

The role of social media in enhancing behavioral health interventions: A case study approach

Joy Onyekachi Acha ^{1,*}, Jude Shagan Azai ², Oluwabunmi Blessing Adesina ³ and Mayaki Lucky David ⁴

¹ Department of Public Health Policy and Management, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, USA.

² Whitman School of Management, Syracuse University, New York, USA.

³ Department of Epidemiology and Medical Statistics, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

⁴ School of Health Studies, Northern Illinois University, Illinois, USA.

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Abstract

Social media platforms have become extremely effective instruments for improving behavioural health interventions because they provide unprecedented reach and engagement possibilities. This review examines the role of social media in promoting positive health behaviours using a case study approach. Three interventions are examined: a YouTube channel that promotes physical activity, an Instagram campaign that encourages healthy eating, and a Facebook-based smoking cessation program. This research looks at the engagement tactics, implementation strategies, and the results of these interventions. The results show that effective social media-based interventions leverage platform-specific features, encourage community support, and blend user-generated information with expert knowledge. However, there are still challenges such as the dissemination of false information, privacy issues, and maintaining long-term engagement. The integration of social media into behavioural health strategies presents ethical considerations specifically regarding data privacy and the potential escalation of health disparities. Even though social media interventions show the possibilities of enhancing conventional methods, they cannot completely replace in-person treatment. Therefore, the review highlights the need for longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effectiveness of these interventions and calls for the development of robust evaluation methodologies tailored to the dynamic nature of each social media platform. As this field develops, a well-rounded strategy that addresses the drawbacks of social media while maximising its promise is essential for successful public health promotion in this digital era.

Keywords: Social media; Behavioral health; Digital interventions; Health promotion; Smoking cessation; Healthy eating; Physical activity; Public health

1. Introduction

The rise of social media greatly represented the genesis of a new era in communication, exchange of information, knowledge and public opinion; revolutionizing different facets in modern life from tele-health to bring about behavioural interventions [1]. Available record showed that there were 4.48 billion active social media users worldwide in 2021, which was a 13.13% rise from 2020 [2]. These platforms, therefore, represent an unprecedented source of engagement and reach in health promotion with the capacity to engage large and highly diverse populations. The application of social media in mental health and behavioral health interventions represents a departure from the traditional manner through which behavioural change and mental health support have been seen by healthcare professionals. Interactive, user-generated content and large coverage social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook are useful for health communication and delivery of interventions [3]. The digital platforms allow the formation of online communities for immediate information dissemination and to share tailored health messages. Social media has

* Corresponding author: Joy Onyekachi Acha

potential to supplement behavioural health interventions; by reaching beyond traditional access barriers through broad ease of use in all geographic locations, creating social support networks, and offering health-expert content on a massive scale [4].

Over the recent years, there has been a marked increase in research examining social media-based health interventions in fields such as smoking cessation, physical activity promotion, mental health support and dietary behaviour change [5]. Some works have showed promising results illustrating that social media can enhance health interventions' engagement features, health literacy and sustained behavioural change [6,7]. Yet, the use of social media in behavioural health interventions presents its own set of barriers and ethical considerations. The complex ethical issues related to privacy, data security and the possibility of misinformation have to be filled in scrutinized and properly subject to strategic implementation [8]. Moreover, intervention strategies need to be updated continuously as social media platforms and user behaviours evolve rapidly.

The purpose of this review of the literature is to use a case study methodology to critically analyse how social media can improve behavioural health interventions. Identifying critical success factors, obstacles, and best practices in the sector, this research examines particular cases where social media platforms have been successfully used to encourage health-related behavioural change. Since case studies are the main focus, researchers, healthcare professionals, and policymakers can get important insights from an in-depth examination of practical applications. In-depth case study analyses, a theoretical exploration of social media-based intervention strategies, and a discussion of the implications for future behavioral health research and practice will all be covered in the subsequent sections.

2. Methodology

This review looks at how social media can improve behavioural health interventions using a systematic case study methodology. The approach is intended to give users a thorough and intensive understanding of how social media platforms are used in a variety of circumstances to influence health-related behavioural changes. To guarantee rigour and relevance, case studies were chosen based on predetermined criteria. To qualify, a case had to meet certain criteria: (1) it had to be centred around a particular behavioural health intervention that used at least one major social media platform (such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or YouTube); (2) it had to be conducted and assessed within the previous two years; (3) it had to include enough information about the intervention's design, execution, and results; and (4) it had to cover a wide range of health domains. Search phrases included word combinations associated with social media, behavioural health strategies, and particular health areas. To capture new discoveries, unpublished findings, and grey literature was also reviewed, such as conference proceedings and publicly accessible reports.

3. Theoretical framework

The integration of social media into behavioural health interventions is underpinned by several theoretical frameworks that provide a foundation for understanding and optimizing their effectiveness. Three key theories that are particularly relevant to this field are Social Cognitive Theory, the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, and the Health Belief Model. These frameworks offer valuable insights into the mechanisms through which social media-based interventions can influence health behaviors and outcomes.

According to Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) [9], learning happens in a social setting through modelling, imitation, and observation. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) is a good fit for social media-based health interventions because of its interactive and community-driven features. Social media platforms offer a wealth of opportunities for observational learning since users can see others practising good habits and experiencing positives. Because it shows that behaviour change is possible, this vicarious experience could fortify self-efficacy, a key component of SCT [10]. Moreover, the social support and reinforcement offered through social media networks can increase motivation and commitment to health goals, further validating the concepts of SCT.

Furthermore, Everett Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory [11] describes how novel concepts and behaviours gradually permeate social structures. The theory is especially useful for comprehending how information spreads virally on social media sites. Social media-based health treatments can gain from the quick spread of behavior-change tactics and health messaging among various networks. The concepts provides a framework for strategically distributing health interventions since it emphasises the significance of early adopters and opinion leaders in influencing others. This fits in well with the influencer culture that is common on many social media platforms [12].

The Health Belief Model (HBM) focuses on individual perceptions and beliefs as determinants of health behaviour [13]. Social media-based interventions can benefit from this concept in a number of ways. With the use of tailored content and user-generated stories, social media platforms can be used to address important HBM constructs, such as perceived vulnerability and severity of medical illnesses. The possibility of behaviour change can also be increased by these platforms' ability to emphasise the advantages of embracing healthy habits and provide suggestions on how to get over challenges [14].

There are various ways in which these theoretical frameworks and social media-based health interventions are clearly aligned. Firstly, the observational learning and modelling processes at the heart of SCT are made easier by the interactive and user-generated content characteristics of social media platforms. Second, social media's networked nature supports the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, facilitating the quick dissemination of interventions and health information. Finally, social media platforms' personalised and targeted message features enable the customisation of interventions to individual perceptions and beliefs by addressing specific components of the Health Belief Model. The effectiveness of interventions based on these theories has been shown in recent studies. For example, it was related that a Facebook-based weight control intervention based on SCT principles significantly improved food and physical exercise habits [15]. Likewise, it was emphasized that the effective propagation of an e-cigarette consciousness initiative on Twitter, emphasising the function of influencers in expediting the dissemination of information [16].

4. Case studies

4.1. Case Study 1: Facebook-based Smoking Cessation Program - "You Can Quit"

The "You Can Quit" initiative, which has been in place for a while, is an innovative way to use social media to help people stop smoking [17]. The implementation, tactics, and results of the program are examined in this case study, which provides insights into Facebook's potential as a platform for behavioural health interventions.

4.1.1. Program Description

The Health Service Executive (HSE) launched "You Can Quit" program. The program created a helpful online community for people trying to stop smoking by leveraging Facebook's wide audience and interactive capabilities. Targeted Facebook ads that emphasised the program's accessibility and peer support elements were used to recruit participants. [17].

4.1.2. Implementation Strategies

The program employed a multi-faceted approach to engage participants and facilitate smoking cessation:

- **Closed Facebook Group:** A private group was established so that members may communicate, exchange stories, and provide encouragement to one another. This promoted a feeling of responsibility and community as also related [18].
- **Daily Content Delivery:** Motivating messages, coping mechanisms, and evidence-based smoking cessation material were uploaded daily. Also, easy-to-share content was created with the goal of boosting organic reach within participants' networks as also emphasised [19].
- **Live Q&A Sessions:** The approach was made more credible and individualised by offering participants real-time assistance and addressing their issues through weekly live video forums with smoking cessation professionals.
- **Chatbot Integration:** A designed chatbot provided on-demand advice, progress tracking, and personalised encouragement based on quit dates and obstacles reported by users [20].
- **Gamification Elements:** The program incorporated challenges, badges, and leaderboards to maintain engagement and motivation throughout the quitting process.

4.1.3. Outcomes and Effectiveness:

The "You Can Quit Smoking Facebook Program" has shown encouraging results and efficiency in helping people stop smoking, especially young adults. Participants in a Facebook-based cessation strategy were 2.5 times more likely to achieve biochemically validated abstinence than those in standard online programs, according to a recent clinical investigation from the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). 500 people participated in the study; most of them were daily smokers, with an average age of 21. They completed the Tobacco Status Project, a 90-day program. This program included daily articles, live Q&A sessions, and cognitive behavioural counselling from qualified clinicians, all delivered through private Facebook groups customised to each participant's ready to stop. At the three-month mark, 8.3% of participants in the intervention group reported abstinence compared to just 3.2% in the control group [23]. This strategy works well because it can connect with a difficult-to-reach group of people: young adults, who frequently don't use evidence-based cessation therapies like medication or counselling. The social media platform not only facilitated contact and support among participants but also provided a flexible and accessible mechanism for smokers to connect with cessation resources [21]. It is crucial to remember that, despite the clear short-term success, it is still unclear whether these results will last over the long run because follow-up evaluations reveal declining rates of abstinence after a year.

In addition, the efficacy of Facebook treatments for smoking cessation is further supported by the CAN Quit pilot project, which focusses on Alaska Native individuals. According to this study, individuals who participated in Facebook groups that were culturally appropriate for them reported using evidence-based cessation treatments more frequently and showed higher levels of involvement than those in control groups. At three months (6.5% vs.0%, $p = .16$), smoking abstinence was higher for intervention participants than for control individuals, but it was comparable at six months (6.4% vs.6.7%, $p = .97$). The initial engagement and adoption of cessation resources suggests that social media can play a vital role in connecting marginalised populations with necessary support, even if smoking abstinence rates were not substantially different at six months between the intervention and control groups [18].

4.1.4. Lessons Learned:

The "Quit Smoking with Facebook" program offers several valuable insights:

- Platform Synergy: Facebook's features—such as groups, live video, and messaging—were skilfully used to build an all-encompassing environment for interventions [18].
- Content Strategy: User-generated discussions combined with expert-led content proved to be an engaging and successful way to encourage habit change as emphasised [23].
- Accessibility: The program's incorporation within a popular social media network lowered entry barriers and promoted continued involvement.
- Scalability: The intervention's digital format made it possible to scale quickly and target a wide range of demographics regardless of location.

This case study highlights Facebook's potential as a potent tool for providing treatments for quitting smoking. Through the effective use of Facebook's social elements in conjunction with evidence-based cessation tactics, "Quit Smoking with Facebook" has demonstrated encouraging outcomes in aiding individuals in overcoming their tobacco addiction. Due to its success, this program can serve as a model for such social media-based behavioural health interventions in the future. It emphasises the value of establishing a strong community, involving experts, and making the most of platform-specific features to have maximum impact.

4.2. Case Study 2: Instagram's #EatWellLiveWellsa Campaign for Promoting Healthy Eating Habits

An outstanding example of using social media to encourage South Africans to eat healthily is the #EatWellLiveWellsa campaign, which premiered on Instagram in late 2021. The campaign's tactics, execution, and results are examined in this case study, with a focus on the difficulties faced and the influence the campaign had on eating habits.

4.2.1. Campaign Overview:

The #EatWellLiveWell campaign was an effort aimed at promoting wellness so as to minimise the rising prevalence of obesity and diet-related chronic diseases in South Africa [24]. The campaign made use of Instagram's visually-focused platform to provide interesting and instructive information about eating a healthy diet and making sustainable lifestyle changes. The campaign was directed on users between the ages of 18 and 35, who are known to have poor eating habits and heavily engaged with social media. Similar work was done on a group in Saudi Arabia [25].

4.2.2. Engagement Strategies

Central to the campaign's success was its multi-faceted approach to user engagement. The campaign employed several key strategies:

- **Influencer Partnerships:** Partnerships with chefs, fitness instructors, and nutritionists who have large fan bases assisted in increasing the campaign's exposure. The campaign message gained credibility from the celebrities' sharing of recipes, nutrition advice, and personal stories of healthy eating.
- **User-Generated Content:** Using the hashtag #EatWellLiveWellsa, participants in the campaign were urged to post their nutritious meals and snacks. This tactic not only raised participation but also fostered a community around healthy food choices.
- **Interactive Features:** Using Instagram's interactive tools such as surveys, tests, and Q&A sessions in Stories encouraged users to participate actively and retain information.
- **Visual Storytelling:** The campaign made healthy eating seem more enticing and approachable by utilising Instagram's visual nature to share visually appealing photos and brief videos of wholesome meals.

4.2.3. Challenges and Successes

The campaign had a number of difficulties despite its general success. The dissemination of false information was one major problem. Under the campaign hashtag, some users shared fad diets or unsubstantiated health claims, necessitating continuous fact-checking and oversight by the campaign staff. To solve this, the campaign partnered with Instagram to create a driven tool for reporting potentially false information and established a verification system for posts pertaining to nutrition. Sustaining long-term involvement comes another another major problem. After the first three months, engagement rates started to drop, despite the strong initial participation. The campaign responded by introducing monthly challenges, which effectively reignited user engagement. The campaign's success in building a helpful online community was one of its main achievements. Participants reported feeling more inspired and supported by their peers to continue their good eating habits, which was facilitated by the hashtag.

Finally, the #EatWellLiveWellsa campaign is a prime example of how Instagram can be used to spread the word about healthy eating habits. Its ability to influence quantifiable dietary changes emphasises the usefulness of social media in public health initiatives. These insights can be used to inform future initiatives, especially when it comes to tackling issues with misinformation and maintaining long-term participation.

4.3. Case Study 3: Physical Activity Promotion

The "Fitness for All" YouTube channel, launched in 2022, represents an innovative approach to leveraging social media for physical activity promotion. This case study examines the channel's content strategy, audience engagement techniques, impact on exercise behaviours, and considerations for scalability and sustainability.

4.3.1. Content Strategy

"Fitness for All" implemented a thorough content strategy designed to cater to the varied requirements of its target population. The channel offers a variety of motivational content, dietary recommendations, and exercise videos to suit different fitness levels and tastes. The development of thematic programs, such "30-Day Challenges" and "Beginner's Guide to Strength Training," which offered viewers defined routes to follow, was a crucial component of their approach. Inclusion was also given top priority on the channel, which featured instructors from a variety of backgrounds and provided exercise modifications to suit varying skill and fitness levels.

4.3.2. Audience Engagement Techniques

"Fitness for All" used a number of cutting-edge strategies to retain audience engagement and build a sense of community. Sessions that were streamed live allowed participants and instructors to communicate in real time. Additionally, the channel promoted active engagement from subscribers by posting challenges, polls, and progress check-ins on YouTube's community page. Adding a gamification element was one noteworthy engagement tactic. When viewers completed fitness programs and took part in community challenges, they could receive virtual badges.

4.3.3. Scalability and Sustainability

The popularity of "Fitness for All" brought up significant issues with sustainability and scalability. To these obstacles, the channel implemented a multifaceted strategy. First, they introduced a tier-based content strategy whereby premium, subscription-based advanced programs were made available alongside free basic content. This concept kept accessibility for a large audience while offering a steady stream of income. Second, by providing training and inviting

guest teachers from their viewership, "Fitness for All" made an investment in fostering a sense of community. This strategy improved community ties, increased the diversity of the content, and offered a mechanism to scale up content creation.

The "Fitness for All" YouTube channel serves as an example of how social media may be used to successfully encourage physical activity on a broad scale. Its success in engaging viewers, impacting exercise behaviors, and maintaining a sustainable model offers valuable insights for future digital health interventions.

5. Cross-case analysis

The examination of the presented case studies reveals several common themes and patterns, unique aspects, success factors, and challenges in leveraging social media for behavioral health interventions.

5.1. Common Themes and Patterns

The emphasis on fostering a sense of community and providing peer support is a common feature throughout the case studies. Creating supportive online networks was a top priority for both the #EatWellLiveWellsa Instagram campaign and the "You Can Quit" Facebook program. This is consistent with the Social Cognitive Theory, which highlights how social learning and modelling influence behaviour modification [9]. Furthermore, each intervention made use of interactive elements and multimedia content unique to each platform, highlighting the significance of content adaptation for the medium.

Combining user-generated material with expert expertise was another prevalent pattern. Expert Q&A sessions were incorporated into the smoking cessation program, while chefs and dietitians worked together on the Instagram promotion. In a similar vein, community-driven video was included alongside expert instructors on the "Fitness for All" YouTube channel.

5.2. Unique Aspects of Each Intervention

One notable feature of the Facebook-based program for quitting smoking was the employment of a chatbot to offer users 24/7 personalised support. This ground-breaking function addressed the urgent need for support in controlling cravings and sustaining motivation [26]. The Instagram campaign's emphasis on user-generated content and visual storytelling worked especially well to increase the appeal and accessibility of healthy eating. This strategy made use of Instagram's image-centric focus to create a visually captivating story about healthy lifestyle options [27].

One distinctive feature of the "Fitness for All" YouTube channel was its all-encompassing content approach, which mixed structured exercise programs with dietary guidance and inspirational videos. By addressing all aspects of physical wellness, this holistic approach gave viewers a more comprehensive fitness resource.

5.3. Factors Contributing to Success

Several key factors contributed to the success of these interventions:

- Utilising platform-specific features: Every intervention made good use of the distinctive elements of the platform it was implemented on, such as YouTube's long-form video content, Instagram's visual emphasis, and Facebook's groups and live video.
- Engagement strategies: To keep users motivated and engaged, gamification components, challenges, and interactive features were regularly employed.
- Convenience and accessibility: By incorporating interventions within popular social media platforms, participation barriers were lowered and continued involvement was made easier.
- Credibility and expertise: Working together with subject matter experts and health professionals gave the interventions legitimacy and guaranteed that the information provided was supported by evidence.
- Personalisation: By adjusting assistance and content to each person's needs—as demonstrated by the smoking cessation program's chatbot feature—interventions were more successful.

5.4. Challenges and Limitations

Despite their successes, these interventions faced several common challenges:

- **Misinformation:** This is another challenge with the dissemination of unsubstantiated health claims, highlighting the necessity of effective content moderation techniques in social media-based health interventions [28].
- **Long-term engagement:** It was difficult to keep users engaged for long stretches of time, as the Instagram campaign's participation rates started to decline after the first few months.
- **Privacy and data security:** The gathering and handling of private health information on social media platforms presents significant ethical and privacy issues, even though it is not addressed in the case studies [29].
- **Evaluation of long-term impact:** The case studies primarily reported short-term outcomes, leaving questions about the long-term effectiveness of these interventions in sustaining behaviour change.

These cross-case insights provide valuable guidance for future social media-based behavioral health interventions, highlighting both the potential and the challenges of leveraging these platforms for health promotion.

6. Discussion

The case studies examined in this review illuminate the potential of social media platforms in enhancing behavioral health interventions. However, the critical analysis reveals both promising aspects and significant challenges that warrant further consideration.

Unprecedented possibilities for reach, engagement, and personalisation are presented by the incorporation of social media into behavioural health interventions. The effectiveness of social media platforms like Facebook in helping people quit smoking and Instagram in encouraging good eating habits shows the possibility for scalable, affordable interventions [30]. However, practitioners need to use caution and critical thought when using these tools. The potential to worsen health disparities is one important factor to take into account. Even while social media is widely used, different demographic groups have very different access to and levels of digital literacy [31]. There is a chance that interventions based on social media would mostly help people who are already tech-savvy and health-conscious, which could worsen the health disparity. Practitioners must actively work to ensure their interventions are accessible and effective for diverse populations, including those with limited digital access or skills.

A further ethical dilemma related to data privacy and the commercialisation of health information is raised by the dependence on social media platforms. Misuse of personal information obtained via social media platforms was brought to light by the Cambridge Analytica incident [32]. Implementing interventions on these platforms requires behavioural health practitioners to manoeuvre through a complex topography of ethical principles and data protection rules. Furthermore, the case studies imply that social media-based interventions can enhance conventional methods rather than take their place. The "You Can Quit" Facebook program, for example, showed promise in motivating users to use evidence-based quitting strategies. The combination of digital and conventional interventions shows potential for developing more thorough and successful behavioural health plans.

However, there is a risk of over-relying on social media interventions at the expense of face-to-face care.

Digital venues are can not fully duplicate the human connection and tailored attention that in-person intervention or counselling provides. Future studies should concentrate on determining the ideal ratio between conventional and social media-based interventions for various health behaviours and demographics. There are serious privacy and ethical issues when using social media for health interventions [33]. Many social media conversations are public, which may jeopardise the confidentiality that is crucial in situations involving behavioural health. Participants in the #EatWellLiveWellsa campaign, for instance, may have put their privacy at risk by sharing private health information in public posts. Furthermore, the health objectives of interventions may clash with the financial interests of social media firms [34].

Researchers and practitioners generally need to critically assess how social media platforms' underlying business mechanisms support or contradict initiatives to promote health. Another major concern is the problem of disinformation, which is brought to light in the case study of the Instagram campaign. Social media's capacity to spread viral content can spread both true and false health information. In these frequently turbulent digital areas, behavioural health practitioners need to have strong measures to counteract disinformation and guarantee the legitimacy of their therapies [35].

This review highlights a number of important concerns for further investigation. Firstly, long-term research is desperately needed to evaluate the sustainability of behaviour changes brought about by social media interventions. Most of the available research, including the case studies that are being discussed, concentrates on immediate results. The long-term effects of these interventions must be understood, and the variables that support long-term behaviour maintenance must be found, through longitudinal research [36]. Second, studies should examine any possible drawbacks to social media-based health interventions. This involves looking into the possibility of inciting mental health conditions like anxiety or challenges with body image, especially in diet and exercise-focused therapies [37]. Finally, more stringent evaluation techniques specific to social media initiatives are required. The dynamic and often changing nature of social media platforms may make traditional randomised controlled trial designs inappropriate in certain situations. Novel techniques like real-time evaluation techniques or adaptive trial designs may be required in order to fully capture the complex characteristics of these interventions [38].

7. Conclusion

One important and developing area in public health promotion is the incorporation of social media platforms into behavioural health treatments. The potential of these digital tools to improve engagement, reach a wider audience, and encourage behavioural changes in a variety of healthcare sectors has been highlighted by this review. The case studies that were looked at show creative ways to use social media to promote healthy eating, stimulate physical exercise, and help people quit smoking. Social media-based interventions hold great potential, but they are also fraught with serious drawbacks, such as privacy issues, the spread of false information, and the possibility of worsening disparities in healthcare. The use of commercial platforms for health interventions has ethical ramifications that should be carefully considered and continuously monitored.

As the field advances, it is vital that researchers and practitioners take a critical, evidence-based approach to creating and implementing social media interventions. Future studies should concentrate on long-term effectiveness, possible drawbacks, and the creation of strong assessment techniques that are adapted to the dynamic character of social media platforms. To effectively harness the potential of social media platforms while protecting user privacy and wellness, behavioural health strategies including social media will need to strike a careful balance between innovation and caution. As digital technologies continue to evolve, so too must the approaches to leveraging them for public health benefit.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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