Adolescents' Food Communication in Social Media

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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 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.

FOOD CONTENTS IN NUMEROUS SOCIAL MEDIA

Communication includes both the sending and receiving of messages. Online, adolescents are exposed to messages relating to food, but they also act as uploaders of food-related content such as images or videos of food items. Along these lines, there are a growing number of studies highlighting ways in which food communication is perpetuated through different types of social media applications.

Food blogs provide information and inspiration regarding recipes, meal ideas, and food items. As such, they have the capacity to shape

adolescents' social norms regarding how, what, and where to eat. Schneider et al. (2013) found that popular American food blogs met energy recommendations but were excessive in saturated fat and sodium. The authors therefore suggested that the public should be aware of the nutritional limitations of common food blogs. Simunaniemi et al. (2011) analyzed how laypeople blogged about fruits and vegetables. The study revealed that the bloggers approached fruit and vegetables through either lived or mediated experiences and that self-expression that aimed to influence others' diets was common in these blogs. There are also examples of how blogs are used to foster controversial dietary practices. Using the spreadable media theory (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), research has shown that blogs allow for non-conventional experts to circumvent traditional peer-review processes by publishing in the public domain. Holmberg (2015) uses the example of how prominent low-carb high fat diet promoters in Sweden could reach a wide audience and appeal to a like-minded community of dieters by using self-made blogs and websites. Also microblogs such as Twitter have been analyzed in regards to food communication. Hingle et al. (2013) found that Twitter can provide a method for observing real-time food consumption and that this type of data visualization may present a method of identifying relationships between diet and behavior.

Media-sharing sites popular with adolescents, such as YouTube also propagate large amounts of food and diet information. Cerri et al. (2012) showed that a large number of the videos on YouTube labeled with the word "diet" did not contain this information. The researchers also found that a majority of the videos did not contain scientifically sound information and that videos often contained incomplete information. boyd and Ellison (2007) defined social network sites as:

… web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users

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