

Public Reaction to the UK Government Strategy on Childhood Obesity in England

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Introduction

The UK is battling a childhood obesity epidemic with nearly a third of children in England currently overweight or obese [1]. Without action, these rates are predicted to increase to a point where nine in ten adults and two-thirds of children will be overweight or obese by 2050 [2]. In July 2016, the UK government published their strategy to tackle the childhood obesity crisis [3]. However, with recent public health strategies proving ineffective to stem rises in obesity thus far [4], evaluating the public reaction to the latest measure is essential

Aim

The aim of this research was to analyse user-generated comments made to online newspapers reports on the obesity strategy to record real time opinions and reactions to the publication of the strategy. A secondary aim was to examine likes/dislikes associated with comments for representativeness of overall themes.

Methods

Comments and associated likes and dislikes were collected from newspaper articles within 24 h of publication of the strategy. After applying criteria for inclusion and exclusion, three newspaper articles with 1704 associated comments were identified. An ethnographic (ethnography) approach was applied to interpret the comments and generate themes as previously described elsewhere in detail [5]. The top five most liked and disliked comments from each article were extracted and summarised as a proxy of agreement of the wider community with the identified themes. Comments were also classified as either positive or negative in response to the strategy.

Results and Discussion

It is well acknowledged that an effective policy is reliant on the directives being supported and adopted by the major stakeholders. The childhood obesity strategy lists schools, communities, families and individuals as stakeholders and is presented as the "start of a conversation" on a course of action to prevent obesity rates in children and therefore adults, continuing to rise. However, there was little engagement with these stakeholders in formulating the strategy. This work has opened up the conversation and placed public opinion central to the debate, we summarised public interest and their

preferred action using the comments facility provided by online newspapers.

The public response to the policy was largely negative (94% of comments). Three major themes emerged from the data; paternalism or libertarianism, lobbyist influence and, anecdotal solutions. There were divergent views about the causes of obesity and the level of government intervention that there should be. Most prominently, comments demonstrated a suspicion of the relationship between the government and food industry and distrust on the grounds of profit seeking that placed industry interests before public health. Suggestions for solutions to the obesity problem were mostly anecdotal, non-evidence based and lacked utility. We also found large similarities between the attitudes and themes presented in the comments and those presented in the newspaper articles, highlighting the influential role of the media in communicating health messages and policy to the public.

Conclusion

The research demonstrated that the internet can be a source for public engagement, consultation and as a means to gauge public opinion. The themes identified here, particularly those of distrust and suspicion and the influential role the media had on public opinion on this occasion, informs the need for more public engagement and the active management of the publication of future strategies and public health policies. Public engagement through approaches such as this could stem public scepticism, apathy and enhance receptiveness.

References

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