



#Gettinghealthy: The perceived influence of social media on young adult health behaviors



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ABSTRACT

Young adults (18–25 years old) spend a majority of their waking hours with technology and young adulthood is an important developmental time period for establishing lasting health behaviors. Considering the relevance of technology and health during young adulthood the current study explored young adults ($N = 34$) perceptions of social media's (e.g., social networking) influence on their health behaviors (i.e., diet and exercise) using a social ecological framework. Data was collected through eight focus groups and four individual interviews. Three themes were identified through phenomenological qualitative analysis. Young adults perceived that technology could be both a barrier and a motivator for exercise. Social media was also credited with expanding food choices through creating access to a variety of recipes, providing a venue for showcasing the food young adults eat or prepare, and distracting young adults from making positive food choices. Participants also reported that it is common to post statuses or pictures relating to exercise practices on social media during young adulthood. Young adults indicated that these posts could be inspirational or misused, depending on the context. Results are discussed in terms of theory and preliminary implications.

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1. Introduction

Young adults (18–25 years old) spend more time with media and technology daily than any other activity (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013). Media and technology that facilitate social interaction (i.e., social media) are preferred mediums among young adults (Xenos & Foot, 2008). The developmental time period of young adulthood is marked by transition (e.g., living arrangements, college, work) and the development of some independence while maintaining some continued reliance on parents for a variety of resources (e.g., financial support, emotional support; Aquilino, 2006; Arnett, 2000). With increased independence and transitions, young adulthood has been proposed to be an important time period for the development of lasting health behaviors (Nelson, Story, Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, & Lytle, 2008). A variety of factors (e.g.,

individual, environmental) influence health behaviors and social media may be an important factor in understanding young adult health (Freeland-Graves & Nitzke, 2013). It is essential to identify the influence of technology use on health behaviors during young adulthood due to the potential salience of health behaviors and frequency of technology use during this time period of development. The current exploratory study was designed to begin to identify the perceived connection between health behaviors (i.e., diet and exercise) and social media use among young adults.

1.1. Social media in young adulthood

New media and technology are viewed by young people as a normal part of daily living (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011; Cupples & Thompson, 2010). It has been reported that young adults spend between 11 and 12 h a day with technology and media (Alloy Media, 2009; Kaiser Family Foundation., 2010). Young adults have a particular affinity for social media—or technologies that facilitate social interaction (Xenos & Foot, 2008). As of January 2014, 89% of 18–29 year olds report using social networking sites and 67% access these sites on their cell phones (Pew Research Center,

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2014). The social media landscape has expanded to include several different platforms for interaction and communication (Duggan & Smith, 2013). One of the most popular features afforded by these social platforms is photo sharing and 79% of 18–29 year olds report sharing photos they have taken online (Duggan, 2013). Table 1 provides a summary of some of the most popular social media platforms that are utilized by young adults. Facebook (84%) continues to be the most widely accessed social networking site, although young adults also report accessing additional sites such as Twitter (53%), Instagram (37%), and Pinterest (27%) (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Additionally, 26% of young adults report using the Snapchat mobile app (Duggan, 2013). Considering the quantity of time young adults spend with technology and the variety of social media platforms available, it appears that social media has become a normative aspect of young adult life.

1.2. Young adult health behaviors

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (Academy) advocates for the *total diet approach*, which emphasizes that a health-promoting lifestyle consists of varied and moderate intake of nutrient-dense food, coupled with adequate physical activity (Freeland-Graves & Nitzke, 2013). Consistent with the total diet approach, our conceptualization of health behaviors included both diet and exercise. Young adulthood has been proposed to be a risky time period for the development of poor diet and exercise habits (Nelson et al., 2008). The National College Health Assessment (NCHA; American College Health Association, 2013) reported that 58.7% of young adults ($N = 123, 078$; mean age = 22.82) eat one to two servings of fruits and vegetables per day and 56.6% engage in moderate-intensity cardio exercise between one and four times a week. This large scale health survey also asked students to address a variety of contextual factors such as relationships, academic performance, finances, etc., but does not include questions about technology or media use. This is surprising considering the amount of time young adults spend with technology.

1.3. Social ecological theory: Media and health

There are a variety of factors that influence health behaviors and we propose that social media could be a relevant factor contributing to a persons' total diet. The social ecological model has been used to describe the complexity of how people make the decisions to eat what they eat within concentric ecosystem levels (i.e., individual factors, environmental settings, sectors of influence, and social and cultural norms and values; Freeland-Graves & Nitzke, 2013). Within the social ecological theory, individual factors in making food choices include time availability, convenience, and psychosocial factors. The sector of influence level of the

ecological model includes the larger societal structures and influences on food choices and exercise such as government, agriculture, and industry. Media and technology, also at the sector of influence level, has been credited as one factor that has led to a shift in perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about nutrition during the last 50 years (Freeland-Graves & Nitzke, 2013). Social scientists have proposed that media and technology now have a more direct influence as they are a regular part of young peoples' psychosocial experience (McHale, Dotterer, & Kim, 2009). It is proposed that media and technology are now a part of the individual factors level of the ecological system. Considering the relevancy of environmental factors on health behaviors, it would be logical to investigate the relationship between young adult social media use and health behaviors among young adults.

1.4. Connecting social media to health behaviors

Media and technology (e.g., TV, movies, video games, Internet) are conceptualized as sedentary activities that displace time for physical activity and ultimately lead to increases in Body Mass Index (BMI) among children and adolescents (Arora et al., 2013; Proctor et al., 2003). With technological convergence (i.e., the ability to access several technologies from one device) many young adults have access to social media on their cell phone and prefer to carry their social network around with them at all times (Brown & Bobkowsky, 2011), which could be indicative of an increase in sedentary behavior. Television viewing has also been investigated in association with food choices and portion sizes (Blass et al., 2006; Cleland, Schmidt, Dwyer, & Venn, 2008). Young adult abdominal weight gain can be partially explained by the foods and beverages consumed while watching TV (Cleland et al., 2008) and young adults are more likely to consume high-density foods (e.g., pizza and macaroni and cheese) with less moderation while eating and viewing TV concurrently (Blass et al., 2006). Like TV, social media could serve as a distraction during eating. However, unlike television social media allows for interaction with others through technology.

The interactive nature of social media may have a different influence on young adult health behavior than non-interactive technologies (e.g., TV, movies, music). Researchers have identified that social interaction can influence food choices and portions among young adults (McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, & Morales, 2010). For example, an experimental study concerning food consumption in social situations reported that all of the young adult participants were likely to take more food than the consumer before them, but the people who followed a thin consumer in a food line took significantly less food when compared to people who followed after an obese consumer (McFerran et al., 2010). It may be that social media use can be a distraction, like TV, for

Table 1
Descriptions of Select social media platforms.

Name of platform	Brief description	Website
Facebook	Allows users to create a personal profile to share selected personal information, interests, photos or videos. Users can find and accept friends with whom they wish to connect. Facebook allows for status updates, instant messaging, and posting content found on the internet	www.facebook.com
Twitter	Allows users to create a brief profile with a photo. Twitter allows users to share photos, videos, and brief 140-character status updates referred to as Tweets. Twitter users can follow people or organizations to stay connected	www.twitter.com
Instagram	This is a photo and video sharing app. Users can take a picture and select different filter options in order to share their picture with their followers. Users develop their own profile and can select to follow specific people/organizations to get photo/video updates	www.instagram.com
Pinterest	This platform is an electronic pin board. Users create a profile and "pin" (i.e., post) content from the internet to their board. It is a form of social bookmarking where users can organize information on their own board and follow other Pinterest users to share information	www.pinterest.com
Snapchat	A photo and video sharing app that allows users to share with a specified group of recipients. Sent messages are referred to as Snaps. Senders can decide how long (between 1 and 10 s) the receiver(s) can view the Snap before it is erased	www.snapchat.com

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