. Based on focus groups conducted with low-income, primarily Hispanic parents, that study found that lack of time and concerns about the credibility of social media sites were parents' primary objections. The authors concluded that more work is needed to determine the most effective way of using social media in low-income populations. Furthermore, the study of Stroeve et al study focused on health information in general, and not nutrition education specifically.

The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), a federally funded nutrition education program, is interested in investigating how to effectively use social media to reinforce program curricula.² Combining supplemental social media support with in-class lessons, which are already part of the program, may improve behavior change more than in-class lessons alone.²⁰ Furthermore, social media may be an effective way of communicating with and providing follow-up support for current and past EFNEP participants, who frequently move or change phone numbers, which also makes it challenging to evaluate long-term program impacts.²¹ This study assessed EFNEP graduates' use of social media, their interest in using social media as a resource for nutrition information, and factors that might influence their engagement. Although previous studies (eg, Chou et al⁷) highlighted the potential of social to engage low-income audiences, this is 1 of the first studies to use qualitative data from low-income

participants to directly assess the effectiveness of using social media to communicate nutrition information with this audience.

METHODS

Study Population and Design

The researchers conducted 4 focus groups (average size, 7 participants), lasting 1.5–2 hours, to explore opinions of an EFNEP social media page.^{22,23} Female EFNEP graduates who were primary caregivers of at least 1 child between the ages of 2 and 12 years were recruited. The study focused on women because they represent the primary demographic of adult EFNEP participants.²⁴ Study participants were at least 18 years of age and reported visiting at least 1 of the following sites at least twice weekly: Facebook, blogs, Twitter, or YouTube and other video sources. These sites were chosen owing to their popularity among social media users.⁴ For the purpose of this study, an EFNEP graduate is defined as an individual who has completed a minimum of 6 lessons targeting the primary goals, which are to improve dietary intake, increase daily physical activity, improve food resource management skills, improve nutrition knowledge and skills leading to better health choices, and improve food safety skills. Individuals who indicated they were not comfortable speaking English were excluded from the study. Participants were recruited from 2 counties in North Carolina through EFNEP paraprofessionals and were screened for eligibility via telephone by the lead author (TML). This study was approved by the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board and written informed consent was obtained.

Focus Group Protocol

A multidisciplinary team including professionals in sociology, nutrition, and extension developed the moderator guide. Most study participants reported Facebook as the site they visited most frequently, and thus focus group questions were adapted to address this specific social media outlet. The moderator guide included the following open-ended questions, along with probes: (1) If EFNEP had a

Facebook page, what would you like to see on the page? (2) What are your thoughts about getting tips on saving money at the grocery store, how to cook and handle food safely, nutrition information, and physical activity, on Facebook? (3) What concerns do you have about receiving these tips on Facebook? (4) With regard to Facebook, who would you like and/or trust to make posts or updates?

The data collection team consisted of the lead moderator (TML), an assistant moderator, and doorkeepers who assisted with administrative tasks. Both moderators had backgrounds in qualitative data collection, and all data collectors participated in a 2-day qualitative methods training designed specifically for this study. During the training, team members engaged in in-depth discussions regarding qualitative methods with an emphasis on focus groups, and reviewed the roles and responsibilities. On the second day of training, data collectors led a mock focus group with EFNEP staff serving as participants, after which mock participants and expert observers provided feedback to improve the moderator guide and data collection process.

Data Analysis

Focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The moderator and assistant moderator also collected field notes to capture key observations during the discussion. To guide the analysis process, coders used the constant comparative method to identify emerging themes, in addition to ones set a priori, and to develop a theory grounded in the response of study participants.²³ Specifically, 3 data analysts (TML, LB, and AL) met and coded the first focus group transcript together to develop a preliminary codebook and establish a consistent definition for each code. The analysts then independently coded 1 focus group transcript at a time. After coding each transcript, they met to discuss any differences in coding and add newly emerging codes to the codebook. Once all transcripts were coded, the analysts used an axial coding process²³ to categorize codes and then develop overarching themes that best explained the data. Researchers determined

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