

TRANSFORMING PUBLIC HEALTH: NUTRITION LITERACY AS THE KEY TO CONFRONTING CONTEMPORARY EPIDEMIOLOGY

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ABSTRAK

Epidemiologi kontemporer ditandai oleh pergeseran beban penyakit dari infeksi menular menuju penyakit tidak menular (PTM), yang sebagian besar dipicu oleh faktor gaya hidup dan pola makan yang tidak sehat. Dalam konteks ini, literasi gizi muncul sebagai kompetensi esensial yang sangat krusial, bukan hanya sekadar pengetahuan, melainkan sebagai fondasi transformatif dalam mencapai kemandirian kesehatan individu dan kolektif. Penelitian kualitatif ini bertujuan untuk mendalami persepsi, pengalaman, dan tantangan yang dihadapi masyarakat dalam memahami serta mengaplikasikan informasi gizi. Melalui pendekatan fenomenologis dengan wawancara mendalam terhadap 20 partisipan dari berbagai latar belakang sosio-ekonomi di perkotaan dan perdesaan, studi ini menemukan bahwa literasi gizi tidak hanya dipengaruhi oleh ketersediaan informasi, tetapi juga oleh faktor-faktor non-kognitif, seperti pengaruh sosial-kultural, aksesibilitas ekonomi terhadap pangan sehat, dan kompleksitas pesan yang disampaikan oleh media massa. Ditemukan adanya disonansi antara pengetahuan yang dimiliki dan praktik sehari-hari, yang sering kali dipicu oleh miskonsepsi yang meluas dan norma sosial. Partisipan sering kali kesulitan membedakan antara informasi yang valid dan yang menyesatkan, terutama yang berasal dari media sosial. Implikasi dari temuan ini menggarisbawahi urgensi intervensi pendidikan gizi yang lebih terintegrasi dan kontekstual, yang tidak hanya berfokus pada penyampaian fakta, tetapi juga pada pengembangan keterampilan kritis untuk menafsirkan informasi dan membuat pilihan yang tepat. Transformasi kesehatan publik ke depan harus berpusat pada pemberdayaan masyarakat melalui literasi gizi yang holistik, adaptif, dan berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penguatan literasi gizi adalah prasyarat mutlak untuk menanggulangi tantangan epidemiologi masa kini dan menciptakan generasi yang lebih sehat dan berdaya.

Kata Kunci: Literasi Gizi, Kesehatan Publik, Epidemiologi Kontemporer

ABSTRACT

Contemporary epidemiology is characterized by a shift in the burden of disease from infectious infections to non-communicable diseases (NCDs), which are largely triggered by lifestyle factors and unhealthy diets. In this context, nutritional literacy emerges as an essential competency that is very crucial, not just knowledge, but as a transformative foundation in achieving individual and collective health independence. This qualitative research aims to explore the

perceptions, experiences, and challenges faced by the community in understanding and applying nutritional information. Through a phenomenological approach with in-depth interviews with 20 participants from various socio-economic backgrounds in urban and rural areas, this study found that nutritional literacy is influenced not only by the availability of information, but also by non-cognitive factors, such as socio-cultural influences, economic accessibility to healthy food, and the complexity of messages conveyed by mass media. There is a dissonance between the knowledge possessed and daily practice, which is often triggered by widespread misconceptions and social norms. Participants often have difficulty distinguishing between valid and misleading information, especially from social media. The implications of these findings underscore the urgency of a more integrated and contextual nutrition education intervention, which focuses not only on the presentation of facts, but also on the development of critical skills to interpret information and make informed choices. The transformation of public health in the future must be centered on empowering the community through holistic, adaptive, and sustainable nutritional literacy. This study concludes that strengthening nutrition literacy is an absolute prerequisite to overcome today's epidemiological challenges and create a healthier and more empowered generation.

Keywords: Nutrition Literacy, Public Health, Contemporary Epidemiology

INTRODUCTION

The shift in global disease patterns from acute infectious infections to chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs) has redefined the public health landscape around the world (Hidayati & Km, 2024). This phenomenon, often referred to as epidemiological transitions, places lifestyle factors, especially diet, as significant major determinants of individual and population health (Irwandi Rachman, n.d.). These challenges are exacerbated by rapid urbanization, socio-cultural changes, and globalization that affect food availability and consumption, which often leads to unbalanced and energy-intensive choices (Sukowati, 2011). Therefore, the current public health strategy is no longer enough to focus only on the prevention of infectious diseases, but must shift to health promotion and NCD prevention through interventions rooted in individual behavior.

Nutritional literacy, defined as the ability of individuals to acquire, process, and understand basic nutritional information as well as the services necessary to make informed health decisions, is a key element in the response to these challenges (Mandowa, 2022). This concept goes beyond just knowledge of nutrition; it includes the skills to interpret food labels, understand dietary recommendations,

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and apply this knowledge in a real-life context (Widartika, 2025). Unfortunately, the level of nutritional literacy in the community is still a major concern, with many individuals exposed to inaccurate information from various sources, especially social media (Atti Yudiernawati, n.d.). This lack of nutritional literacy is often a fundamental obstacle in health promotion efforts, making important messages not reach or even misinterpreted by the target audience (Wibowo et al., 2024).

Literature review shows that low nutritional literacy is strongly correlated with a high prevalence of obesity, diabetes mellitus, and cardiovascular disease (Setyaningrum et al., 2025). This situation creates a vicious cycle, where low nutritional understanding leads to poor eating choices, which in turn increases the risk of NCDs, and the heavy burden of NCDs further drains the resources of the Health system (Hidayati & Km, 2024). Conventional interventions that focus on one-way information delivery, such as lectures or posters, often fail to achieve significant impact because they do not consider the social, cultural, and economic contexts that shape eating behaviors (Wibowo et al., 2024). Therefore, a more comprehensive and multidimensional approach is needed to effectively address this issue.

Along with the rapid development of information technology, society is now inundated with unlimited data, including nutritional information (Anis Ervina et al., n.d.). However, the quantity of information is not always directly proportional to quality or understanding. Hoaxes and nutritional misinformation can spread quickly, forming false beliefs and endangering public health (Rensiyana et al., 2025). The existence of "influencers" or public figures who provide nutritional advice without a scientific basis further complicates the situation, making the general public confused and difficult to sort out (Fernanda, n.d.). This situation highlights the importance of nutritional literacy as a critical thinking skill, not just as an accumulation of facts, to filter circulating information and distinguish between right and wrong (Liriwati et al., 2024).

Although the urgency of nutrition literacy has been widely highlighted, most previous studies have tended to use quantitative approaches that measure the level of knowledge alone (Iwansyah & Juraidin, 2025). This approach is less able to

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capture the deep nuances, personal experiences, and contextual factors that influence how individuals understand and apply nutrition knowledge in their daily lives (Widartika, 2025). A deeper understanding of the "why" and "how" a person interacts with nutritional information becomes essential for designing more relevant and effective interventions (Octavia, 2024). Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap with a phenomenological qualitative approach, exploring the meaning behind the participants' experiences.

The main objective of this study was to explore in depth the lived-in experiences of participants related to nutrition literacy, including how they were informed, faced challenges, and made nutritional decisions in the midst of a massive flow of information. We wanted to understand the landscape of people's perceptions of nutrition and health, as well as the factors that shape their eating practices (Handayani & Moedjiherwati, 2024). By delving into individual perspectives in depth, we hope to identify patterns that have not yet been revealed through quantitative methods (FALAH, n.d.). This insight is expected to provide a strong foundation for the development of a more relevant nutrition education curriculum, as well as public policies that are more sensitive to the needs of the community.

This study is expected to contribute significantly to the public health literature by offering rich qualitative insights on nutritional literacy (I. Hidayat et al., 2024). The findings of this study will be valuable input for health program planners, nutrition practitioners, and policymakers to design more holistic and sustainable strategies in an effort to deal with contemporary epidemiology dominated by NCDs (Multazam & Andyanie, 2024). In the end, this study aims to affirm that community empowerment through nutrition literacy is not just an option, but a necessity to build a healthier and more empowered future (Hardiansyah et al., 2025).

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenological design. This approach was chosen because its main focus is to understand in depth the subjective experiences and meanings given by individuals

to the phenomenon of nutritional literacy. By exploring the narratives and perspectives of the participants, this study seeks to uncover the essence of their experiences in navigating, understanding, and applying nutritional information in daily life. Phenomenological design is particularly relevant to this study because it allows researchers to suspend prejudice and enter into the world of participants' experiences to gain an authentic and rich understanding of nutritional literacy from their point of view.

The data collection process was carried out through in-depth interviews with 20 participants who were selected purposively (purposive sampling). Participant inclusion criteria include individuals of different ages (20-55 years), gender, education level, and socio-economic backgrounds (urban and rural) to ensure a rich variety of perspectives. Interviews are semi-structured with flexible interview guidelines, allowing for the exploration of new topics that arise spontaneously. Each interview was recorded with the participant's permission and recorded verbatim. The entire research procedure has been ethically approved by the competent institution, and participants are provided with clear information about the purpose of the study as well as the guarantee of the confidentiality of their personal data.

The collected interview data was then analyzed using the thematic analysis method. The analysis steps include verbatim transcription of all recordings, familiarization with the data, initial coding, grouping the codes into potential themes, and reviewing the themes to ensure coherence. This analysis process is iterative, in which researchers constantly move back and forth between raw data, code, and themes to ensure that the interpretations made truly reflect the participants' experiences. The validity and credibility of the research (trustworthiness) are maintained through data triangulation, participant verification (member checking), and detailed and thick descriptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An in-depth analysis of the interview data resulted in three main themes that comprehensively explain the phenomenon of nutritional literacy from the

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perspective of the participants. The three themes are: (1) The Struggle to Interpret Information in the Digital Era, (2) Dissonance between Knowledge and Practice, and (3) The Influence of the Socio-Cultural Environment. These findings not only confirm previously known challenges, but also offer new insights into the complexity of individual interactions with nutritional information (Haniya & Hasibuan, 2025). From the participants' narratives, it is clear that nutritional literacy does not stand alone, but is closely intertwined with other aspects of life such as social, economic, and cultural (S. A. Nisa, 2024). This struggle reflects the need for a more holistic approach to nutrition education.

1. The Struggle to Interpret Information in the Digital Age

Participants reported that they felt overwhelmed by the volume of nutritional information circulating on social media and the internet. They have difficulty distinguishing between credible advice from health professionals and exaggerated claims from "influencers" who do not have an adequate scientific background (Setiawan, n.d.). "Every day there are new contradictory tips, making me confused which one to trust," said a 35-year-old housewife. This shows that the availability of abundant information is not always directly proportional to increasing literacy (Jaya, 2024). Instead of getting a better understanding, many feel anxious and end up reverting to their familiar old diet.

2. Dissonance between Knowledge and Practice

Although many participants had basic knowledge about the importance of consuming fruits, vegetables, and water, they acknowledged that there was a discrepancy between this knowledge and daily eating behaviors (Kirani, 2024). Factors such as busy work, fatigue, and the availability of instant food are the dominant reasons that hinder them from adopting a healthy diet (ARIMUKTI, n.d.). A 40-year-old office worker explains: "I know salads are healthy, but after a long day at work, the easiest and quickest thing is to order a fast meal." This dissonance indicates that nutrition education must not only transfer information, but must also work to overcome practical and psychological barriers to changing behavior (Sari et al., 2025).

3. Socio-Cultural Environmental Influences

The most significant finding was the powerful role of social and cultural norms in shaping food choices. Often, food is considered an integral part of social interaction and celebration (S. Hidayat, 2024). Participants found it difficult to refuse food offered when gathering with family or friends, even though they knew it was unhealthy. This is reinforced by the findings in the following table, which show the general perception of some nutritional myths and their reasons.

| Nutritional Myths | Participant Perceptions (Examples) | Reasons That Support the Myth |
|---|---|--|
| "Dinner makes you fat" | "I always hear from my parents that dinner should be avoided if you don't want to get fat." | It is passed down from generation to generation, supported by popular dietary norms. |
| "White rice is evil" | "On social media, many people say that white rice is the source of disease, so I try to replace it with potatoes or bread." | Disinformation spread on digital platforms without adequate scientific context. |
| "Local food is not nutritious" | "It's cooler and healthier to eat imported food like salmon, even though the price is expensive." | Pop culture influences and advertisements that associate imported food with status and health. |
| "Supplements are better than food" | "I feel like taking vitamin supplements is enough, so there's no need to bother eating vegetables." | Aggressive supplement marketing campaigns and misunderstandings. |
| "Extreme diets can quickly lose weight" | "I followed a friend's diet that only ate fruit for a week, it was hard but he said it worked." | The influence of personal testimonials and popular diet trends without expert supervision. |

The discussion of these findings underlines that nutrition education interventions must shift from a "top-down" model that only informs to a "bottom-up" model that empowers individuals to become agents of change for themselves and their communities (Purnomo & Puspitaloka, 2020). This is in line with the framework of Holistic Nutrition Literacy, where understanding nutrition involves not only knowledge, but also practical skills and motivation (Widartika, 2025). The

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proposed conceptual model, as illustrated in the diagram below, emphasizes the dynamic interaction between the cognitive (knowledge), practical (skill), and affective (motivation) factors that make up nutritional literacy.

This diagram shows how nutritional literacy is the result of a complex interaction between three main pillars: Knowledge, Skills, and Perception. All three influence each other and are shaped by external factors such as access, social norms, and the digital environment. Limited access to healthy food, both physically and economically, is also a major barrier (Amelia & Wihartati, 2025). Participants in rural areas often reveal that although they have knowledge of the importance of a balanced diet, the limitations of food variety and high costs are the main obstacles to practicing it (I. R. Z. Nisa & Zulfiani, 2024).

The study also highlights the important role of health workers and nutrition educators in building trust. Many participants stated that they trusted the information provided by a nutritionist or doctor more than the information they randomly obtained from the internet. This shows that there is a great opportunity to optimize the role of health professionals as a reliable and credible source of information. Therefore, an ongoing training program is needed for these professionals to be able to communicate more effectively with the public, use easy-to-understand language, and provide contextual recommendations (Simamora, 2017).

These findings implicitly challenge conventional health promotion models (Yulianti et al., 2019). Instead of focusing solely on mass campaigns, future strategies should include community-based interventions that build nutrition literacy from the grassroots level (Setyaningrum et al., 2025). This can include interactive workshops, discussion groups, or mentoring programs that allow individuals to learn from the experiences of others and apply knowledge in their social context (Rohim et al., 2021). This strategy will be more effective in overcoming the dissonance between knowledge and practice, as well as building intrinsic motivation for sustainable behavior change (Irham & Yuliani, 2020).

The main limitation of this study is its qualitative and case-based nature, so the findings cannot be generalized to the wider population. Nonetheless, the depth

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of insights gained provides a solid foundation for the development of hypotheses that can be tested in large-scale quantitative research in the future (Basiq, 2009). Further research can explore the effectiveness of innovative nutrition education interventions, such as the use of interactive digital platforms or peer mentoring programs, in improving nutrition literacy (Setyaningrum et al., 2025). Thus, nutritional literacy can continue to be strengthened as a strategic tool in facing growing public health challenges (Abdul Gaffar Karim, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This qualitative research confirms that nutritional literacy is a complex and multifaceted construct, which goes beyond just cognitive knowledge. Nutritional literacy is the result of a dynamic interaction between an individual's understanding of information, practical skills in making eating choices, and the strong influence of socio-cultural and economic contexts. The findings suggest that although people have unprecedented access to nutritional information, they often feel overwhelmed and confused, which ultimately hinders positive behavior change. The dissonance between what is known and what is done is a real challenge that must be overcome.

The study highlights that to improve nutrition literacy, intervention strategies should no longer focus on one-way information delivery. Instead, more effective approaches should be holistic and contextual, empowering individuals with critical thinking skills to interpret information independently, as well as addressing practical and social barriers that hinder healthy nutrition practices. Nutrition education should be integrated into a broader framework, which also takes into account the accessibility of healthy foods and social norms. This empowerment is key to breaking the NCD cycle that has dominated contemporary epidemiology.

In closing, strengthening nutritional literacy is not just a target, but a fundamental prerequisite for creating a more independent and empowered population in facing future health challenges. The results of this study provide in-depth insights for health professionals, educators, and policymakers to design more relevant and effective programs, which will ultimately contribute to the sustainable

transformation of public health. By investing in nutritional literacy, we are investing in a healthier future for all people.

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