

Young People's Experiences and Perceptions of YouTuber-Produced Health Content: Implications for Health Promotion

Aims

This study aims to qualitatively explore young people's (age 13–18 years) experiences and perceptions of YouTuber-produced health content. By developing a thorough understanding of the circumstances in which young people engage with YouTuber health content, this study provides important initial data on the contexts in which health improvement efforts are most likely to be effective.

Key Findings

YouTuber health content was one of the many sources of health information used by young people in the study and was most frequently encountered during young people's routine viewing. Findings suggest that engagement may be influenced by age and gender: younger teenagers who are already actively engaged with YouTubers might be more predisposed to receive YouTuber health messages, and YouTubers may be an effective way to encourage young males in help seeking. The findings suggest young people's engagement with YouTuber health content is dependent on the following:

- **The Encounter:** Young people discussed two distinct methods of encountering YouTuber produced health content – health information they had actively searched for and health information encountered during their routine viewing of YouTubers.
- **Motivations for Production:** YouTubers' scope for personal gain influenced whether young people responded positively or negatively to their health content.
- **Relatability:** Characteristics such as using emotional, honest and friendly narratives helped YouTubers portray an everyday version of health events, and enabled them to be viewed as an extension of peer-constructed norms.
- **Sincerity:** YouTubers did not necessarily need to be in a position of professional expertise, but needed to be open and truthful in order to build trust and familiarity.
- **Generalisation:** Young people were concerned that YouTubers could generalise their own health experiences, providing a biased account which was unrepresentative of the diversity existing among their viewers. In turn, this could prompt younger viewers to try and emulate the health behaviours of the YouTuber in question.

Policy Context

YouTubers are among the many sources of health information young people encounter in the digital age. The findings from this study suggest YouTubers can help address the stigma associated with certain health issues and help-seeking among young people. Future collaboration between public health organisations and YouTubers could be promising in communicating health messages to young people already engaged with these YouTubers as part of wider campaigns or interventions. These messages could be particularly effective if they focused on experiences and norms rather than advice, remained consistent with YouTubers' existing

health content, incorporated clear indicators of accuracy into their narrative, and stated their intention to benefit young people.

Methodology

Seven focus groups were undertaken with 85 young people (13–18 years) from a convenience sample from three secondary schools and sixth-form colleges in North West England. Three focus groups were stratified by age (according to school year group) and gender for participants under 16 years. Focus groups for young people aged 16 years and over ($n = 4$) were larger and mixed gender as it was logistically easier for the college to recruit whole tutor groups to participate. Over half of the sample (53%) were female.

The focus groups began with an icebreaker where the groups twice ranked sources of health information according to frequency of use and accuracy. Photographs and excerpts from YouTuber videos were used to prompt the discussion. Three videos viewed were YouTuber experiences of mental health conditions (one male, one female) and physical activity (male). The fourth video had been produced by a YouTuber for Public Health England's "Rise Above" PHSE campaign (2016), focusing on social norms of health risk behaviors.

Background

Social media is one of the multiple sources of health information available to young people in the digital age, with popular, routinely used social media sites playing a role in young people's health information seeking. YouTube is one of the most popular social media platforms for young people in the UK, and YouTubers are the most important influencers on the platform producing diverse health content. They are increasingly recognised by popular media and public health organisations as a potentially influential source of health information for young people. UK health campaigns are beginning to make use of YouTubers in health improvement, and these activities should be informed by the perspectives of young people. However, few studies have focused on qualitative explorations of young people's experiences and perceptions of YouTuber health content.

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