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COVID-19-Related Information Engagement, Risk Perceptions and Behaviors among Undergraduate Students



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Purpose Disseminating accurate health information is imperative, particularly among college students who play a critical role in the transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the viral agent responsible for COVID-19. We aim to understand COVID-19-related information engagement, risk perceptions, and preventive behaviors among undergraduate students.

Methods Undergraduate students aged ≥ 18 were surveyed from a large public university via convenience sampling (April-June 2020). Participants self-reported COVID-19-related information engagement, risk perceptions, and preventive behaviors. Differences among students who did or did not use social media for health-related information (SM_h) were assessed.

Results The majority of the study sample ($n=1,827$) was female (71.1%) aged 18-24 (86.8%); one-in-four students (25.2%) did not use SM_h. Compared to students who used SM_h, students who did not were less likely to seek COVID-19-related information (76.7% vs. 78.7%; p -value = 0.06). Among those who sought COVID-19-related information, students who did not use SM_h sought information from fewer sources (3.7 vs. 4.0; p -value = 0.01) and less often (1.7 vs. 2.2; p -value < 0.001). Additionally, students who did not use SM_h were less likely to know Coronavirus was a contagious respiratory infection (93.7% vs. 96.5%; p -value = 0.01), had lower perceived coronavirus concern (3.1 vs. 3.2; p -value = 0.01), were less likely to follow self-quarantine orders (90.4% vs. 94.2%; p -value = 0.01), and to endorse adopting preventive behaviors.

Conclusions While the misinformation epidemic is pervasive, social media is the main avenue through which college students engage with information. Ensuring accurate and age-appropriate information channels can increase COVID-19-related knowledge, and subsequently change risk perceptions and adoption of preventive behaviors among college students.

Supplementary materials Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:[10.1016/j.annepidem.2022.06.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annepidem.2022.06.011).