Impact of social media interventions on eating behaviours in young people: a mixed-method systematic review

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Introduction

- Diet is a targetable contributor to adolescent health, weight & wellbeing.
- Globally there are 4.9 billion social media users: 60% aged 13-35 y. In the UK, 97% of 16-24 olds engage weekly.
- 54% of youth seek health advice on social media, yet face misinformation, unrealistic body standards & unhealthy food promotion/ads.
- Social media provides potential for scalable and accessible promotion of healthier diets/eating behaviours.
- Need for a review to capture current trends, qualitative user experiences and the mechanisms of how interventions work (or don’t).

Methods

To assess the impact of social media interventions on healthy eating in young people (13-35 years) by:
1. Synthesizing quantitative effects & behaviour change techniques employed
2. Exploring participants’ qualitative experiences.

Aim

- Systematic review of quantitative and qualitative studies (interventions & observational)
- Search date: 2/3/2023
- Databases: ASSIA, Cochrane Library, Embase, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science
- Analysis: Convergent segregated approach.
- Eligibility: Year 2000 onwards
- Registration: PROSPERO CRD42023414476

Data Analysis

Quantitative Findings

- 19 interventions (n=16 studies)
- Study Design: Quasi-experimental (n=11), RCT (n=6), Observational (n=2)
- Location: (n=8), (n=4)
- Target Pop: Undergraduates (18-22 y; n=2390 total)
- Intervention Duration: Ave 12.8 weeks, most <10 weeks (n=11); longest at 12 months
- Intervention Target: Healthy eating (n= 12), Weight gain prevention (n= 5)
- Social Media Platforms: (n=14), (n=6), (n=5)
- Effectiveness: Positive impact (n=12), No impact (n=7)
- Frameworks: Social Cognitive Theory (n=2), Social Ecological Model (n=2), ‘Not reported’ (n=8)
- Behaviour Change Techniques: ‘Information about health consequences’ (n=13), ‘Feedback on behaviours’ (n=9), ‘Goal setting’ (n=8)

Qualitative Findings

- Content Appreciation
  - Participants favour personal narratives, evidence-based dietary information, and practical tips.
  - “I think that there’s a lot of value in taking people’s stories, lived experiences, and sharing it with others because I find… it brings connection and community within these silos we have and just makes us know that we’re not alone in our struggles”
- User Preferences
  - Type 1 user: Values storytelling & strong community connection.
  - Type 2 user: Actively seeks practical & evidence-based dietary guidance.
  - Both highlight the want for localized content & culturally-tailored interventions.
- Feedback & Themes
  - Content that underscores well-being, mental health & realistic dietary tips is valued.
  - “It’s nice to see a focus more on ‘wellbeing’ and ‘healthy bodies’, rather than ‘skinny’ and ‘losing weight’.
  - Humour enhances engagement & content recall.
  - Credibility of intervention tied to trust in the source.
  - Signposting to reputable sources appreciated.

Conclusions

- Social media is a promising tool to shape young people’s eating behaviours ➔ Tailored, local content is key.
- Previous interventions show significant positive change to diet ➔ Potential for effectiveness using behaviour change techniques
- Aligning content & delivery mode with audience preferences is vital
- Emphasising well-being & mental health resonates deeply with the target audience.

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Scan for the protocol

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