

Egyptian Consumers' Perception of Social Mediaas Health Information Source

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Abstract

The paper addresses the contemporary question of social media role as credible and trustworthy source of information. However, social media have provided healthcare organizations with new opportunities to communicate and engage with consumers. Nevertheless, healthcare providers should understand the key stages of consumers' decision-making and tailor the right message at the right time, in the right place to the right consumers' segment, which will to increase their chance of reaching and influencing consumers' behaviors and perceptions.

Keywords: social media, consumers' behavior, perceptions, trustworthiness, engagement

1. Introduction

Due to the free accessibility and interactive nature of social networks, consumers become more and more actively engaged in creating, modifying, sharing, discussing, and exchanging information (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Thus, social media phenomenon can now significantly affect a firm's reputation and even survival, since communication about brands happens, with or without permission of the firms (Kietzmann, et al., 2011).

Social media become a valuable channel of communication with consumers due to its real-time transmission of information and influence on consumers' intentions; around 81% of consumers are seeking advice through social sites before making a purchase decision (Zembik, 2014). Yet social media are likely to play a key role as information source if consumers are highly involved in decision-making and cannot tolerate the occurrence of negative consequences resulting from wrong choices (Bronner & De Hoog, 2014).

Building on that line of thinking, Naidu (2009) affirms that consumers' high-involvement is an inherent feature in healthcare. The concept of consumer involvement defined as the *"motivational variable reflecting the extent of personal relevance of the decision to the individual."* When someone is personally highly involved, this person will most likely be concerned with higher level of decisions' risk and the consequences of that decision, hence becomes motivated to gain more knowledge and is actively involved in searching, processing and assessing all available sources of information (Laing, et al., 2002; Grant, et al., 2007; Choubtarash, et al., 2013). Therefore, healthcare professionals nowadays recognize that informed and engaged consumers play a vital role in improving the quality of care.

According to Karaosmanoğlu (2012) most individuals, who are spending time online, are more engaged in online information search due to both rational and affective reasons. Similarly, health consumers are increasingly empowered to seek accurate and timely health-related information online, to communicate and share their experience with other users, and to connect online with physicians asking about specific health conditions and treatment options. Hence, social media networks have become popular for building online communities to share health information and experience (Bugshan, et al., 2014).

Consumers use social media in daily life for various reasons. The social media networks include sites targeting the general masses (i.e. Facebook) while others (i.e. LinkedIn) are focused on professional networks, as well as social bookmarking sites (i.e. del.icio.us), video sharing sites (i.e. YouTube), wikis and blogs (i.e. Wikipedia and WordPress), most recently micro-blogging (i.e. Twitter) joined social media networks (Tenopir, et al., 2013; Sashi, 2012; Kietzmann, et al., 2011).

According to a recent survey, 42% of consumers have used social media to access health-related reviews, 25% have shared their health experience, 20% have joined health-related online communities, or forums and nearly 30% have supported a health cause. Nevertheless, 45% of consumers proclaimed that information found via social media have affected their decision for seeking a second opinion, while more than 40% of consumers acknowledged that it has affected the way they coped with a chronic condition. However,

approximately 90% of consumers would engage in health activities via social media but 61% are likely to trust information posted by healthcare service providers (PwC, 2012).

The expectation is that when consumers have the right information they will request high quality services and make comprehensive healthcare choices. Not surprisingly, research suggests consumers' fear of choosing more costly or inappropriate treatments, lack of relevant information at the right time and place, chronic conditions diagnosis, and the limited accessibility to physicians among many other constraints increase consumers' need to access diverse information sources. Thus, motivates healthcare consumer to answer the question "*what is good for me*" instead of "*what is good in general*," striving to make more informed and personalized decisions (AcademyHealth, 2007).

Social media have created engagement opportunities at each stage of the consumer decision process. Consumer engagement is activated by the social media networks' interactive aspects, yet according to Sashi (2012) achieving engagement with consumers is much more about building and adding value to long-term relationships through the different stages of consumer engagement cycle. Additionally, classifies consumers' into four levels of engagement. "*Transactional*" with minimal personal relationships and no anticipation for future interactions; "*Delighted*" with increased level of satisfaction and affective commitment that relates positively to word-of-mouth communication. "*Loyal*" derived by calculative commitment that is dependent on trust relationships; finally, "*Fans*" fully engaged consumers who are delighted and loyal consumers with a relationship characterized by enduring trust and commitment.

Therefore, using the appropriate mix of interactive social media platforms can change how firms and consumers connect, interact, and influence each other. It is acknowledged that social media networking sites are acting as real-time transmitters to positive or negative electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and have a strong influence on the cognitive and affective stages of consumers' decision-making (De Valck, et al., 2009; Brandtzaeg, 2012; Sashi, 2012; Gatautis & Kazakevičiūtė, 2012; Hutter, et al., 2013; Vinerean, et al., 2013; Ioană & Stoica, 2014).

The growing body of research in social media and consumers' behavior makes it imperative to conduct an exploratory study to start examining the state-of-the-art literature to explain the theoretical background of the paper that discusses the social media types and aspects; the classification of social media consumers' and the decision making journey. Then attempt to conduct a descriptive analysis in order to understand social media consumers in Egypt throughout investigating their online activities, frequency of usage, and their preferences of social media networking sites. Consequently classifies online users using a typology that explains how these users are interacting over social media networking sites and reasons for searching health-related information with specific focus on their perception of social media content trustworthiness as source of health information.

2. Theoretical Background of the Research

Various forms of social media have grown in popularity; authors defined social media as the

innovative and interactive online platforms that enhance communication and collaboration between individuals and communities through co-creating, sharing, discussing, and modifying consumers-generated content(Kietzmann, et al., 2012).

Social media is a broad concept used for different online platforms, which link millions of users from all over the world. Although social media networks' sites appear to be similar and share common characteristics that include its unlimited reach to users worldwide, ease of use, accessibility, availability of free content, ability to connect and interact with other users in real-time which makes it more influential than traditional media. Nevertheless, all of these online formats used to communicate are quite different in terms of their purpose, functionality and the type of users they attract (Cachia, 2008).

Cavazza (2014) classified social media according to their usage that include publishing with blogging platforms (e.g. Blogger) and wikis (e.g. Wikia); sharing with videos, music, and photos platforms (e.g. Flickr, Dailymotion, SoundCI); discussing with desktop-based platforms (Skype) and mobile apps (WhatsApp, Messenger); networking with BtoC social networks (Tagged) and BtoB social networks (LinkedIn). However, consumers perceive social media networks differently due to the variations in their perception of social media content and activities' utility, dissimilar usage patterns, as well as variations in users' demographic characteristics(Chan-Olmsted, et al., 2013).

Social media havea tremendous impact on consumers' behavior with respect to information acquisition and consumers' intentions, a Deloitte study discovered that 98% of US consumers find online reviews generated by other users trustworthy and 80% asserted that their buying intentions was affected by these reviews(Ioanăs & Stoica, 2014).Furthermore, Kietzmann, et al. (2011) found that the consumer behavior on the internet has changed from simply reading and watching content to taking more active role in creating, modifying, sharing and discussing various content. They introduced the honeycomb framework to help better understand social media by examining the seven building blocks namely: identity, presence, reputation, relationships, Conversations, Groups, and Sharing. Kietzmann, et al. (2012) claim that social media activities are defined by the extent to which they focus on some or all of these blocks.

Cavazza (2014) who created the social media landscape diagram back in 2008claims today that there is no social media anymore, only one global social web with a major shift towards social mobile apps connected with infinite number of online services. Nevertheless, he asserts that the new wave of mobile apps (e.g. WhatsApp, SnapChat, Tango, WeChat, Line, etc.) managed to gather millions of users. In his 2014 diagram (see figure 1), pinpointed that the three usual platforms Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ at the center of the diagram are still undoubtedly the key players with their wide range of functionality to publish, share, discuss and network.

Meanwhile, organizations have to acknowledge that they can no longer ignore social media as it plays a major role in influencing consumers' behavior. Nowadays people are relying more and more on social media to seek information and recommendations from other users, to ask questions and share their experience online.

Organizations need to identify which social media platforms to use based on consumers' online activities' orientation, this enables an in depth insight into ways of exploiting different formats of social media networks to tailor "same message" but, in different ways to engage and build long-term relationships with different consumer segments depending on their online communication patterns' preferences (Taprial & Kanwar, 2012). Many attempts to analyze and identify different types of consumer behavior in social media are gaining attention (Gatautis & Kazakevičiūtė, 2012).

Beninger, et al., (2014) described consumers' engagement with online content by defining three distinct but overlapping roles: "Creators" who contribute with their own original content; "Observers" who only read and view content on social media; and "Sharers" who like to share the information with other users by commenting or tagging content.



Figure 1. Social Media Landscape 2014

Similarly, Burke, et al., (2011) argue that the differences between consumers in the utilization of social media influence the effects it has on them. Therefore, classify consumers' behavior in social media into three types namely "Directed Communication" with social network that consists of one-to-one interactions relationships, "Passive Consumption" when one only reads social media content, and "Broadcasting or Indirect Communication" when one writes and shares content for others consumption.

On the other hand, Li & Bernoff (2011) classify online social behaviors by the degree of participation that different groups have in a social network, they introduced the social technographics ladder including "Creators" those who create original content, "Critics" those who respond to content from others, "Collectors" those who sort the content created others into ranked categories, "Joiners" those who connect in social networks. "Spectators"

those who consume what the rest produce and "*Inactive*" those who neither create nor consume social content.

It is worth noting that regular and extended social media visits imply a high level of exposure to information; thus, expected that the frequency and duration of these visits positively relate to social media influence on consumers' decisions (De Valck, et al., 2009). Years ago, marketing scholars have pinpointed the importance to reach consumers at the "touch point" or the so-called ideal moment to influence their decisions. Yet, developing knowledge of how consumers make decisions is the first step to tailor effective messages at a specific point.

Court, et al., (2009) pinpointed that there is a profound change in the way consumers; research or buy their products/services due to the digital revolution; thus developed the "*consumer decision journey*" approach.

The argument is that first, in the initial consideration phase, consumers form impressions from touch points such as advertisements, reports, conversations with family members or friends, perceptions, personal or peer experience, etc. Second, consumers are empowered to gather information helpful to them in the active evaluation phase that is driven by online reviews, word of mouth, and recommendations. Finally, when consumers reach a decision and after purchasing, in the post-purchase experience phase they build expectations based on their gained experience to repeat purchase, hence become not only loyal but also active loyalists who recommend to others.

Therefore, social media form a unique component of the consumer decision journey, it is the only form of marketing that can touch consumers at each stage; without knowing how social media affects consumer behavior, firms run the risk of wasting time and efforts on wrong consumers' targets and ineffective strategies (Muñoz & Strotmeyer, 2010). Especially that social media offers a medium for communicating information with different formats quickly to targeted consumers who are anonymous in the social media networking sites (McNab, 2009; Hussain & Subramoniam, 2013).

Social media have become a significant source of online health information. Health consumers access social media networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, blogs, forums, etc. at different stages of their health decision journey. However, healthcare providers have serious concerns of the potential for harm that can come from inaccurate or misleading medical information. Thus, many health organizations and professionals recognized the importance of their social media presence to disseminate timely, accessible, and credible health information (Heldman, et al., 2013). As well as, adopting strategies moving beyond traditional communication push approach to pull approach.

Based on the preceding discussion of literature review, it is clear that knowing the importance of social media in healthcare is completely different from understanding how different groups of consumers interact with social media. Hence, it is crucial to know how to deliver the right message to the right consumer through appropriate social media networks to leverage consumers' engagement.

In the context of this study, the researcher attempts to explore social media impact on

consumers' health-related decisions in the Egyptian environment. By identifying the preferred social media used to seek health-related information, the preferred online activities and usage pattern, the motivation to find healthcare information, the level of social media trustworthiness in order to define the appropriate social media platforms that match different online consumers' types, and determine the extent of social media influence on health-related choices.

3. Descriptive Analysis and Discussion

All participants are residents in Egypt and regular users of social media; they were invited to take an online survey designed using SurveyMonkey through posting a link in Facebook and LinkedIn pages. A total number of 450 responses were collected and analyzed. The respondents consist of 90% female, participants aged from 25 to 34 who ranked 42% higher in responses than other age categories, followed by 32% responses of participants aged from 35 to 44. In addition, 91% of participants are using social media on a daily basis with 66% of respondents using social media more than once a day (see figure 2).

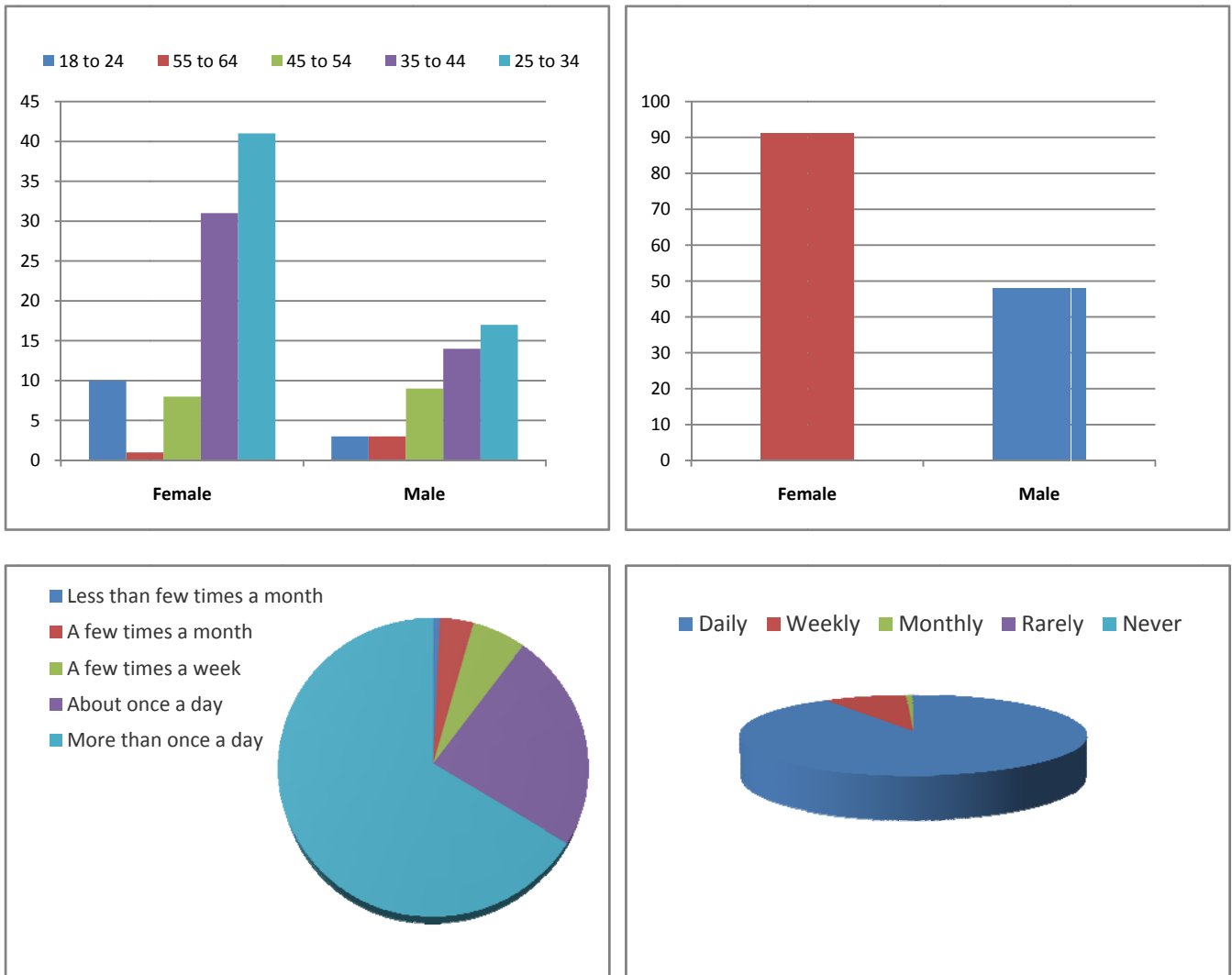


Figure 2. Respondents' Age, Gender, Frequency of Using Social Media

When the respondents were asked what activities they are usually doing online and how often, the responses received indicate that 96% are using social networks, 63% are reading blogs, articles and reviews, 59% are watching videos, 41% are sharing contents and 32% are posting comments, reviews and ratings. Furthermore, 87% of respondents affirm that they do these activities on a daily basis (see figure 3).

In addition, when respondents were asked to specify the list of social media sites they are frequently using, 94% of them have pointed out that they use Facebook, 78% YouTube, 52% Wikipedia, 49% LinkedIn, 36% Twitter and 30% Google (see figure 4). Afterwards, another question asked participants to identify only one social media preference; 66% of respondents selected Facebook, 11% selected YouTube, 8% selected Google and the remaining social media gathered 15% of responses.

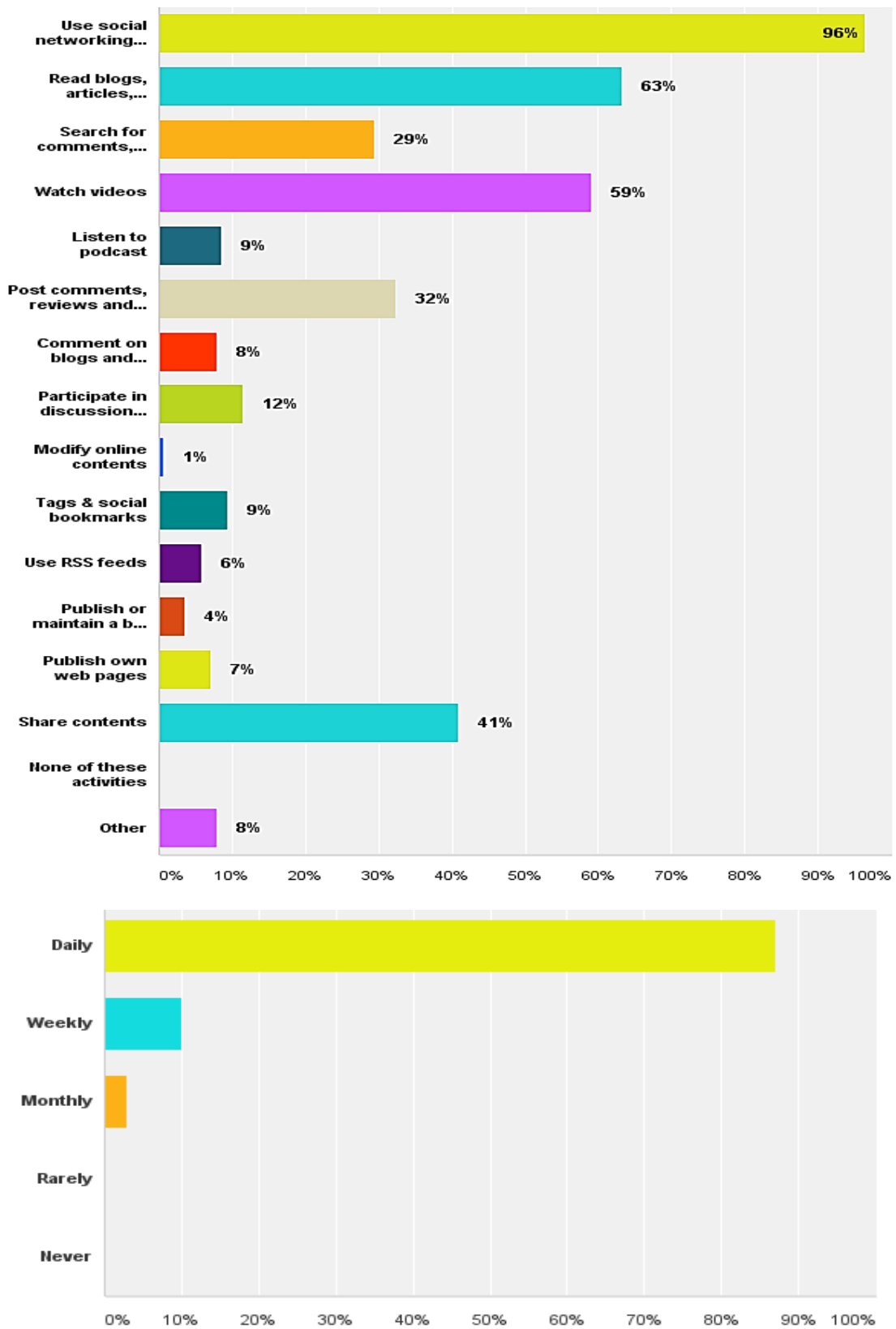


Figure 3. Respondents' Online Activities and Frequency

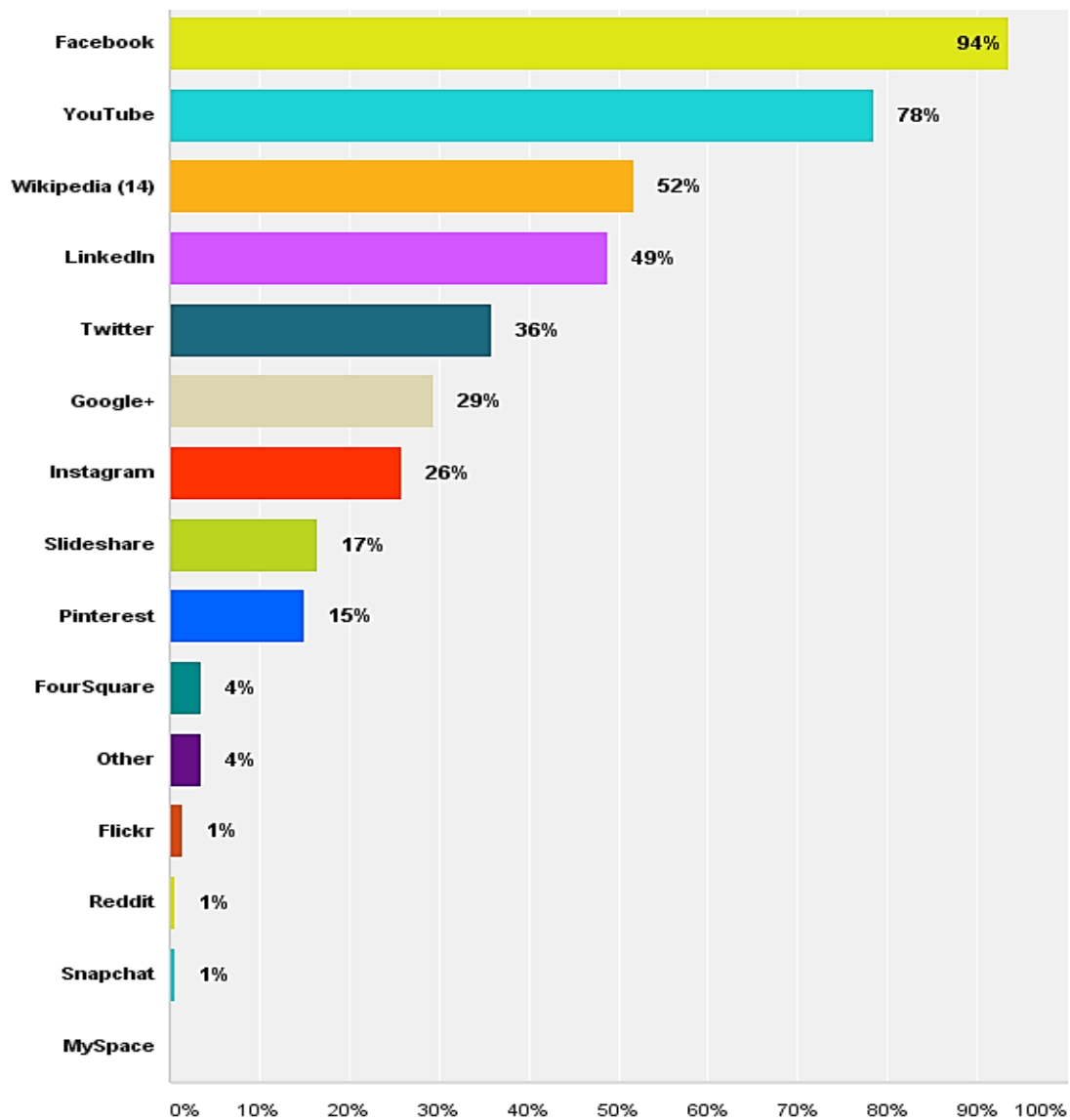


Figure 4. Social Media Frequently Used by Respondents

However, it is important to understand why participants are constantly using social media, thus another question asked them to state all reasons that make them use social media. 86% of respondents say they want to keep in touch with friends and family, 66% search information and read reviews, 57% for entertainment, 51% share contents, 48% make professional and business contacts, 45% join groups and communities, 37% for research and collaboration and 27% for discussions (see figure 5).

Furthermore, when asking them if they think social media can be source of health-related information, 73% of respondents confirmed that they could use it as source of health information. Additionally, when asked about their preferred source of health information, respondents' answers varied from 74% preferring online, 66% preferring healthcare providers, 35% asking their friends and family, 29% using printed publications and 13% using TV (see figure 6).

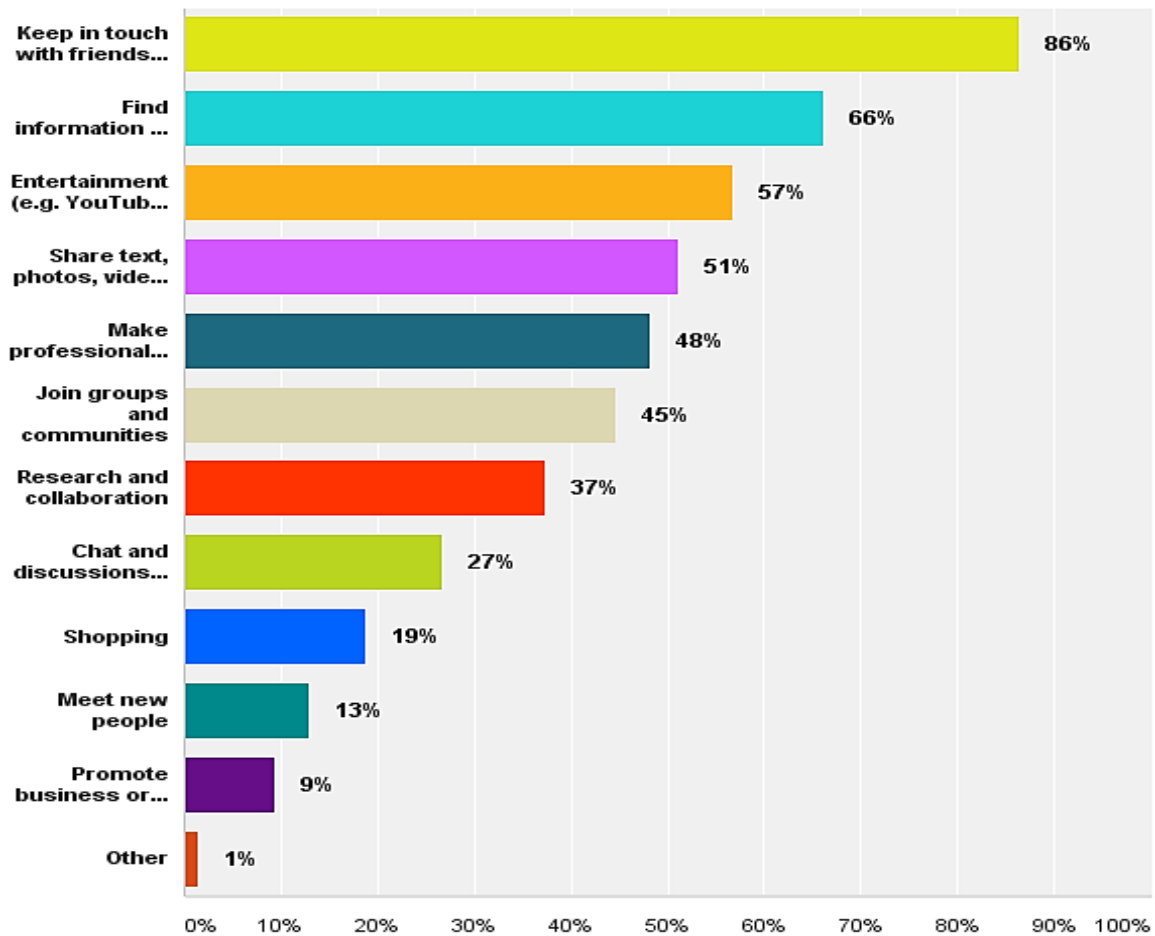


Figure 5. Respondents' Reasons to Use Social Media

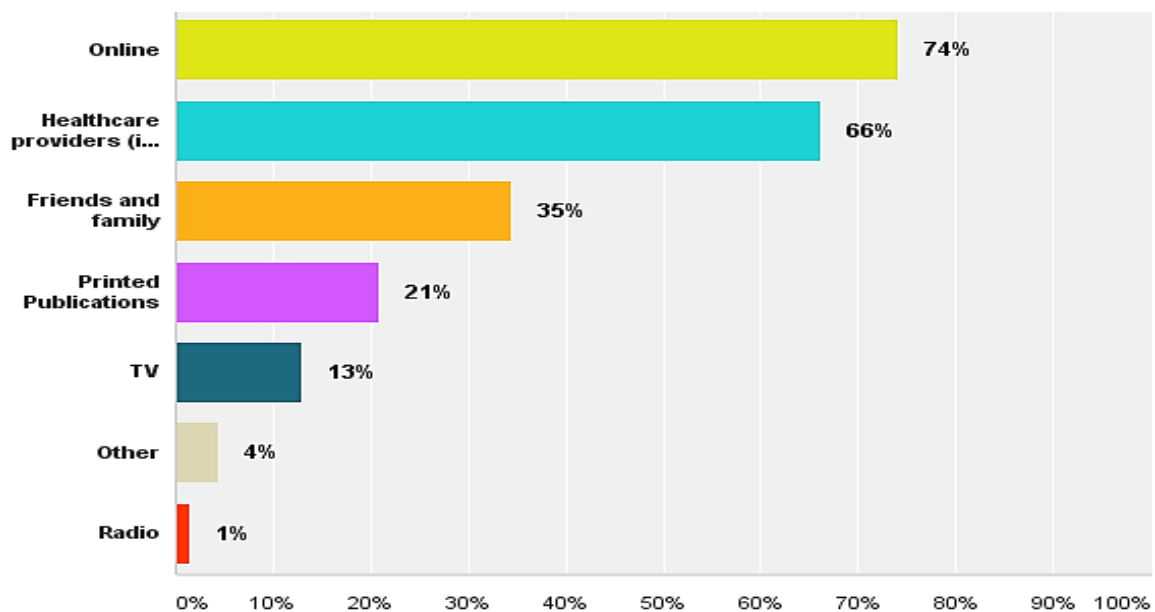


Figure 6. Respondents' Reasons to Use Social Media

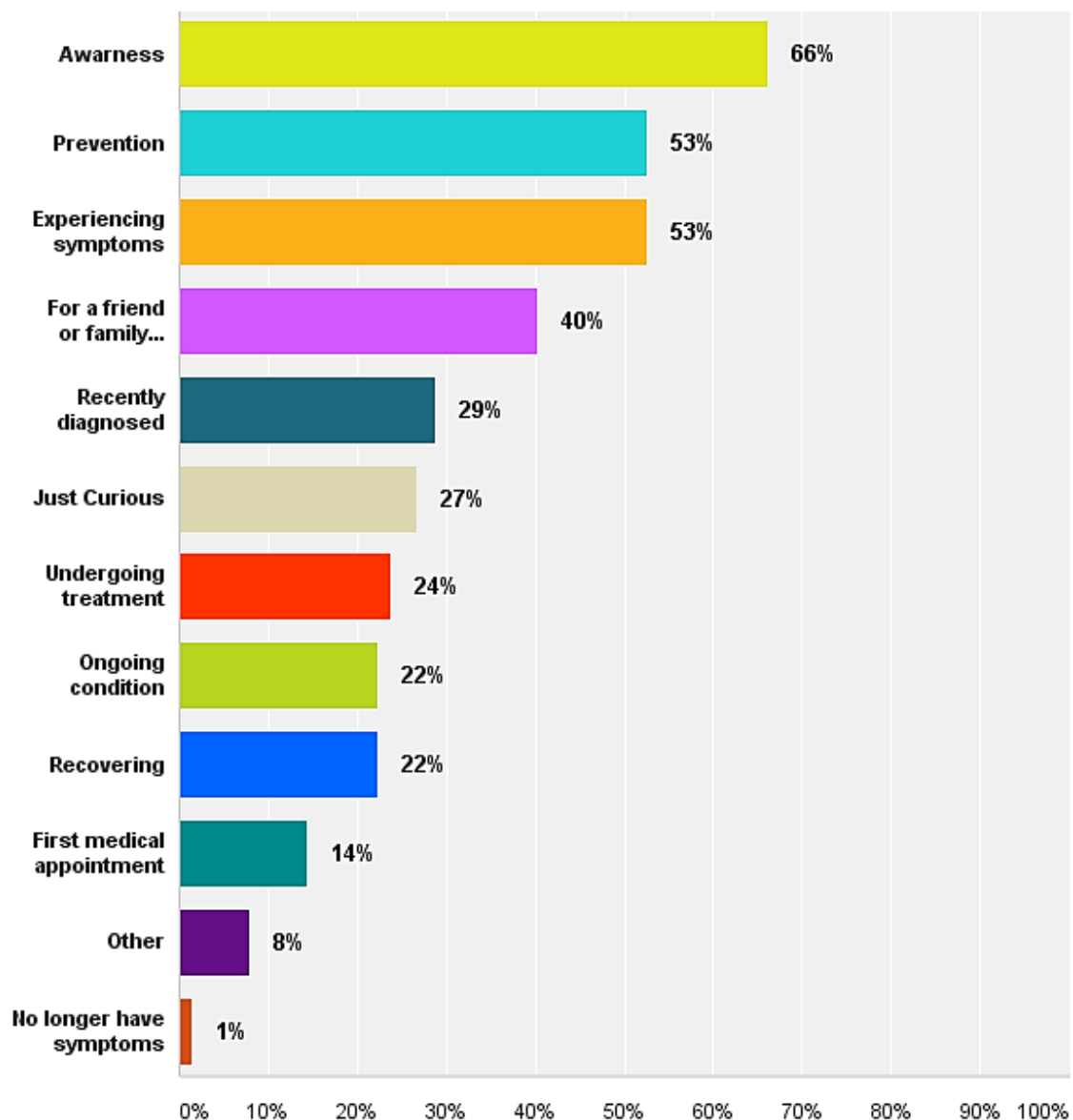


Figure 7. Respondents' Reasons to Search Health Information

In summary, it was found that 91% are using social media on a daily basis, participants were divided into 42% from the age 25 to 34 and 32% from the age 35 to 44 with 87% who are daily involved in variety of online activities and 66% who are using social media more than once a day to search information. Yet, 54% of respondents state that they have made health-related decisions based on information found on social media.

Respondents point out that they are mainly searching general health and wellness information, symptoms, medications and side effects and seeking information about certain health condition, reading articles and blogs. But when asked which social media will be likely best to find health information, 50% of responses indicate Wikipedia, 44% YouTube, 41% Facebook, 32% Google and 22% LinkedIn (see figure 8).

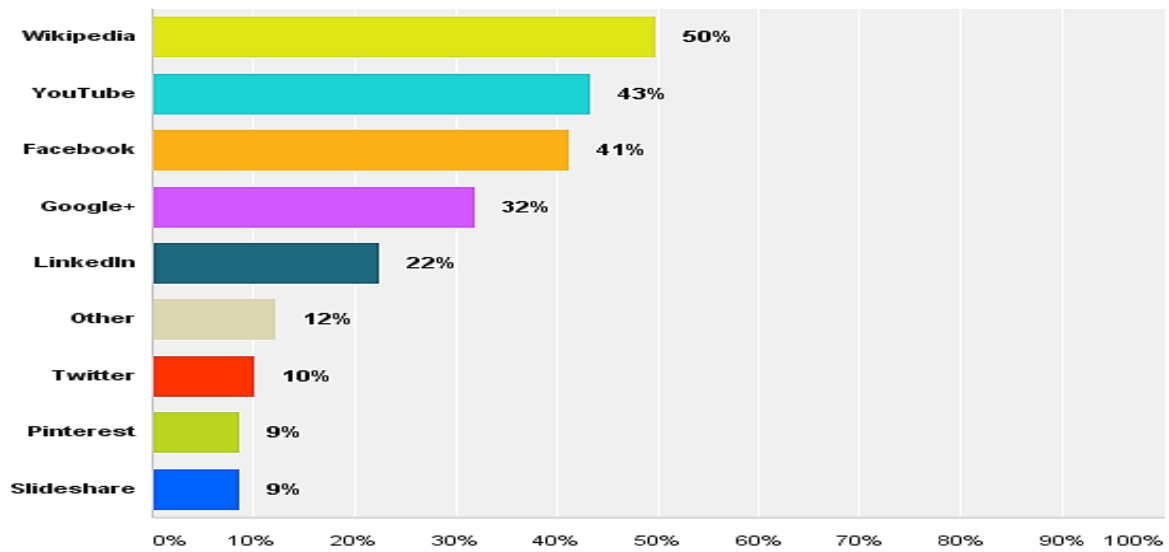


Figure 8. Respondents' Used to Find Health Information

Based on the participants' online behavior identified earlier, the researcher finds it crucial to classify respondents using the social technographics ladder to help identify the existing profile of respondents and understand how they are using social media to know the best way to connect and interact with them. The survey findings indicate high level of joiners actively participating in social networks, spectators that are consuming social media contents and critics who are posting comments and sharing experience on daily basis as illustrated in figure 9. Thus, the respondents' typology consists of three main social media consumers' types "Joiners, Spectators, and Critics."

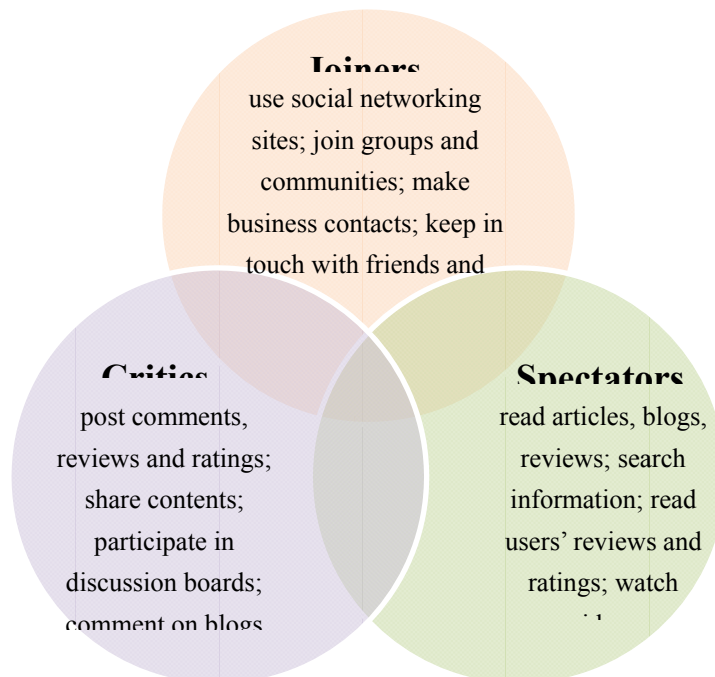


Figure 9. Respondents' Typology Based upon their Online Activities' Preferences

Moturu & Liu (2011) stress that the creation of a massive amount of user-generated content due to the increasing use of social media, makes it difficult to guarantee the trustworthiness of the content. Since social media platforms allows users to create, share, and modify online content thus the trustworthiness of content become crucial.

Therefore, was considered important in this study to ask the participants to rank a list of statements that represent their perception of online health information trustworthiness by respectively assigning level of importance for each statement using 5 points Likert scale that consists of 1= not important, 2= somewhat important, 3= important, 4= very important and 5= extremely important.

Responses indicate that the important factors that affect their perception of health information trustworthiness include, the existence of scientific research and health communities; sponsorship of social media sites by health professionals; content written and updated by health professionals; availability of multimedia content, promotion of health causes, accessibility to specialists to get advice, and trust in privacy protection (see table 1). Which supports (Moturu & Liu, 2011) argument that although online health information can be beneficial for patient education, health promotion and preventive care but a user seeks trustworthy content to avoid inaccurate information, and prevent harm.

Table 1. Perceived Health Information Trustworthiness

Dimensions of Trustworthiness	Mean
Contains academic articles and scientific research	3.72
Sponsored and updated by health professionals	3.37
Healthcare communities	3.16
Groups and forums of online users	2.51
Promoting health causes and awareness	3.29
Recommended by health professionals	3.10
Recommended by friends and family members	2.49
I have seen ads and announcements or heard about it	2.10
I can connect with health experts to discuss and get advice	3.09
I can communicate with online users to chat and get support	2.35
Articles, blogs, reviews, etc. written by specialized healthcare professionals	3.44
Contains (videos, podcasts, presentations, etc.) of diverse health topics	3.20
Blogs, reviews and comments are written by online users	2.44
Number of users visiting, downloading and sharing contents	2.38
Number of followers, likes, tweets, tags and citations	2.26
I can disclose the identity of users (designation, profession, gender, age, etc.)	2.43
I trust the privacy of my personal information is protected	3.66

These results suggest that users' perception of the identity and reputation of information providers are important indicators for the trustworthiness of information; assuming that the

more control a consumer perceives over the source of information and the content displayed in social media the more likely they will trust the content. Thus, demonstrate that social media is becoming a support tool for building strong customers' relationships throughout developing the business identity and reputation capabilities in order to increase users' trust into social media networking sites' online content that will consequently influence online social interactions.

4. Conclusion

It is necessary to understand the importance of social media as new source of information that has changed the traditional way of communication and that has a tremendous impact on consumers' perceptions and behaviors. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize consumers' experience on each of the social media platforms, and strive to know how consumers search and communicate information to maximize their engagement with a variety of online activities.

To make effective use of social media networking sites, healthcare providers have to segment their online users, to study their profiles and their preferred social media usage patterns to know in which social network they hang out and set the appropriate social strategy for each segment. In addition, it is vital to recognize exactly what online consumers like and don't like about each social network they are using to understand what drives their behaviors, thus elicit the appropriate social media platforms that will enable healthcare providers to leverage the management of their online identity and reputation that will eventually affect the consumers' perception of content trustworthiness.

In this study we have identified three social media consumers' types Joiners who actively participate and join social networks, Critics who post comments and share their experience on daily basis, and Spectators who consume social media contents and log into social media sites every day but rarely interact online. These specific types of consumers are invisible and it is hard to identify their interests, but their social media affect their online and offline behaviors.

Despite the wide amount of information available online, consumers finds it difficult to differentiate trustworthy from misleading information. By examining how consumers are empowered to gather health-related information helpful to them from social media platforms in the active evaluation phase of their decision-making journey, healthcare providers can have in depth insights into ways of exploiting different formats of social media networks to tailor "personalized messages" to different consumer segments depending on their online communication preference patterns.

As a result, healthcare providers will be able to reach their online consumers with high quality health information that is up-to-date, accurate, available, accessible, and customized for their needs. As well as providing real-time support and services to their consumers by facilitating interactions, searching and sharing health-related information to improve loyalty, trust, and confidence in healthcare providers' information.

5. Limitations and Future Research

The purpose of this paper is to provide significant insight into social media phenomenon, thus the research conducted is exploratory in nature seeking to discover the issues that concern researchers while studying social media by reviewing the literature with specific focus on the factors affecting consumer behavior and purchase choices.

Also, the fact that various social media platforms nowadays are considered the largest pool of data in the world and source of vast amount of information that affect the consumer decision-making. In the context of the Egyptian environment in general and the healthcare industry specifically, the integration of social media into business is still at its preliminary stage, thus the main goal was to provide a better understanding of the situation and discover new ideas thus, lay initial groundwork for future research.

Yet, current thoughts indicate that although social media is the contemporary research topics in many disciplines but still lots of research questions are not investigated, similarly in this paper although the researcher attempts to unfold the importance of social media wave and the necessity to rethink the integration of social media strategies into healthcare business to achieve a competitive advantage. Nevertheless, she believes that the paper has some limitation because it used only descriptive analysis to describe the findings with respect to the concepts highlighted in the paper.

Thus suggests conducting a quantitative research to generate holistic data sets to be able to identify potential influencers across social media platforms, study the different formats of social media aspects as new health-related communication tool and its impact on consumers' trust and health awareness, changes in consumers' health attitudes, behaviors and its relationship with health outcomes improvements.

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