

Health-related behavior on the online social networking site Facebook – a content analysis of communication on Facebook

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Background

Using social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook plays an important role in adolescents' social lives. These Web 2.0 applications are regarded as a novel setting for health promotion, but are marginally used for health education. As a potential channel for public health interventions, it is necessary to better understand communication about health-related behaviors on Facebook.

Objective

The objective of our analysis was to describe and evaluate the communication about different types of health (risk) behavior (alcohol consumption, healthy and unhealthy nutrition, physical activity, tobacco smoking) among a population of college students. The study should answer which topics Facebook users mention frequently, how they communicate about health (risk) lifestyles and how health-related topics are perceived by fellow Facebook users.

Methods

First and second year medical students (N=30, age 18-25) printed out their private Facebook profile (a protocol which documents all posted reports, photographs, comments, or 'posts' of a user) for the time period September 2011 till May 2012. The participants were then asked to mark through all personal data using special pens, in order to protect their privacy. All viewable elements of the printed profiles were investigated i.e. text, photographs, and documented 'likes'. We conducted a content analysis of 5,851 posts.

Results

6.5% of all posts were related to one of the selected health (risk) behaviors (n=381). 267 of all 381 health-related posts (70%) referred to risky lifestyle factors (alcohol consumption 42%, unhealthy nutrition 28%), whereas 30% referred to healthy lifestyle factors (physical activity 26%, healthy nutrition 4%). Smoking did not appear in the Facebook communication in the studied sample. Commentary on both healthy and risky behaviors was associated with companionship, chumminess and fun. The vast majority of references made to health (risk) lifestyles i.e. alcohol consumption and unhealthy nutrition were not expressed in terms of health concerns but rather in a funny, ironic or self-mocking way. Extensive consumption of alcohol, meat, sweets and fast food were frequently mentioned. The studied sample did report on healthy nutrition as well, usually in the context of effort (preparing food) or accomplishment. Additionally we identified seasonal influences on reported health (risk) behavior (e.g. holidays or public festivals). Other users rated communication about health-related behavior predominantly positive.

Conclusions

Our results help to understand if health-related behaviors are a relevant issue in communication on Facebook. In addition they provide information on target and temporally-aligned health education activities in both the online and offline setting. Furthermore the code book which we developed not only proved itself in analyzing

health-related topics, but could also be adapted for monitoring or evaluating future public health interventions on Facebook. Extending the analysis to different groups of Facebook users seems reasonable.

Accepted as Poster Presentation on the 6th World Congress on Social Media, Mobile Apps and Internet/Web 2.0 in Medicine, Health and Biomedical Research, London 2013