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Exploring the Role of Digital Media and Lifestyle Choices on Weight-Related Behaviors in Young Adults in the UK

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Abstract

This article is a critical discussion of the correlations between the use of digital media, lifestyle and weight-related behaviours among the young adults aged 18-35 in the UK. The systematic literature review methodology is applied in the study based on evidence of the peer-reviewed research, nationally representative health surveys, and policy documents published in 2021-2024. The analytical theory that is used is the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) created by Bandura (1986). to allow a systematic discussion of the mechanisms of observational learning, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations through which digital media can affect dietary habits, physical activity patterns, and body image perceptions of this population group. The results have shown that digital media is a two-way phenomenon of the weight-related health outcome as online marketing of digital foods with algorithmic targeting, social pressures on the body image with mediating roles, and sedentary habits through screens are all found to contribute to poor health outcomes, whereas purposely designed digital health tools are clinically meaningfully effective when based on SCT principles. It is discovered that the current regulation framework that governs online food advertising in the UK is considerably insufficient to the magnitude and complexity of the business problem. The article concludes that to reverse the net impact of digital media on weight-related health outcomes among young adults in the UK, there is a need to implement structural regulatory changes alongside a long-term investment in digital health literacy by the population.

Keywords: Digital media, weight-related behaviours, young adults, United Kingdom, Social Cognitive Theory, obesity, lifestyle choices, sedentary behavior

1. Introduction

The spread of digital media through every aspect of contemporary life has established the bases according to which the daily space of young adults in the UK is significantly influenced by the interactions on screens, algorithmically edited information, and commercially driven digital environments. The age bracket of 18-35 years is no longer incidental to the digital environment and has become the main ingredient of the everyday life of that group as it relates to social media networks, video sharing services, food delivery apps, and target online advertising environments. Ofcom (2023) ^[6], reported that more than 90% of adults between 18 and 34 years in the UK use social media every day, and that their average daily screen time often goes beyond six hours a day. Such statistics do not merely represent a gradual changing of leisure patterns, but they represent a significant change in the informational, social, and commercial environment upon which the decision-making processes of weight-related behaviour occur continuously.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of such a change to the health of the population. According to NHS Digital (2022), 26% of adults in England are considered as obese and the quality of food and lack of physical activity are the most common modifiable risk factors that contribute to this continuing trend. The cost of weight-related conditions has been estimated to cost the National Health Service over £6 billion every year, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, and some preventable types of cancer as well (Public Health England, 2021). Although investment in both population and individual-level interventions to overcome the consequences of poor health has been sustained over the last

20 years, population trends have remained difficult to reverse and increased interest in the structural and environmental determinants of weight-related behaviour has become popular in scholarly literature and policy discussions. Digital media is among these determinants that have become a defining and continuously unregulated aspect, one whose impact is both omnipresent, commercially structured and virtually unseen by its victims.

The argument of considering digital media as the determinant of weight-related behaviour is based on two analytically distinct mechanisms. The first is the commercial mechanism as online platforms act as advertising universe, and food and beverage industry spread algorithmically optimised and micro-targeted advertising to encourage the consumption of products with an energy content and a lack of nutrients that the traditional regulations of the broadcasting media never aimed to cover (Boylund *et al.*, 2022) ^[2]. The second is the social and psychological mechanism as the image-based platforms actively mediate the body image ideals and lifestyle ideals

that young adults are exposed to on hourly basis producing the strong social comparison processes, which influence body satisfaction, dietary cognitions, and motivation to participate in health-promoting physical exercise (Valkenburg *et al.*, 2022) ^[11]. Both processes are functioning well below the level of conscious awareness, which casts some basic doubts regarding whether some form of behavioural explanation of health disparities associated with weight can be adequately explained at the individual level.

This paper deals with such concerns distinctly and critically. The theoretical framework that should be used in relation to this analysis is the Social cognitive theory developed by Bandura (1986) ^[1], according to which behaviour is due to a triadic and reciprocal interaction of the personal cognitive factors, action patterns and the environment. The framework is especially fit to examine the shaping and the shaping of individual behavioural patterns as per the digital environments in relation to eating, exercise, and body image. The article is not deterministic in approach as there are valid opportunities in using digital media to promote health, offer peer support, and self-managed behaviour change and these opportunities are discussed critically along with the surrounding dangers. There is a steady and systematic approach to the whole, the context is set, the pros and cons are analysed, and the final conclusion is made accordingly.

Adolescents between 18 and 35 years are a particularly educative and policy-relevant group to be studied in this research. They exist between the formal adolescent platforms and independent adult life, are the most digitally active group in the UK, and have the highest exposure to the commercial aspect of digital media simultaneously (Ofcom, 2023) ^[6].

2. Method

A qualitative methodology has been used in this study which consists of systematic literature review. The method used is the structured observational analysis, with the help of which the author conducts a thorough study of existing literature in accordance with the formulated research problem. The main data sources consist of peer-reviewed academic articles, systematic reviews, prospective cohort studies, national health surveillance reports, and policy documents published within the last 5 years (2021-2024), to be relevant and towards the present context in the UK. The process is used to

gain secondary data, analyse and synthesise them critically. The methodological strategy is aligned with conventional practise in both the field of public health and behavioural science, whereby systematic evidence synthesis has become a rigorous and suitable approach to generating policy-relevant inferences from scattered empirical evidence. This process of the methodology is further evaluated in detail as below.

2.1. Problem formulation

At this point, the problem of research is narrowly formulated and scoped. The main research question of the study is formulated in relation to the gap that can be identified in reference to the increasing rate of the digital media consumption usage and the level of the weight-related health outcomes measured on the population level, which stays low in the UK. The area is clearly restricted to the UK setting and to those sources that are relevant directly to the age group under consideration so that the conclusions that are made would be context-specific and policy-implementable. It is at this point that the choice of the analytical framework as the Social Cognitive Theory is informed based on its relevance in the triadic interaction of personal behaviour and environment which defines the influence of digital media on health behaviour explicitly.

2.2. Literature search

The search through Google Scholar and the institutional repositories is performed with the help different key words and combinations such as digital media and obesity UK, social media and weight-related behaviour young adults, digital food marketing United Kingdom, physical activity sedentary behaviour digital media, Social Cognitive Theory and health behaviour, and lifestyle choices young adults UK. The search is narrowed to studies that have been published since 2021 with the only exception being an introductory theoretical text by Bandura (1986) ^[1], which forms the basis of the analytical framework? The preference is in the peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews and meta-analyses, prospective cohort studies, and authoritative grey literature provided by authorities such as NHS Digital, Public Health England, Ofcom, and Sport England. Open-access repositories provide sources that are acquired with the aim of ensuring verifiability.

2.3. Data evaluation

All the sources found in the literature search are analysed based on three criteria including a direct relevance to the digital media, lifestyle preferences, and weight-based behaviours or their psychosocial and behavioural antecedents, the methodological rigour including systematic reviews, nationally representative surveys, and prospective cohort design, and the recentness that should be based on the 2021 to 2024 publication date, which aligns with the recency requirement of the study. Speculative sources, those with an ideologically based agenda, those with weak methodology or those that are simply less relevant to the UK situation with young adults are eliminated. The result of this evaluation process includes eight major sources including three systematic reviews or meta-analyses, a prospective cohort study, two reports of national surveys, and two official policy analysis.

2.4. Data analysis and interpretation

The remaining eight sources are subjected to thematic content analysis method, with the help of which identification, extraction and synthesis of the patterns of evidence that can be related to the core research question. The three fundamental constructs of the Social Cognitive Theory including observational learning, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations, are used to structure the analytical process to analyse both the negative and positive aspects of how the digital media affects weight-related behaviours through the prism of organisational lenses. Results are determined with the long-term consideration of the quality and consistency of the evidence provided, the structural and regulatory environment of the UK, and the methodological shortcomings of the cross-sectional and review designs of research. This analysis is not a descriptive analysis, but a critical analysis, which aims to question mechanisms and implications, and not to list associations.

The content analysis methodology used allows conducting a rigorous and critical synthesis of evidence based on different methodological aspects, ensuring that the conclusions made are based on extensive involvement with the complexity and internal contradictions of the available research. This is intentionally selected instead of a complete descriptive description as the point is to challenge the mechanisms,

compare existing explanations, and come up with conclusions that are analytically justified and useful in practical implementation of the policies in the area of public health explicitly.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

According to the systematic review of the literature and the following analysis, eight publications that fit the set inclusion criteria were located. All these sources can be related to the interconnection between the use of digital media, lifestyle trends, and weight-related health consequences in young adults, although the discussed aspect refers specifically to the situation in the UK. The evidence base involves systematic reviews, meta-analysis, prospective cohort study, national health surveys, and the authoritative policy analysis. The data of the research provided through the above sources are summarised in the table below including the name of the author, year of publication, area of the study of the data and the main finding of the study. Such an evidence base is carefully composed of different methodological approaches, which compiles quantitative, review-based, and policy-analytical approaches to give a methodologically triangulated image of the phenomenon being studied.

Table 1: Summary of Key Literature on Digital Media, Lifestyle Choices, and Weight-Related Behaviors in UK Young Adults

No	Author(s)	Year	Focus Area	Key Finding
1.	Boyland <i>et al.</i> [2]	2022	Digital food marketing and eating behaviors	The results of systematic review and meta-analysis have shown significant correlation between digital exposure to food and beverage marketing, and increased consumption of energy-rich and nutrient-dense products among youths significantly.
2.	Hartmann-Boyce <i>et al.</i> [4]	2021	Technology-supported weight management interventions	A systematic review illustrating that digitally-delivered behavioural weight management programmes yield clinically significant results in the event of structured goal-setting and social accountability in context of the SCT.
3.	Rauber <i>et al.</i> [8]	2021	Ultra-processed food and obesity risk – UK Biobank cohort	Prospective cohort study ascertaining a direct relationship between the consumption of ultra-processed foods and the risk of obesity in the UK adult population, and digitally promoted dietary patterns as contributors to the quantifiable changes in weight.
4.	Tatlow-Golden and Garde [10]	2023	Digital food marketing: harms and regulatory gaps	The influence of policy on the issue by critically analysing the current policy frameworks on how influencer relationships, micro-targeting, and immersive content marketing strategies are constructed to market nutrient-dense foods to youth outside of current UK advertising legislation.
5.	Valkenburg, Meier and Beyens [11]	2022	Social media and mental health, body image	Umbrella finding that the use of image-based social media is always linked to body dissatisfaction, social comparison distress and disordered eating cognitions among young adults and adolescents.
6.	Ofcom [6]	2023	Digital media use patterns among UK adults	National survey that found out that more than 9 out of 10 adults in the UK age 18-34 years daily use social media with a daily screen time of more than six hours giving the exposure base to the analysis of behavioural influence.
7.	Sport England [9]	2022	Physical activity levels among English adults	National survey result that high percentages of young English adults do not engage in the required levels of physical exercise with overly time-consuming screen time being found to be a key causative element of exercise avoidance.
8.	NHS Digital [5]	2022	Obesity prevalence and diet quality in England	National health survey reports 26% prevalence of adult obesity and that young adults aged 16-34 years have the lowest adherence to fruit and vegetable intake with high levels of consuming ultra-processed foods.

3.2. Discussion

The evidence that is synthesised in the given review provides a logical and an alarming image of the net effect of digital media on weight-related behaviours of the young adults in the UK. Critically analysed in the prism of the Social Cognitive Theory, although it also demonstrates that this influence is not predetermined and unavoidable, it is the result of structural and design decisions that are theoretically subject to change. This step, which involves analysis to leave decisively the descriptive stage and interact with the mechanisms, tensions, and policy implications in the

evidence, is the task of this stage of analysis.

The system of observational learning, which is the core of the SCT provided by Bandura (1986) [1], offers the closest explanation of the quantifiable effect of digital food marketing on dietary behaviour. When the feeds of young adults are algorithmically curated to consistently provide them with influencer-promotion, emotionally charged images of calories-dense foods as enjoyable, socially desirable, and identity-affirming, observational conditions of behavioural modelling have been set in a scale which is not previously seen in a media environment. However, Boyland *et al.* (2022)

[2] revealed that such modelling is translated into objectively more significant consumption of energy-dense products, which is also expected in SCT projections, which repeated vicarious reinforcement of a behaviour progressively heightens its adoption. The digital marketing environment is that a lot of this observational learning happens without any awareness including sponsored content, native advertising, and influencer endorsements often go unnoticed as commercial advertising, and to a significant extent they are undergoing the deliberative processing that would be invoked under other circumstances, particularly invoking the response of a critical consumer, which is highly concerning. The resultant effect is normalisation of unhealthy eating habits that override the threshold, where traditional health education can actually intervene.

The UK Biobank data presented by Rauber *et al.* (2021) [8] supported this consideration since it shows that the consumption of ultra-processed foods as the most widely advertised category has a positive and quantifiable relationship with the risk of obesity among the adult population in the UK. More importantly, this result places digital marketing not only in the framework of a cultural phenomenon, but within the framework of a tangible and measurable health burden to the population as well. To blame the long-term increase in the consumption of ultra-processed foods on personal choice or inability to exercise self-restraint, and not attribute the role of commercial and technological institutions that are organised to endorse and support this consumption, is an analytical and a policy failure with real-world implications regarding health disparities in the UK.

An additional critical complexity is provided by the self-efficacy dimension of SCT. One of the strongest predictors of long-lasting health behaviour change in different fields is self-efficacy, which is the belief that a person holds in their ability to perform a certain behaviour and attain the desired outcome (Bandura, 1986) [1]. With their exposure of young adults to an unremitting and algorithmically fortified flow of digitally exaggerated and highly narrow body images, image-based social media platforms create a social comparison context whereby the body-related self-efficacy of many users becomes gradually and exponentially diminished. Valkenburg *et al.* (2022) [11] ensured that the outcomes of this process create body dissatisfaction and disordered eating cognitions in a population level. The behavioural outcomes at the downstream, such as avoiding exercise settings because of body self-consciousness, overeating as a reaction to the distresses triggered by comparison, the adoption of unsustainable and not medically evaluated dietary habits out of appearance motivation, but independent of, and on top of the immediate impacts of food marketing, is a major and underestimated channel by which digital media causes poor weight-related health outcomes.

Outcome expectations, which is the third SCT construct, is another theoretical prism through which the role played by digital media in the weight-related behaviours can be perceived explicitly. Outcome expectations refer to a set of beliefs that a person has about what is likely to happen when a person participates in a specific behaviour. Systematic commercial food advertisement is a way of constructing these expectations by positioning the consumption of products rich in energy as directly gratifying, socially bonding, and emotionally fulfilling, and largely conceals or minimises the health outcomes in the long term (Tatlow-Golden and Garde, 2023). This perversion of expectations of outcomes is

especially relevant in the young adult age group that is at the developmental stage when the formation of an identity and belonging to the social group is a highly relevant motivational agenda, which is commercially created digital content is skillfully crafted to attract. Simultaneously, digital interventions promoting health that are aimed at biasing the expectations that individuals have regarding physical activity and balanced nutrition in a realistic and optimistic way show that such a mechanism is also susceptible to beneficial effects. Hartmann-Boyce *et al.* (2021) [21], recorded that interventions that assist users to build realistic expectations of attainable outcomes of weight-related changes result in greater adherence and long-term behavioural change than the one based on idealised transformation. This supports the inference that the issue is not the digital media as a medium but commercial motive that it is being used to achieve in the present regulatory framework.

It is here that the multidimensional nature of digital media comes into the most analytically significant growth and requires an actual assessment in terms of balance. The infrastructure channelling commercially driven, health-compromising food content carries a significant proportion of communities that focus on inclusive fitness, evidence-based nutritional advice, and health behaviour change facilitated by peers. The evidence presented by Hartmann-Boyce *et al.* (2021) [4], on the use of technology to deliver weight management interventions, designed with structured behavioural support and accountability mechanisms operationalising SCT principles, has been compelling that the programmes lead to clinically relevant results as compared to face-to-face programmes. Sport England (2022) [9], also captured the growth of digitally enabled active living networks that offer affordable, easy access points to physical activity by young adults experiencing structural impediments to engagement in official sport or exercise in the gym. These results have an analytic significance as they determine that the digital medium is not necessarily adverse, and that carefully and thoughtfully constructed interventions can use its unrivalled reach and accessibility to in ways that actually promote healthy weight-related behaviour.

Whether the digital media can serve the positive weight-related effects is not then the decisive question, the evidence shows that they can, but why the commercially structured digital space fails in this systematic way in the population level, and what structural conditions have to be altered so that this imbalance is addressed effectively and efficiently. The most analytically rigorous response is provided by Tatlow-Golden and Garde (2023) as the technical complexity of modern digital marketing, including granular behavioural micro-targeting, video content formats that are immersive and short in form, and commercially-scaled networks of influencer creators, have made the current regulations governing UK advertising practises virtually ineffective in the digital environment. The HFSS advertising restrictions that were historically to the broadcast media have not been sufficiently extended to exactly the digital ecosystem, creating a regulatory gap that the actors in the commercial food industry systematically and progressively are filling with evidence-based learned skill. Ofcom (2023) [6], statistics confirming near-universal daily use of social media by young adults in the UK proved that this vacuum introduces the overpopulating majority of the target group to a non-mediated, algorithmically-optimised commercial food information on a daily and mostly non-avoidable scale.

Unless structural change is undertaken successfully, the commercial logic of a majority of platforms will still dominate and the therapeutic potential of digital health tools and the aspirations of UK public health policy are still not going to become a reality.

4. Thank-You Note

The author would like to personally thank the researchers, the organisations of the public health, and academic institutions whose work became the basis of the empirical and theoretical background of this article. The works of researchers that have been conducted over the field of nutritional epidemiology, digital health, behavioural public health, and media studies have proven essential in the lines of argument formulated here. Special recognition is given to the fact that it is due to the systematic reviews of those and the nationally representative health surveys that rigorous open-access evidence has become accessible to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, across the UK. The author also identifies the necessity of sustainability of institutional dedication to open-access publication to ensure that evidence of the population health is accessible to all communities with the vested interest in enhancing population health outcomes responsibly

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has critically analysed how digital media and lifestyle decisions influence weight-related behaviours in young adults in the UK based on a systematic literature review methodology and the Social Cognitive Theory as the main analytical model. The reviewed evidence highlights the direction of asserting that digital media serves as a multidimensional agent as it empowers and disempowers healthy weight-related behaviours simultaneously, yet under the existing structural conditions, when the commercial organisation of digital food marketing is the order of the day, the overall population-level impact will still be negative.

The discussion shows that behavioural change is not possible at the individual level with the help of individual education and personal power as the environmental factors, which predispose behaviour, are systematically organised against health. The fact that SCT focuses on the three-factor approach to the relationship between personal and behavioural and environmental factors highlights that the interventions that neglect the commercial digital environment as a structural element of the problem are inadequate. Policies that are effective and enforceable on digital food advertising to young adults can be considered as the most effective and immediate lever that a policymaker can make. This should be supported by long-term community investment in digital health literacy, efforts to ensure that effective accountability systems are aligned which see the platform economic incentives matched to the goals of population health, and by further investment in the rigorous evaluation of SCT-informed digital health intervention programmes in socioeconomically diverse populations.

Future methods of study should focus on longitudinal and quasi-experimental study designs that can provide causal directions between particular digital media practises and weight-related outcomes, and should test the greater efficacy of regulatory and digital intervention strategies in the entire socioeconomic spectrum of the UK young adult population as well. Comparative study of regulation of digital food advertising among different countries would also be useful in

informing policy change in the UK explicitly.

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