



Acta Medicinae et Sociologica (2024)  
Vol. 15. No. 39. (69-86)

doi:  
10.19055/ams.2024.11/29/4

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## Dietetics on Social Media - Netnographic Research of Instagram Stories on Healthy Eating

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#### Keywords

social media, social capital, health literacy, dietetics, information about healthy eating, Instagram

### ABSTRACT

Social media content on health and healthy eating and dietetics challenge users with a low health literacy index. There are often barriers to distinguishing who is a credible content producer and whose advice can be considered professionally relevant. In our research, we examine why the reach of social media content published by dietitians is lower than that of self-proclaimed advisors who appear to be experts. We analyzed the content of 14 Hungarian influencers in June, July, and August 2024 and tracked their follower numbers and reach using qualitative content analysis methods. We found that the reach and number of followers of influencers who are not distinct in terms of content credibility varies mainly as a function of daily activity. The more stories and posts influencers publish, the higher the rate of increase in their followers and reach of their content compared to those who rarely publish scientifically sound professionally valid content as registered dietitians. This means that the primary indicator of the credibility of the content that users seek on social media is the frequency of social media activity, the number of followers and likes, rather than the scientific, evidence-based validity of the content.

#### Kulcsszavak

közösségi média, társadalmi tőke, egészségértés, dietetika, egészséges táplálkozással kapcsolatos információk, Instagram

A közösségi média egészséggel, egészséges táplálkozással és dietetikával kapcsolatos tartalmi kihívások elé állítják az alacsony egészségértési indexű felhasználókat. Annak elkülönítése, hogy ki hiteles tartalomgyártó s így kinek a tanácsai tekinthetőek szakmailag relevánsnak gyakran korlátokba ütközik. Kutatásunkban arra keressük a választ, hogy a dietetikusok által közölt közösségi média tartalmak elérése miért alacsonyabb a szakembernek látszó önjelölt tanácsadók követőihez képest. 2024 június, július és augusztus hónapban 14 magyar influencerszer tartalmait elemeztük a kvalitatív tartalomelemzés módszereivel,

s emellett nyomon követtük a követőik számának alakulását és az eléréseiket. Azt tapasztaltuk, hogy a tartalmi hitelesség szempontjából nem elkülönülő influenszerek elérése és követőik száma elsősorban a napi aktivitás függvényében változik. Minél több történetet és posztot tesznek közzé az influenszerek, annál nagyobb ütemben nő követőik száma és a tartalmaik elérése szemben azokéval, akik ritkán tesznek közzé tudományosan megalapozott szakmai szempontból érvényes tartalmat regisztrált dietetikusként. Ez azt jelenti, hogy a felhasználók számára a közösségi oldalakon keresett tartalmak hitelességének elsődleges mutatója a közösségi média aktivitás gyakorisága, a követők és like-ok száma, nem pedig a tartalom tudományos, evidence-based megalapozottsága.

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Beérkezett: 2024.10.07.

Bírálat: 2024.11.03.

Elfogadva: 2024.11.15.

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## **Introduction**

Shared content on the internet and social media is a primary source of health-related information for all generations (Byrne and Kearney et al. 2017, Spettigue and Henderson 2004, Deng 2017, Horváth and Schulz et al. 2021, Afana and Astuti et al. 2021, Chirumamilla and Gulati 2021, Engel 2024). The 2023 Eurobarometer Media & News Survey indicates a decline in the reach of traditional media year on year, while the reach and active use of various social media platforms are steadily growing. The research results show that social media is the primary source of information and content Hungarians consider most credible.

Our research highlights the importance of trusting and identifying credible sources with a possible solution. It can be challenging as anyone can claim anything about themselves. However, it can easily verify who is a professional using a dedicated database system for Hungarian healthcare workers. Posting on social media is accessible to everyone, yet they struggle to effectively utilize it to reach their target audience with impactful information. While the platforms provide the tools for sharing content, understanding how to engage and communicate effectively with followers remains challenging. This lack of effectiveness frequently hinders users from fully leveraging their posts and engaging with their desired audience. As anyone can create, publish, and respond to social media content, the ongoing communication context in social media creates specific cultures in the online space that influence our thoughts, knowledge, and behaviour in the offline world. This can be dangerous if

uncontrolled information about health, disease, and healthy eating influences our health behaviour and is a further risk if this behaviour is accompanied by low health literacy. The results of several studies have shown that the average health literacy index in Hungary is low by international standards. (Erdei and Barth et al. 2018, Horváth and Schulz et al. 2021, Nagy and Gradvohl et al. 2022, Jindarattanaporn and Rittirong et al. 2023). This means that users have limited abilities to access and understand health-related information and are more likely to misunderstand health-related information. Netnographic research can help uncover and identify the cultural patterns that influence users' perceptions of the reliability of content on social media. The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of the frequency of 24-hour Instagram stories on follower numbers and reach, in particular comparing the online activities of professional dietitians and self-proclaimed nutritionists. The aim of the research is to understand the impact of healthy eating information sharing on social media, particularly Instagram, and why users prefer the content of self-promoted dietitians over the professionally credible advice of qualified dietitians. As social media have become the primary source of information for users, it is of paramount importance that research explores the cultural patterns of trustworthiness perceptions and the behavioural patterns that shape users' information and decision-making. The results of this study may help dietetic professionals to reach social media users with low health literacy more effectively, and may contribute to the development of guidelines to promote the dissemination of credible health information on social media.

## **Background**

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, social media was already a popular platform for communication and connection, with millions of users engaging daily. However, during the pandemic, the use of social media skyrocketed as people sought ways to stay connected while adhering to social distancing measures. This surge in activity allowed individuals to maintain relationships, share experiences, and access information, significantly increasing overall engagement across various social media platforms. (Nagy and Gradvohl et al. 2022) In the 2023 Eurobarometer Media and News research, which examined the most trusted news sources across EU countries, almost all nations placed their trust in public TV and radio stations, including their online platforms except Hungary. However, Hungarians expressed the greatest confidence in people, groups, or friends they follow on social media. This reflects a notable

shift in how information is consumed and trusted in Hungary. Due to this, people can easily believe everything they see on various social media platforms. It is extremely challenging to distinguish between a genuine professional content creator and someone pretending to be one. These untrustworthy content creators often have a large follower base, with their audiences relying on the information they share, even when it is full of misinformation. People tend to prioritize quantity over quality. In our research, we are focusing on one of the most widely used social media platforms, Instagram. Launched in 2010, Instagram was acquired by Meta Platforms, Inc. in 2012. Today, it is the third most popular social media platform, with 2.4 billion active users. According to a 2023 study, Hungary has approximately 4 million average active users on Instagram monthly. This statistic underscores the platform's considerable reach and influence within the country, making it a powerful platform for content creators and influencers. Since its acquisition by Meta Platforms, Inc. in 2012, Instagram has experienced several pivotal changes. One notable transformation is the integration of functionalities that facilitate better content sharing and communication with Facebook, creating a more unified user experience. Furthermore, Instagram shifted from a chronological to an algorithm-based feed, prioritizing engagement metrics and personalized content delivery. This change has also enhanced advertising opportunities, allowing businesses to implement targeted marketing strategies, and enabling content creators to explore monetization avenues. Additionally, the platform has increasingly focused on video content through features like IGTV and Reels, reflecting broader trends in social media consumption and significantly influencing user engagement patterns (Dwivedi and Ismagilova et al. 2021).

The concepts of social capital and health literacy provided the theoretical background for our research. It is important to highlight an important form of social capital, the information potential of social networks. Social media offer a wide range of social connections, giving the feeling of unlimited access to information on almost any topic on these platforms to their users. The paradigm of the information society has necessarily focused attention on it, which has made it a research priority. Coleman (1998) argues that information plays a significant role in the justification of action, but that it is costly to obtain, requires attention, energy, and time, that one way of obtaining information may be to exploit social relationships for other purposes (Coleman 1998: 21). These relationships, Coleman argues, are valuable not because they

provide a form of exchange that guarantees reciprocity from others in the form of obligations or trustworthiness of the parties, but simply because they provide information. Social media is also redefining social relationships into looser, less binding online relationships, and checking the authenticity of information will be the point where the focus shifts back to social relationships in the offline world. It is not information per se that has the power of capital, but credible, valid information.

In Robert D. Putnam's (1993) approach, social capital refers primarily to the characteristics of social organization in the form of networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.

Gary Becker (1998) emphasizes the role of preferences and values in social capital and, looking at the nature of decision mechanisms, finds that the main driving force in our choices is the acquisition of social conformity. This conformity is nothing other than the acquisition of respect, recognition, acceptance, and prestige from family, friends, and their various groups. Consumption is of paramount importance in this respect, as it takes place in public, so individuals often choose their restaurants, schools, books, political views, food, and leisure activities by taking into account the opinions of those in their groups and social network of contacts whom they wish to please (Becker 1998: 112). In the age of social media, this is all public and easily accessible information about everyone who shares it. This is put by anthropologist Mary Douglas as 'the real moment of choice... is the choice of friends and lifestyle' (1983: 45 cited in Becker 1998: 113). Becker disagrees with the economic view that choices are determined by some basic biological needs. He lacks emphasis on cultural influence and the influential power of symbols. He concludes that culture has a strong influence on preferences individual behaviour and value choices, even though behaviour has little influence on culture. Consequently, cultural differences shape significant differences in preferences for different goods (Becker 1998: 117).

However, for information from social media to function as an asset in the lives of users, the content published must be properly understood. Understanding health-related information is of major importance in determining an individual's future health status, as inappropriate health behaviour can lead to poor health status (Lee and Arozullah et al. 2004, Kim and Shin et al. 2015, Libicki and Tim 2020, Cui and Li et al. 2021).

In the pre-social media days, credibility was linked to professionalism and qualifications. The visual manifestation of this was when you could see framed

diplomas hung on the wall in offices and surgeries. Nowadays, these have been replaced by professional databases, about which users do not know much. It is simple to check who is a registered dietitian, as one of the requirements for registration is appearing in the basic registry of individuals who have obtained a health qualification. This registry includes anyone with a healthcare qualification obtained from an institution recognized by the state in Hungary, as well as those who have acquired their qualifications abroad and have them validated or recognized in Hungary. The process of being added to the basic registry is automatic; the National Hospital Chief Directorate (OKFŐ) registers individuals based on the data submitted by the institution that issued their diploma or certificate (or the decision regarding their recognition). The names, qualifications, and registry numbers of individuals included in the basic registry are public information and can be accessed. Content creators who are not qualified but provide information that appears credible may be considered pseudo-experts. A pseudo-expert refers to someone who presents themselves as an expert in a particular field but lacks the necessary qualifications, knowledge, or expertise to be considered one genuinely. They may give advice or information that appears credible on the surface, but it is often misleading or incorrect. In many cases, pseudo-experts gain attention through social media or public platforms, where it is easier to appear knowledgeable without proper credentials or authority in the subject matter.

To safely navigate between the content of credible and discredited pseudo-experts, a high health literacy index can help the users. The literature introduces the concept of digital health literacy alongside the concept of health literacy, which also shows differences in health literacy along different social aspects, age, education, and access to digital tools. Educational level, higher income, and social support also appeared to have a positive influence on digital health literacy (Estrela and Semedo et al. 2023). Kim and Shim et al. (2023) found a positive correlation between eHealth literacy and health-related behaviors, indicating that eHealth literacy can mediate how health-related information leads to changes in health-related behaviors. Therefore, it is important to examine platforms that provide users health-related information regarding health literacy and behaviour.

## **Research and Methods**

Our research involved online fieldwork on Instagram from early June to the end of August 2024 among Hungarian influencers who regularly share dietary

and nutrition advice. During the three months, we systematically monitored the daily online activities of 14 Hungarian influencers (6 influencers were dietician specialist experts and 8 influencers were pseudo-experts of healthy eating) who posted different content on healthy living and healthy eating daily on Instagram. In addition to retrievable content and posts, we investigated the impact of 24-hour viewable stories on follower numbers and reach by observing the activities of dietician professionals and self-proclaimed nutritionist influencers.

We examined the following research questions: What explains the phenomenon that self-proclaimed nutritionists have a larger follower base and reach on social media than qualified dietitians? How does the frequency of content posted on Instagram influence the number of followers and reach? Is there a difference in this between expert and non-expert influencers? What role does the health literacy level of social media users play in their choice of credible sources? Which online behaviours and strategies contribute to reaching a larger audience of dietetic experts without compromising professional credibility? What cultural patterns and attitudes influence users' preferences between authentic and non-credible health information on Instagram? Which types of content (e.g. personal stories, recipe recommendations, professional advice) attract followers more for self-proclaimed consultants and dietetic experts?

We analyzed the posting habits of 14 popular influencers on Instagram on the topic of healthy lifestyle and diet recommendations throughout June, July, and August in 2024. Influencers were selected primarily based on the number of followers, but it was also important that they were committed to regularly publishing healthy eating content. Six of these influencers are registered dietitians, while the remaining eight can be considered pseudo-experts. The critical question is: who appears more trustworthy to the public?

We used netnographic research methods to understand those online activities that increase the number of followers and access to content (Dörnyei and Mitev 2023, Lawless 2020, Salzman-Erikson and Eriksson, 2023). The primary aim of netnography is to study the culture of online communities through participant observation. We have chosen a non-intrusive method, in which we observe both the activities of influencers producing content and the volume and content of user reactions to them. The latter quantity indicates that at least this many users have interacted with the observed content at some depth.

The site of participant observation is the 'field', which does not necessarily mean a remote exotic location, but can even be framed by the researcher's own culture. To study one's society, it is necessary to create the observer distance that is inherent in a foreign terrain. This is the fundamental difficulty for the researcher, because if we do not understand or misunderstand the phenomena there, we may not even notice them in our own culture (Kapitány and Kapitány 2002: 129) In this case, anthropological interest sees events through a special 'lens', whose optics distances and objectifies what is seen for the observer.

The own culture as the environment of research encourages constant questioning, conscious reflection, interpretation, and reinterpretation, for the realization of which the application of a 'micro-anthropological focus', i.e. 'immersion' in the everyday life of the observed culture, is essential (Borsányi, 1988). Participant observation is then a necessary but not sufficient condition for interpretation.

We started our research on several different platforms at the same time: TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, to first select the right platform, content, and content creators for us. Our research aims to answer the questions of what online behaviours provide a higher reach for followers, and which ethical behaviours dietitians can adopt in an online environment to provide credible information and spread it as widely as possible. We identified 14 active influencers on all the mentioned platforms, the most visited was Instagram. We chose credible and pseudo-expert influencers to compare their online activities and identify similarities and differences. The selected content creators were *z\_o\_z\_o*, *tudatosdieta*, *ronaybarbara*, *petra\_arndt*, *\_barbilla\_*, and *diet\_etikus* (they are all dietitians), and *Odetternath*, *Karvalics.eszti*, *Kovacsziabina*, *Ujvaridori.etrend*, *Jerkovics\_bogi*, *Regina\_fitlife*, *Greffbrigitta\_*, *Harom.harmad* (they all identify themselves as a nutritionist, we consider them pseudo-experts of healthy eating). We observed 3622 Instagram stories (text, photo, short video content) over the three months from the above-listed 14 different influencers. In the observed stories, the most common content focused on healthy diet-related topics. Influencers frequently shared advice and information on healthy eating methods, often incorporating recipes and tips for maintaining a balanced diet. They also provided glimpses into their personal lives, cooking routines, client feedback, promotional content, ads, and self-promotion to strengthen their brand. In several instances, followers were allowed to ask the influencers questions directly. These Q&A sessions (questions and answers) allowed followers to engage more personally, asking



about various topics such as lifestyle choices, health tips, or travel recommendations. Influencers would then respond to selected questions, providing answers or insights based on their expertise or personal experiences, creating a more interactive and dynamic connection with their audience.

## **Results**

After coding the 24-hour visible Instagram stories and posts for credible and pseudo-expert influencers, we found no difference in the type of content posted. There was also no difference in the quality of the visual content published, with equally well-photographed illustrations appearing in both groups' entries. The content posted by dietitians was well-understood, professionally correct posts that did not contain advertising. Although the pseudo-expert posts contained slight inaccuracies, one-sided diets, and more frequent advertising or product sales, they have a larger follower base than the expert influencers most of them have seen significant follower growth and reach over the three months of our monitoring. The textual and visual content elements do not justify the greater reach and growing follower base of pseudo-experts compared to expert dietitians. We also looked at the frequency of content publication and there was a clear relationship with the number of followers. We utilized data from these three months, with the posted content displayed in Table 1. and Table 2. the corresponding follower growth. These visual representations provide a clear comparison of posting habits and their direct impact on follower engagement.

Table 1.: Frequency of publishing content and trends in the number of followers of expert dietitians on Instagram in the June-August period 2024.

Influencer	Month	Followers	Stories (Avg/Day)	Posts
z_o_z_o	June	12390	0.875	0
	July	12437	0.3	0
	August	12471	0.63	0
tudatosdieta	June	1039	0.4375	6
	July	1063	0.12	0
	August	1071	0.3	0
ronaybarbara	June	11163	0.375	8
	July	11130	0.35	13
	August	11127	0.67	15
petra_arndt	June	13915	3.375	2
	July	13907	3.92	0
	August	13883	1.41	0
_barbilla_	June	22944	2.25	4
	July	23163	2.77	5
	August	23186	1.89	3
diet_etikus	June	25405	5.5	11
	July	27294	5.15	7
	August	28831	4.15	8

Table 2.: Frequency of publishing content and trends in the number of followers of pseudo-expert nutritionists on Instagram in the June-August period 2024.

Influencer	Month	Followers	Stories (Avg/Day)	Posts
Odetternath	June	113369	10.81	44
	July	113881	8.42	40
	August	114278	9.26	32
Karvalics.eszti	June	23445	6.64	16
	July	23407	5.12	13
	August	23776	4.41	11
Kovacsziabiina	June	17701	2.06	2
	July	17697	1.42	1
	August	17673	1.26	2
Ujvaridori.etrend	June	73982	0.19	4
	July	73578	0.15	4
	August	73412	0.07	0
Jerkovics_bogi	June	43896	12.06	38
	July	45398	11.31	40
	August	46788	10.7	44
Regina_fitlife	June	9806	5.75	25
	July	9947	5.54	26
	August	10037	5.96	23
Greffbrigitta_	June	20440	3	11
	July	20568	2.08	9
	August	20640	2.93	12
Harom.harmad	June	24261	6.69	8
	July	24629	6.62	17
	August	25035	4.22	3

The registered dietitians exhibited lower posting frequency, which resulted in relatively stable follower numbers, while the pseudo-experts, who posted more frequently, experienced notable increases in follower counts. One pseudo-expert (Ujvaridori.etrend), who posted minimally, saw a decline in followers during the observed period. Conversely, the dietitian with the highest posting activity demonstrated significant follower growth (Jerkovics\_bogi and

Odetbarnath), indicating that follower engagement and growth may strongly correlate with the frequency of content publication. It became evident that the influencers who posted the most frequently, whether through stories or standard posts, experienced the greatest increase in follower count during the observation period. This correlation suggests a strong link between higher content output and follower growth, highlighting the importance of consistent engagement in audience retention and expansion on social media platforms (Kabata and Jaśkiewicz et al. 2022, Jindaratnaporn and Rittirong et al. 2023, Kirk and Shim et al. 2023).

Our research has limitations in terms of time, online platforms, and the number of influencers. Searching for and following content on lifestyle, healthy eating and nutrition, and weight loss may show seasonal interest if the users search this information for aesthetical and non-health reasons. We only analyzed posts and content on Instagram during these three months, and we did not track what content the same influencers posted on other platforms and how their follower numbers evolved on different platforms. We selected the 14 most popular influencers to analyze, so the posting strategies are limited to their activities.

Our results show that the delivery of information to the widest possible audience does not depend on the content, its correctness and accuracy, its lack of advertising, or its visual representation. The more content an influencer publishes, the more followers it can gain, and thus the wider the user community it can reach with its content, even if it is not credible or fake. If the pseudo-scientist shares a variety of one-sided diets that are harmful to health, which can be considered with normal health literacy as harmful content, he or she will not unfollow that content provider if the influencer does this regularly. But if the influencer takes a break from sharing content or decreases the frequency of posting, this can lead to a decrease in numbers of followers, even if the content of the less posts is completely professional and accurate. There is an order of magnitude difference in the number of followers of expert dietitians and pseudo-expert influencers, in the number and quality of reactions and feedback to posts, in favour of the pseudo-experts as we can see it in Table 1. and Table 2. If expert dietitians want to reach the number of followers of self-proclaimed nutritionists and reach a wider audience, including lower health literacy users, they need to increase the number of their appearances without losing professionalism.

## **Suggestions**

It is important to keep track of social media trends that promote healthy lifestyles, healthy eating, weight loss, and diets. As influencers with a large audience reach a wide range of users with their content, even if it is professionally inaccurate or misleading, it may be important for users with low health literacy to frequently post corrective content reflecting on this by expert dietitians. It can also be useful to know the basic social media marketing strategies based on: a well-defined target group, appropriate content indexing, engagement with the followers, utilizing Instagram Stories and Reels, and collaborating with other influencers., partnering with influencers can help reach a broader audience and gain exposure to new followers (Iheme 2019, Wilson 2020, Liu 2021).

## **Summary**

This research investigates why content created by self-proclaimed healthy eating experts (pseudo-experts) on social media reaches more users than content from qualified dietitians. The study focuses on Instagram and analyzes the online activity of 14 influencers over three months (June-August 2024). Our key findings are that there is no significant difference in the quality or type of content posted by dietitians and pseudo-experts. Pseudo-experts tend to have a larger follower base and experience faster follower growth than dietitians. The frequency of content publishing is a strong predictor of follower growth. Influencers who post more frequently see a greater increase in followers.

Taking into account the following limitations the study only analyzes data from Instagram for a limited timeframe and it focuses on a specific set of influencers and may not represent broader trends and seasonal variations in user interest are not considered we can conclude some points.

The reach of social media content on healthy eating is not determined by the accuracy or credibility of the information. Instead, the frequency of content publishing seems to be a key factor in attracting followers. This highlights the challenge for qualified dietitians to compete with pseudo-experts who may be strategically posting more content, even if it is not entirely accurate.

Taking all this into account, we have the following recommendations for dietitians to reach a wider audience and compete with pseudo-experts, they may need to increase their online presence and content creation frequency while maintaining professional standards. This is particularly important given

the information that Hungarians consider social media to be the primary and credible source of information, and that they also have a low average level of health literacy.

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