

Chapter 24

Adolescents' Food Communication in Social Media:

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ABSTRACT

Social media is ubiquitous in the lives of adolescents. Social media permits users to upload and share contents pertinent to health such as food and nutrition communications. Studies show that the dissemination and sharing of food content is prevalent in these channels. Not only do messages of food serve a symbolic purpose in these online platforms, but this communication might also affect adolescents in both positive and negative ways in regards to health. Visual food messages can affect brain areas associated with appetite and influence dietary behaviors among adolescents similar to advertisements. The objective with this chapter is to elucidate the complex and interwoven relationship between food and nutrition, social media, and adolescents from a health communication perspective. The chapter draws upon empirical studies and results, as well as related conceptual literature. Methodological and theoretical explanations are discussed as well as practical implications. Future research directions are also outlined.

INTRODUCTION

Social media is ubiquitous in the lives of adolescents. The Swedish Media Council (2015) reports that 91% of Swedish adolescents between 13 and 16 years old use social media sites such as Facebook or Instagram and similar numbers exist in the US (Lenhart, Smith, Anderson, Duggan, & Perrin, 2015). Social media are usually defined as Internet-based services that permit users to construct personal profiles, generate and access searchable online content (e.g., images, videos), form online connections with other users, and view these social connections (CDC, 2011).

Considering the widespread use of social media, it is no surprise that much of the communication in these networks concern food and nutrition. Previous studies show that the dissemination and sharing of food content is prevalent in many of these channels (Holmberg, Chaplin, Hillman, & Berg, 2016). As Neely, Walton, and Stephens (2014) noted, the communication of food mirrors social and cultural values, and the social aspects of young people's food practices are important components of their wellbeing and

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health. Social media provides a unique opportunity to study adolescents' food communication without interfering with it, and in order to gain a better understanding of what food means to adolescents, it is crucial to study their online food communication.

Adolescents' online food communication is a pressing matter because online food communication affects adolescents in both positive and negative ways with regard to health (Holmberg, 2016). Not only does messages of food in social media platforms and channels serve a symbolic purpose concerning socio-cultural aspects of communication and discourse. A meta-analysis by van Meer et al. (2015) shows that food communication, such as food images, affects brain areas associated with appetite. Other experimental studies show that food communication in social media can affect dietary behaviors among adolescents (Bevelander, Anschutz, Creemers, Kleinjan, & Engels, 2013).

The goal of this chapter is to introduce a promising research direction regarding adolescents' food-related communication in social media. The objective is to elucidate the complex and interwoven relationship between food and nutrition, social media, and adolescents from a health promotion perspective. As such, this article will draw upon empirical studies and results as well as conceptual and methodological research literature.

BACKGROUND

The social nature of food and food practices - that is, the idea that food is a way to interact and connect with others - is crucial to promoting health. To better understand food and its complex relationship with social media, we need to consider how diets and food habits connect people culturally. While food and nutrients are necessary for human survival, they also function as important objects in culture and as rich sources for metaphor (Korthals, 2008). Some sociologists even aver that food is a total social fact (Mauss, 1967). The cultural dimension of food practices has been termed the "omnivore's dilemma" (Korthals, 2008) or "omnivore's paradox" (Fischler, 1988), based on the assumption that humans can eat a wide variety of things. Unlike specialized eaters, omnivores such as humans can thrive on a multitude of diets and lack inherent predilections for foods that are healthy. Culture thus becomes a primary factor that dictates human eating behaviors, which suggests that the social meaning and metaphors of food can affect food choices and implicate which types of food confer social acceptance.

Given that young people are heavy users of social media and that their usage is generally difficult for parents and guardians to monitor (McBride, 2011), it becomes critical to examine health and food messages in those channels. Research demonstrates that the adolescent period is marked by changes in body composition, physical activity, diet habits, and psychological issues. These issues put youths at an increased risk of adapting unhealthy lifestyles (Alberga, Sigal, Goldfield, Prud' homme, & Kenny, 2012). As Vuk Pisk et al. (2012) have documented, adolescence is therefore a critical time for identity formation and a very sensitive period where social ties and relationships with others grow in importance. Since adolescents' social networks function as important influences for their dietary habits, researcher in many fields, such as obesity research, emphasize the importance of further exploring these social network effects.

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