

Social Media influences adolescent diet and exercise behaviours in mostly negative ways;

Health Behaviours are driven by **guilt** and **body dissatisfaction**

A qualitative investigation of social media's influence on body-related health behaviours in Irish adolescents

Ciara Mahon, Selin Akkol Solakolgu & Prof. David Hevey

Background:

Social media constitutes a primary source of health and body-related information for adolescents.

However, little is known about...

- **what** body-related content adolescents consume on social media,
- **how** they interpret this content,
- and to **what extent** their behaviours are influenced by this content.

Methods:

Four focus groups, 3 with females only (n = 23) and 1 with males only (n = 6)

investigated social media use in relation to body-related health behaviours among adolescents.

Participants were aged between 15-16 years ($M=15.31$, $SD=.47$) and were from rural and urban Irish secondary schools.

Inductive thematic analysis identified several themes within the data.

Findings:

- Social media was reported to exert a strong & largely negative influence on adolescent dietary and exercise behaviours.
- **Body-related behaviours were driven by feelings of body-dissatisfaction and guilt which were induced by appearance comparisons with idealised social media content**
- Health behaviours were pursued for largely aesthetic rather than health focused reasons, especially for females.
- Awareness of the unrealistic and unattainable nature of body ideals did not stop adolescents from trying to achieve them by emulating behaviours of celebrities social media influencers

Discussion:

It is important to understand the complex ways that social media influences the body-related behaviours of both genders at this developmental stage to inform efforts as to how to promote adolescent health and wellbeing.

"Sometimes, I'd just be kind of normal, ok, grand. And then I'd go on social media and I'd feel upset and sad about myself after using it"

"just like eating healthy all the time and everything like that. It would kind of make you feel bad for not doing it"

P8,
P4a

I do follow loads of fitness accounts and now I follow many health food accounts ... so that like definitely influences what I eat, what types of workouts I do, how often I work out

P6

I have been doing all these work out things and I'm still not there, why are you lying to me? ...they were always lying to me. But you don't process it though, you keep taking their lies

P6

Well, for a fact I know that they're not completely like that in real life, I know it's heavily edited and everything, but yet I'm still trying to live up to their standards, I'm still trying to look like that ... and it's just unachievable, but I know it, yet I still fall for it

P7

