

Social media can adversely impact young peoples' risk-taking behaviours.

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Review & Commentary for Social media use and health risk behaviours in young people: systematic review and meta-analysis (Purba, et al, 2023)

Category: Nursing

Study type: Systematic review

Declarative title: Social media can adversely impact on young peoples' risk taking behaviours.

Commentary on: - Purba AK, Thomson RM, Henery PM, et al. Social media use and health risk behaviours in young people: systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMJ* 2023; 383:e073552.

Commentary

Implications for practice and research

- Social media is part of young peoples' (YP) everyday life and of interacting with peers and sourcing information.
- Multimodal methods such as online health literacy education and promoting positive health behaviours could contribute to safe social media use in YP.

Context set the scene

Worldwide YP have a strong online presence with the majority of Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) users less than 35 years of age. The World Health Organization has recognised the potential role and impact of social media to improve health outcomes but also the generation of misinformation.¹ Although YP have a noticeable online presence the impact on health behaviours remains unclear. Purba et al's² systematic review of social media use and YP's health risk-taking behaviours (e.g. alcohol, drug, tobacco use) and unhealthy lifestyle choices (e.g. exercise, diet, gambling, sexual risk taking) is timely.

Methods

A systematic review and meta-analysis, using the PRISMA and SWiM review guidelines was undertaken, with a defined age range (10-19 years of age) and primary outcomes (health behaviours) identified. Details of the selection criteria, search strategy, databases searched, and methods of extracting and synthesising data were sufficiently detailed to facilitate reproducibility. The review protocol, second reviewer and independent checker during data extraction minimised bias.

Findings

Findings suggest social media use is associated with multiple risk-taking behaviours, in particular alcohol consumption and unhealthy diets. Facebook was the most widely investigated platform. Insufficient data prevented comparison of active (e.g. posting information) to passive (e.g. perusing content) social media use. Few studies used objective measures of social media use relying primarily on self-reported use. Purla et al.³ identified future research is needed to determine cause and effect, considering confounding factors such as health inequalities, and which social media platform are more likely to influence YP's behaviours.

Commentary

Social media typically refers to interactive communication platforms epitomised by popular social networking and microblogging sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and X. Additionally, a plethora of websites and online applications (apps) created to generate and share information, and connect people with common interests exist. On-line platforms are often the first choice, particularly the millennial generation, for health related information. A dual challenge for the healthcare community, is attenuating misleading or inaccurate information while embracing on-line platforms as a useful adjunct to care delivery. For example video gaming can support young men with Duchene Muscular Dystrophy connect with peers and provide an escapism from the limitations of their condition;³ and web-based interventions can support the transition from child to adult care for YP with long-term conditions.⁴ Social media was used to share important health messages during the Covid pandemic, and promote opportunities to take part in research. While research into digital technologies supporting YP with long-term conditions is growing, research understanding how and why social media is used by this population and the impact on health risk-taking behaviours is essential, as part of the wider public health agenda.

Risk-taking, including experiment behaviours, is part of adolescent development. A predisposition to risk-taking includes rapid physiological changes in the brain, particularly socio-emotional with self-regulatory systems. Managing emotions can be challenging, with YP often reward orientated. Positive reinforcement of behaviours within friendships groups are important, with distress often a manifestation of social rejection. Pushing boundaries and increased risk-taking behavior is part of an adolescents' journey in finding their identities and becoming independent young adults. Risk-taking is not unique to the current generation of YP, but it is likely that social media has changed the way YP interact. Social media use for YP who have grown up within the on-line revolution a 'normalised' adjunct to daily living. Becoming desensitised to the potential risks associated with its content is a reality.

Understanding the relationship between social media and health behaviours is pertinent in today's digital society. While Purla et al's³ study is a welcome start in considering the long-term health outcomes of social media use and adverse health associated risk taking behaviours there are a few considerations: the age range is restrictive, Facebook, the most common platform researched, may not reflect YP's preferred platform, a review of qualitative research could offer broader insights into YP perspectives of the use of social media and influence on health behaviours.

Acknowledgment – we wish to thank Lois Roberts, 15 years of age for her perspectives on 'normalisation' of social media for YP.

References

¹World Health Organization. WHO online consultation meeting to discuss global principles for identifying credible sources of health information on social media. *WHO* 2021; https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/digital-health-documents/final_global-principles-for-identifying-credible-sources-of-health-information-on-social-media.pdf?sfvrsn=18f47c78_14&download=true

²Purba AK, Thomson RM, Henery PM, et al. Social media use and health risk behaviours in young people: systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMJ* 2023;383: e073552

³Peat G, Rodriguez A, Smith J. 'It is easier to not allow them to see your disability straight away, to see you as a person': An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of video gaming from the perspectives of men with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy. *Palliative Medicine* 2023; epub 37129308: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/02692163231172246>

⁴Orpin J, Rodriguez A, Harrop, D, et al. Supportive use of digital technologies during transition to adult healthcare for young people with long-term conditions, focusing on Type 1 diabetes mellitus: A scoping review. *Journal of Child Health Care* 2023; epub <https://doi.org/10.1177/13674935231184919>

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Competing interests - None