



Influence of information published on Instagram about exclusive breastfeeding on first-time mothers in the Colombian Breastfeeding League

Influencia de la información publicada en Instagram sobre lactancia materna exclusiva en madres primerizas de la Liga de Leche de Colombia

Influência da informação publicada no *Instagram* sobre aleitamento materno exclusivo em mães de primeira viagem na liga de leite de Colômbia



ABSTRACT

Introduction: Information posted on *Instagram* about exclusive breastfeeding has influenced the knowledge and practices of first-time mothers. **Objective:** To analyze the influence of exclusive breastfeeding information published on *Instagram* on first-time mothers in the city of Pamplona, Colombia. **Materials and methods:** A mixed-methods study was conducted. In the quantitative phase, a Likert-scale survey was applied to 57 first-time mothers who were members of the Liga de la Leche Colombia, in order to characterize the population and establish inclusion criteria. In the qualitative phase, a focus group was conducted with 8 of these mothers, selected according to the established criteria, to explore in depth their perceptions and experiences regarding exclusive breastfeeding information published on *Instagram*. Qualitative data were analyzed using Atlas.ti7 software and grounded theory methodology with open, axial, and selective coding. **Results:** Thirty-four codes were identified, highlighting the benefits of breastfeeding, strategies for verifying information on *Instagram*, and changes in exclusive breastfeeding practices after consulting this social network. **Conclusion:** *Instagram* has become a relevant source of information for first-time mothers, significantly influencing their exclusive breastfeeding practices.

Keywords: Breastfeeding; mother; social impact; social networks. (Source: DeCS, Bireme).

Sustainable development goals: Health and Wellbeing. (Source: SDG, WHO).

RESUMEN

Introducción: La información publicada en *Instagram* sobre lactancia materna exclusiva ha generado cambios en los conocimientos y en la práctica de la lactancia por parte de madres primerizas. **Objetivo:** Analizar la influencia de la información publicada en *Instagram* sobre lactancia materna exclusiva en madres primerizas de la Liga de Leche de Colombia. **Materiales y métodos:** Estudio de enfoque mixto. En la fase cuantitativa, se aplicó una encuesta con escala tipo Likert a 57 madres primerizas pertenecientes a la Liga de la Leche de Colombia, con el fin de caracterizar la población y establecer criterios de inclusión. En la fase cualitativa, se desarrolló un grupo focal con 8 de estas madres, para profundizar en las percepciones y experiencias relacionadas con la información sobre lactancia materna exclusiva publicada en *Instagram*. Para el análisis se empleó el software Atlas.ti7, con la metodología de teoría fundamentada con codificación abierta, axial y selectiva. **Resultados:** Se identificaron 34 códigos que evidencian beneficios de la lactancia materna, estrategias de verificación de información en *Instagram* y cambios en la práctica de lactancia materna exclusiva tras consultar esta red social. **Conclusión:** *Instagram* se ha consolidado como una fuente relevante de información para madres primerizas, influyendo significativamente en su práctica de lactancia materna exclusiva.

Palabras clave: Lactancia materna; madre; impacto social; redes sociales. (Fuente: DeCS, Bireme).

Objetivos de desarrollo sostenible: Salud y Bienestar. (Fuente: ODS, OMS).

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RESUMO

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Introdução: As informações publicadas no *Instagram* sobre aleitamento materno exclusivo têm influenciado o conhecimento e as práticas das mães primíparas. **Objetivo:** Analisar a influência das informações sobre aleitamento materno exclusivo publicadas no *Instagram* em mães primíparas da cidade de Pamplona, Colômbia. **Materiais e métodos:** Foi realizado um estudo de abordagem mista. Na fase quantitativa, aplicou-se um questionário em escala tipo Likert a 57 mães primíparas integrantes da Liga de La Leche da Colômbia, com o objetivo de caracterizar a população e estabelecer critérios de inclusão. Na fase qualitativa, realizou-se um grupo focal com 8 dessas mães, selecionadas conforme os critérios estabelecidos, para aprofundar percepções e experiências sobre a informação disponível no *Instagram* acerca do aleitamento materno exclusivo. Os dados qualitativos foram analisados com o software Atlas.ti7, utilizando a metodologia da teoria fundamentada, com codificação aberta, axial e seletiva. **Resultados:** Foram identificados 34 códigos, destacando-se os benefícios do aleitamento materno, as estratégias para verificação das informações no *Instagram* e as mudanças observadas nas práticas de aleitamento materno exclusivo após consultar esta rede social. **Conclusão:** O *Instagram* consolidou-se como uma fonte relevante de informação para mães primíparas, influenciando de forma significativa suas práticas de aleitamento materno exclusivo.

Palavras chave: Aleitamento materno; mãe; influência social; redes sociais. (Fonte: DeCS, Bireme).

Metas de desenvolvimento sustentável: Saúde e bem-estar; educação de qualidade; igualdade de gênero; redução das desigualdades; paz, justiça e instituições eficazes. (Fonte: MDS, OMS).

INTRODUCTION

Social media is a direct, fast, and effective communication channel that allows you to reach the largest community of users on the Internet^(1,2). An increasing number of people prefer to use social media to resolve doubts, ask for guidance, or find out about topics of interest, including health and nutrition issues. Platforms such as Instagram have taken on a central role in this process, as they facilitate the publication and broadcasting of images and videos with content that can influence users' decision making⁽³⁾. However, the ease with which information can be generated and shared means that it does not always originate from scientific sources, which increases the risk of misinformation⁽⁴⁾.

Instagram offers a constant stream of posts tailored to user preferences, allowing topics such as exclusive breastfeeding to achieve high visibility. In this context, so-called "influencers"—people with the ability to generate interaction and change perceptions—can have a significant impact on how new mothers conceive of and practice breastfeeding⁽⁵⁾.

In the area of child health, optimal feeding and nutrition during the first years of life are particularly important, as they reduce morbidity and mortality, decrease the risk of noncommunicable diseases, and promote better human development^(6,7). The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) recommend initiating breastfeeding within the first hour of life, maintaining it exclusively for the first six months, and continuing it along with adequate complementary feeding until two years of age or beyond^(7,8).

Various factors can influence the initiation and maintenance of exclusive breastfeeding (EBF), such as prior knowledge, absence of illness during pregnancy, mother-child bonding, non-use of bottles or pacifiers, and absence of nipple problems^(9,10). In the digital age, many mothers turn to social media to resolve doubts and seek advice, which has changed the role of health professionals, who now share the stage with content creators who may lack technical training^(3,11).

A group of first-time mothers who are members of Colombian Breastfeeding League actively participate

on Instagram to search for, share, and validate information about exclusive breastfeeding. This organization, recognized for its work in promoting breastfeeding, provides support and counseling from professionals and volunteer advisors, giving its members a prior knowledge base that may influence how they interpret and apply information obtained from social media. This context also explains the participants' use of technical terms such as "immune system", "nutritional contribution", and "scientific databases".

This study aims to analyze the influence of information published on Instagram about exclusive breastfeeding on new mothers, combining a quantitative component to characterize the population and a qualitative component to delve deeper into their perceptions, information verification strategies, and changes in breastfeeding practices. The findings will provide insight into how social and media factors interact in the adoption of maternal and child health practices and will contribute to strengthening evidence-based health communication strategies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Type of study

A mixed-method study was carried out, consisting of a descriptive quantitative cross-sectional component and a qualitative component with grounded theory analysis.

The sample consisted of 57 first-time mothers who belong to the Colombian Breastfeeding League, selected through non-probabilistic purposive sampling.

The requirements to participate were to be a first-time mother, having an active account on Instagram and having searched for information on exclusive breastfeeding on this platform.

Reasons for exclusion included having previous breastfeeding experience with other children, lack of constant access to the Internet or social media, health problems that prevented exclusive breastfeeding (such as low milk production or inappropriate medical treatment), or failure to provide informed consent to participate in the study.

Quantitative phase

A survey with a specific structure was created and conducted, including questions on a Likert scale, aimed at describing the participants and initially investigating their exposure to and opinion of the information on exclusive breastfeeding disseminated on Instagram.

The questionnaire consists of three main sections:

- Sociodemographic data, which included information on age, level of education and occupation.
- Use of Instagram, which asked questions about frequency of use, types of content viewed, and degree of interaction with breastfeeding-related posts.
- Perception and influence of the information, which included questions to assess usefulness, reliability, perceived impact on breastfeeding practices, and strategies for verifying the information received.

Every question was rated on a scale of five points (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree).

Qualitative phase

This methodology allowed for a qualitative exploration of the patterns observed in the survey, enriching the results with opinions, experiences, and methods of verifying information. The meeting was held virtually via the Google Meet platform, lasted two and a half hours, and was divided into phases of convening, presentation, induction, guided discussion, and conclusion. The discussion guide was designed based on the study objectives and was led by a principal investigator.

This methodology allowed for a qualitative exploration of the patterns observed in the survey, enriching the results with opinions, experiences, and methods of verifying information. The meeting was held virtually via the Google Meet platform, lasted two and a half hours, and was divided into phases of convening, presentation, induction, guided discussion, and conclusion. The discussion guide was designed based on the study objectives and was led by a principal investigator.

Qualitative data analysis

The focus group discussions were analyzed using Atlas.ti version 7.5.2 software, following the grounded theory methodology⁽¹²⁾, through open, axial, and selective coding. This procedure allowed us to identify concepts, group them into categories and subcategories, and generate more comprehensive explanations of the influence of information published on Instagram on the practice of exclusive breastfeeding.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Pamplona. All participants signed an informed consent form, authorizing the use of the data for research purposes only.

RESULTS

Quantitative component

The Likert scale survey applied to the 57 first-time mothers who are members of the Colombian Breastfeeding League allowed us to characterize the population and establish inclusion criteria for the qualitative phase. The results of this phase not only allowed us to characterize the population, but also to define the profiles of mothers selected for the qualitative phase, taking into account their level of participation on Instagram and the degree of confidence reported regarding information on exclusive breastfeeding.

In terms of sociodemographic characteristics, the average age of the participants was 28.4 years (SD \pm 4.2), ranging from 20 to 38 years. Most had technical or university education (78.9%), while 21.1% had secondary education.

Regarding Instagram use, 94% indicated that they use this social network daily, and 98% said they search for information related to exclusive breastfeeding on the platform. Among them, 56% stated that they directly apply the advice or techniques observed on Instagram posts to their practice, while 44% said they first verify the information with other sources, such as health professionals or scientific databases.

Analysis of the Likert scale responses showed that the highest level of agreement was found in items related to the perceived benefits of breastfeeding (95% agreed or strongly agreed), followed by the usefulness of Instagram as a source of information (88%). The lowest scores were observed in items related to complete trust in social media information (62% agree or strongly agree), which shows that, although participants value the content, they maintain a certain level of prior verification before applying it.

Qualitative component

Analysis of the focus group discussions identified three main categories that explain the influence of information posted on Instagram about exclusive breastfeeding:

Benefits of breastfeeding

Participants highlighted advantages related to the baby's health and development, strengthening of the immune system, nutritional contribution, and benefits for the mother, such as reducing the risk of breast and ovarian cancer. In addition, they emphasized the strengthening of the emotional bond between mother and child, considered an essential aspect of the breastfeeding experience (Figure 1).

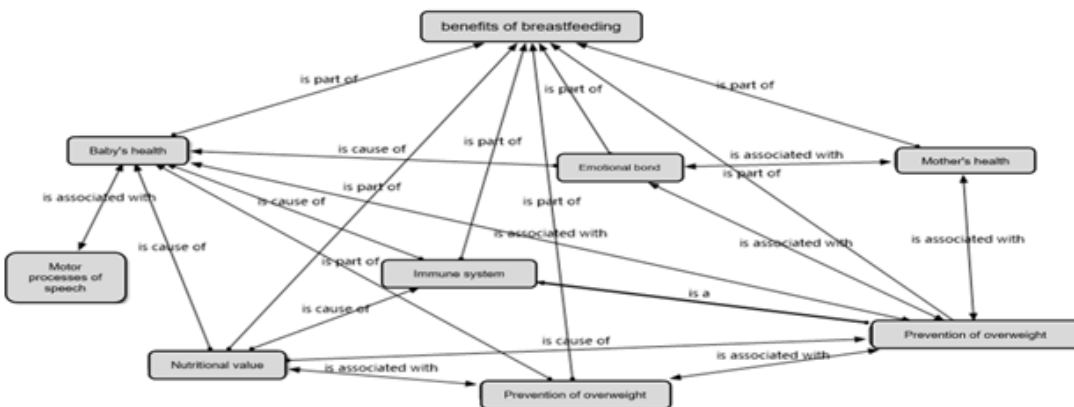


Figure 1. Benefits of breastfeeding

Information verification strategies

Although Instagram was recognized as a central source of consultation, mothers applied verification mechanisms before putting the information they received into practice. These included reviewing the profile of the content creator (pediatricians, lactation consultants, or certified health professionals), consulting additional sources such as scientific databases, and checking with other professionals or specialized profiles. Trust in the content depended, to a large extent, on the credibility of the source (Figure 2).

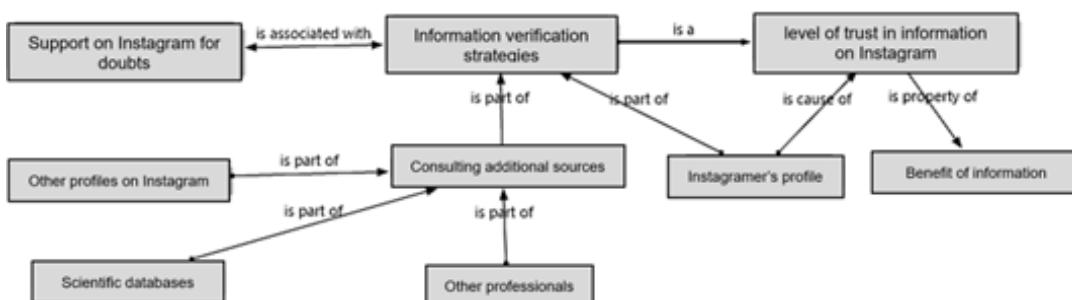
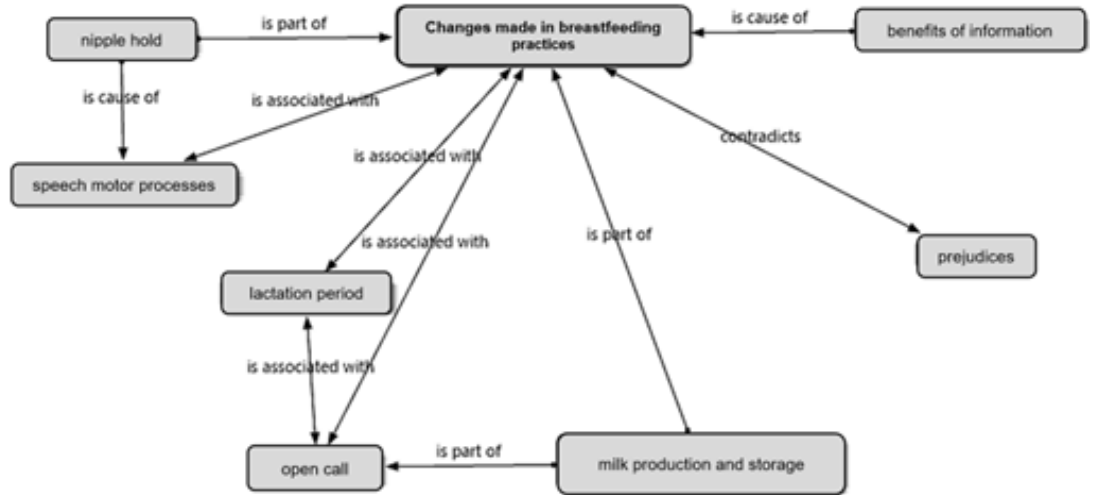


Figure 2. Strategies for verifying information related to EBF posted on Instagram Changes in breastfeeding practice.

Significant changes were reported after consulting information on Instagram. These included correcting nipple latching, which helped reduce pain and improve breastfeeding effectiveness; optimization of milk production and storage, which allowed for the creation of milk banks and improved the quality of life of newborns; consolidation of breastfeeding on demand, respecting the baby's feeding rhythm; and overcoming prejudices and myths surrounding weaning or the use of infant formula (Figure 3).

Figure 3.
Main changes in breastfeeding practices among mothers who consulted information published on Instagram



DISCUSSION

The data obtained from the quantitative part revealed that 94% of mothers access Instagram every day and that 98% use this platform to search for information related to exclusive breastfeeding, demonstrating the establishment of this medium as an important resource in the field of maternal and child health. These findings are consistent with the findings of Herrera⁽³⁾ and García⁽⁴⁾, who highlight Instagram's role as a new space for disseminating health practices and creating supportive digital communities.

On the other hand, 56% of survey participants revealed that they follow the advice they have seen in posts, while 44% preferred to verify the information before applying it. This pattern represents a trust in online content and the need for validation by professionals, in line with research highlighting the growth of critical thinking among mothers in the face of abundant information on social media (Espinoza Portilla and Mazuelos)⁽¹³⁾.

The quantitative findings provide an empirical context that provides context for the categories identified in the qualitative analysis: advantages of breastfeeding, verification methods, and transformations in practice. This reaffirms the connection between the two stages of the study and reinforces the idea that Instagram's influence is not merely passive, but is mediated by processes of validation, reflection, and professional support.

Given the category of breastfeeding benefits, subcategories related to bonding, baby health, immune system, mother health, and nutritional contribution were identified. Mothers noted that breastfeeding strengthens the emotional connection between mother and child,

which is consistent with attachment theory, which posits the biological need for close emotional bonds from the fetal stage⁽¹⁴⁾.

In terms of health, breastfeeding is a survival factor for newborns. The Pan American Health Organization has indicated that exclusively breastfed infants have a lower risk of death compared to non-breastfed infants, which underscores its protective effect against pneumonia and diarrhea⁽¹⁵⁾. In addition to transferring defenses to the baby, breast milk contains nutrients that are essential for growth and development, as argued by the Spanish Association of Pediatrics⁽¹⁵⁾ and other authors^(10,16). It also has benefits for the mother, such as reducing the risk of diabetes, obesity, and certain types of cancer, as well as positive effects on psychological health and the prevention of postnatal depression^(17,18).

With regard to information verification strategies, mothers prioritized content from health professionals, pediatricians, or lactation consultants. This finding coincides with studies that show trust in the internet as a means of consultation, although not always backed by reliable sources⁽¹⁹⁾. They also resorted to scientific databases and consultations with professionals to verify the information, in line with what has been reported by research on the role of family and professional support during breastfeeding⁽²⁰⁾.

In terms of trust in content, participants indicated that Instagram is their main source of consultation, but they assess the credibility of each profile. The publication of images of women breastfeeding was perceived as symbolic support in the face of social pressure that still discourages breastfeeding in public⁽²¹⁾.

Changes in breastfeeding practices included correcting nipple latching, which helped reduce pain and improve breastfeeding efficiency⁽²²⁾, improving milk production and storage, which made it possible to create milk banks and improve the quality of life of newborns⁽²³⁾, and consolidating on-demand breastfeeding. These findings are consistent with WHO and UNICEF recommendations to maintain exclusive breastfeeding for six months and continue it alongside appropriate complementary feeding^(24,25). However, the circulation of

misinformation and myths on social media was also identified, which is consistent with previous studies on the risks of misinformation in health⁽²⁶⁾ and the persistence of taboos around breastfeeding⁽²⁴⁾.

In summary, the quantitative results support and complement the qualitative findings by showing that frequent use of Instagram and selective trust in information are aligned with the conversation patterns observed in the focus group. This coincidence of methods validates that social media has a significant impact on the practice of exclusive breastfeeding, always mediated by conscious processes of evaluation, comparison, and professional review.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the findings, first-time mothers have undergone significant changes in their exclusive breastfeeding practices thanks to the information they have obtained through Instagram. These changes can be observed in technical aspects such as how to latch on to the nipple and how to store milk, as well as in the adoption of on-demand breastfeeding and the elimination of misconceptions about weaning and formula.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods provided a deeper insight into the phenomenon analyzed: statistics validated the frequency of Instagram use and the positive perception of its content, while the focus group discussions revealed how this information is interpreted, validated, and critically applied. This combined methodology strengthens the results and demonstrates the importance of social media as platforms for learning and exchange in the field of maternal and child health.

In summary, the results indicate that Instagram is establishing itself as a fundamental tool for disseminating information on exclusive breastfeeding, provided that such information is accompanied by verification processes and the support of health professionals. It is suggested that health communication strategies incorporate the potential of social media with clear, consistent, and evidence-based messages to empower mothers and prevent misinformation.

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