

Tobacco Control News

Research Roundup February 2023

Using social media to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing



In this 'Research Roundup' I share key messages from five recent Australian research papers that provide some useful information about the way social media can support population health promotion messaging to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Most of these papers are about health messaging in general, but they still provide useful information that we can use in our Tackling Indigenous Smoking (TIS) tobacco control work.

Take Home Message for TIS

Facebook is the most popular social media platform used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and is used in metropolitan, regional and remote areas. It is used by mature-aged adults (people over 41 years of age) as well as youth (Henson et al. 2022).

Mature-aged women in particular use Facebook as a health information source. They then share this information with other Facebook users as well as friends and family that do not use social media themselves. Using Facebook to share health messages is therefore a community strength that can help distribute tobacco control information to both social media users and the wider community. Mature-aged women are often seen as influencers and trusted advisors in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, which may further strengthen messages. As some of this sharing will be offline, measuring the extent of reach is more challenging and social media metrics may actually underestimate the true reach of social media health promotion campaigns.

Research (Hefler et al. 2018; Walker et al. 2019) suggests that social media campaigns will have the best reach and engagement if they are:

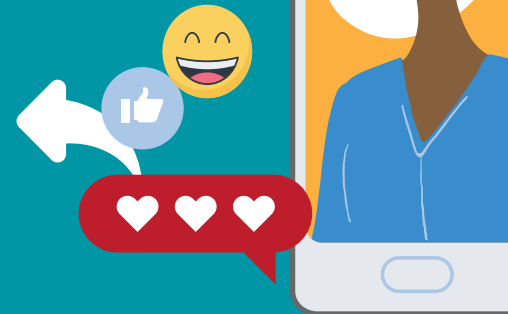
- strengths based and build positive narratives that inspire hope;
- actively centred around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander notions of health and identity;
- respectful of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and culture, incorporating these into the messaging;
- based around/include personal experiences and stories.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may also use social media (Facebook, Twitter) as a way to find relevant and accessible health services (Carlson et al. 2021). This highlights the importance of including a clear call to action in social media campaigns. It is important to direct people to trusted, culturally safe and accessible quit support services that they can contact directly. This might be Quitline, or a local clinical service.

Finally, according to Durkin et al. 2022 using social media for tobacco control campaigns could improve message reach to priority groups. They highlight the importance of using the social media channels that people from priority groups use regularly (e.g. Facebook) to share positive messages on how to quit, and campaigns focused on building confidence, hope and self-efficacy. Durkin et al also note that more research is needed to evaluate the reach and impact of social media on communities. For example, we need to investigate how social media metrics focused on exposure to campaign material (views, click-throughs, reactions) convert to meaningful engagement in the real world. This will help us to improve how social media is used in tobacco control campaigns.



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Research suggests that social media campaigns will have the best reach and engagement if they include personal experiences and stories



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In Depth Paper Reviews

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Specific Research

Henson, C., Chapman, F., Shepherd, G., Carlson, B., Chau, J. Y., Gwynn, J., ... & Gwynne, K. (2022). Mature aged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are using digital health technologies. *Digital Health*, 8, 20552076221145846. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/20552076221145846>

This was a cross-sectional study looking at the use of technology for health improvement – including social media – by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults living in rural, regional and remote locations of NSW. Participants were categorized as either mature age (over 41 years, n=59) or younger (under 41 years, n=18). Younger participants were born after 1981 and grew up with the internet. Their experiences with technology are therefore likely to be very different to that of mature age adults. The aim of the study was to understand the perspectives and practices of this mature aged group so as to better know how to best use social media for health promotion.

Key findings

Social media (chiefly Facebook) was found to be an important source of health information for mature-aged people (45%), particularly women:

- Among mature-aged participants, women used social media more than men;
- Over half of all mature-aged women (56%) reported using social media every day, compared to only 17% of mature-aged men;
- Facebook was the most popular social media channel (used by 50% of mature aged women);
- These mature-aged women shared health information found online via social media platforms and 'real life' discussions with friends and family who were not social media users;
- Facebook was used more frequently for acquiring and sharing health information in rural and remote locations compared to regional locations;

Take home message

For mature aged women Facebook, is an important source of health-related information. Messages will also be shared with non-Facebook users including family, friends and colleagues thereby increasing message reach. As some of this sharing will be offline, measuring the extent of reach is more challenging and social media metric may actually underestimate true reach.

Hefler, M., Kerrigan, V., Henryks, J., Freeman, B., & Thomas, D. P. (2018). Social media and health information sharing among Australian Indigenous people. *Health Promotion International*, 34(4), 706-715. doi: [10.1093/heapro/day018](https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/day018)

This qualitative study explored the types of health content shared in social media networks by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in the Northern Territory. Over an eight-week period, 20 regular social media users (mainly Facebook) monitored their social media networks for health-related information and were interviewed weekly about their chosen content. The aim of the study was to understand how people engage with health-related social media messages and explore what sort of messaging creates the greatest impact.

Key findings

Participants engaged with health information on social media in different ways, depending partly on individual style, but also on message content. Engagement included:

- observation (content is scanned, posts are rarely liked or shared, new content is not developed);
- sharing messages without reading or engaging with them (sharing is based on attention grabbing headlines, words or phrases)
- purposeful engagement with messages and post sharing (especially messages from personal networks);
- seeking information to share with others to educate them (usually about a topic of personal interest);
- commenting on and sharing only messages from credible sources (credibility established via personal knowledge of the source and the topic);
- actively challenging social norms and raising issues with intent to create social change (political and social activists).

Content was more engaging if it:

- actively centred around Indigenous notions of health and identity;
- built positive narratives (rather than building stigma and blame);
- talked of personal experiences;
- related to an issue of concern to the user.

Take home message

Tobacco control campaigns will be more engaging if they build positive (strengths-based) narratives and avoid negative narratives which can stigmatise users and create feelings of guilt and blame. Social media campaigns that create a safe space that builds on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander notions of health and identity will also be more effective.

Walker, T., Palermo, C., & Klassen, K. (2019). Considering the impact of social media on contemporary improvement of Australian Aboriginal health: Scoping review. *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance*, 5(1), e11573. doi: [10.2196/11573](https://doi.org/10.2196/11573)

This review explored the role of social media for supporting better health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Key findings

- Social media can be a good tool for sharing and discussing health information (a 2-way exchange);
- A supportive online community which uses strengths based, self-empowering language to promote and encourage a healthy lifestyle (e.g. being smoke-free) is more effective than deficit-based messages which can feel threatening;
- Aboriginal perspectives and culture must be respected and incorporated into social media campaigns for them to be effective – co-creation of content is a good way to achieve this;
- linking real-world events (e.g. WNTD) with online promotion and conversations is a good way to increase awareness of offline support and how to access it (e.g. access to quit support);
- Social media increases message reach and awareness of access to support for people living in remote communities.

Take home message

Strengths-based social media campaigns that create a culturally safe space are effective tools for engaging people with health messages about tobacco control and can increase message reach.

Carlson, B., Frazer, R., & Farrelly, T. (2021). "That makes all the difference": Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health-seeking on social media. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, 32(3), 523-531. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/hpja.366>

This qualitative research study looked at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's 'health-seeking' behaviours (seeking help for health-related issues) on social media. Participants were 52 Facebook users aged from 18 to 65 years of age living in New South Wales (Brewarrina, Dubbo, Illawarra), Queensland (Cairns) and the Northern Territory (Darwin). Whilst a range of platforms were used by participants, interviews focused primarily on Facebook.

Key findings

Five types of health-seeking behaviour were identified as follows:

- Posting content on Facebook seeking advice and emotional support for specific health issues;
- Sending direct messages ('in-boxing') to both formal and informal (friends and family) sources of help and support was also described as useful. The privacy offered by direct messaging, which allows people to seek help without revealing this publicly was greatly valued;
- Joining groups that address specific health issues as this helped participants to both actively seek information, and find support and guidance through reading and reflecting on other people's posts;
- Sharing positive content to inspire hope was also common – for example someone might share a story of change to encourage others, whilst keeping themselves accountable and maintain their own positive emotions;
- Facebook was also used as a directory to find relevant and accessible health services.

The study concludes that this active use of Facebook by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to sustain their health and well-being provides a unique opportunity for promoting public health messages. Anyone working on social media health promotion campaigns for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should consider ways to use existing pathways to increase message reach.

Take home message

Social media is a significant part of the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. TIS teams should be aware of the five health-seeking behaviours described by this study and try to include elements of these in their social media campaigns to increase the reach and effectiveness of TIS messaging. This might include: reaching out to existing online groups, using 'tags' to enable groups to find this content more easily, ensuring a clear call to action to direct viewers to trusted, culturally safe and accessible quit support services.

Australian Tobacco Control

Durkin, S. J., Brennan, E., & Wakefield, M. A. (2022). Optimising tobacco control campaigns within a changing media landscape and among priority populations. *Tobacco Control*, 31(2), 284-290. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2021-056558>

This article provides an overview of what we know about the effectiveness of social media as a way to boost the reach and impact of tobacco control social marketing campaigns, and identifies areas where we need more research to show what works best, particularly for priority populations including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Key messages

- Over the past decade television audiences have declined, whilst audiences for content shared through social media platforms have increased, although traditional media retains some relevance to adults over 50 years of age;
- Whilst we know that social marketing is effective as part of a comprehensive tobacco control program, information about the effectiveness of messaging via social media channels specifically, is limited;
- One advantage of social media marketing over traditional marketing, is that it allows more targeted and personalised exposure to messages;
- Using social media platforms that are popular with specific priority groups has the potential to increase message reach and so reduce health inequities – in contrast not using the right platforms will limit reach and could intensify health inequities. Knowing which platforms to use depending on the characteristics of the target group (e.g., age, gender, cultural identity) is therefore essential for good message reach;
- Effective messaging focuses on the benefits of quitting, provides advice about how to quit, encourages people to keep trying, aims to build confidence and self-efficacy, and helps people to access quit support;
- More research is needed to identify best practice for social media messaging from message design and delivery, through to measures of reach, impact and exposure. In particular, whether social media metrics such as impressions, reactions and click throughs translate into real world engagement and behaviour change.

Take home message

Whilst we have some understanding of what works for social media messaging, this approach to social marketing is still relatively new and ongoing research is needed to understand what makes an effective social media campaign and how best to evaluate its impact. For TIS, this means using local knowledge (evidence) to identify the best platforms to use and the balance of social and traditional marketing tools to use to deliver locally relevant and meaningful strengths-based tobacco control messages.

