Public reaction to the UK government strategy on childhood obesity in England: A qualitative and quantitative summary of online reaction to media reports

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ABSTRACT

This work aimed to summarise public real-time reaction to the publication of the UK government childhood obesity strategy by applying a novel research design method. We used a netnographic technique to carry out thematic analysis of user-generated comments to online newspaper articles related to the strategy. We examined likes/dislikes associated with comments as a proxy of agreement of the wider community with identified themes. To examine media influence on the comments we carried out thematic analysis of online media headlines published about the strategy, and compared these themes with themes identified from comments.

Three newspaper articles and 1704 associated comments were included. Three parent themes were identified: paternalism/libertarianism, lobbyist influence and, anecdotal solutions. The comments were largely negative (94%). Commenters were split as to individual responsibilities and the role of the government, some felt that lobbyist influence had won out over the nation's health and others offered non-evidence based solutions. The ten most liked and disliked comments reflected themes identified in our main analysis. There was parity between themes that emerged from comments and from headlines. This summary of public reaction to the obesity strategy publication may aid translation of public views and receptiveness into practice and inform subsequent government action and policy. Furthermore, the process applied herein may provide a means of informal public engagement.

1. Introduction

Nearly a third of children in England aged 2–15 years are overweight or obese [1]. By 2050 Britain is predicted to be a mainly obese society with 25% of its children affected [2]. In a bid to halt the increasing burden of obesity, the UK government have published their strategy to reduce childhood obesity in England, "Childhood obesity: a plan for action" [3]. This strategy was developed following recommendations of the Health Select Committee in 2015 [4]. Previous measures to tackle obesity have not been specifically focused on children and have focused on single initiatives e.g. food labelling or provision of physical activity and healthy eating guidance [5]. These strategies however are lacking in effective approaches exemplified by the increasing prevalence of obesity. The childhood obesity strategy aims to provide more appropriate intervention and support by opening the discussion to stakeholders.

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The strategy outlines 14 action areas relating to the following areas: changes and mandates for the food industry including food labelling; supply of healthy food in public sector, school and home settings; improving opportunities for physical activity and; support for families and individuals. The strategy is presented as the "the start of a conversation" and an integral feature is for the active engagement of schools, communities, families and individuals to achieve long-term sustainable change. Yet, although this call acknowledges the crucial contribution the public can make in reducing obesity, the views and ideas of these acknowledged stakeholders have not been sought [6] and thus have not informed the strategy and cannot inform subsequent government actions.

It is important to ensure that public health strategies, policy, services and practice are aligned with the beliefs and priorities of the public [7]. Translating public views into strategies and policy could help create services, practice and interventions that are more effective [8]. Furthermore, gauging the reactions of the public is important to ascertain understanding of and receptiveness to strategies and may also be a source of novel ideas and alternative perspectives.

There is no pre-existing forum for the public to comment on this strategy directly. Traditional qualitative interviews, focus groups and systematic reviews could be used to collect and summarise public reactions and views, however there is a plethora of user-generated data available in online fora that can be used for this purpose. The public's views on news publications about the strategy are recorded in comments areas of newspaper websites. Using these as a data source can provide a more timely and cost effective alternative to the more traditional methods and has been previously shown not to compromise on the breadth of views captured and to parallel findings from focus groups [9]. Thematic analyses of these comments provides a flexible but rigorous means of capturing the broad range of views in reflexive reactions of individuals [10,11]. It can give us timely insight into popular views, predominant interpretations and potentially novel concepts and perspectives.

The collation and analyses of user-generated comments in this way, is inspired by netnography, originally developed for marketing research [12,13]. The value that online media can have for exploring public health issues is increasingly acknowledged [9,14–16]. However, this is the first work to use this method and type of data to provide timely thematic analysis of public comments to a core public health strategy.

The aims of this study is to present a novel research design method, netnography, by utilising it to summarise in real-time, the public's reactions to the publication of the childhood obesity strategy with the purpose of informing subsequent policy, practice and government action.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study design

We applied a netnographic technique of reviewing user-generated online content written by commentators on mainstream media and social networking fora. In brief, we collated user-generated comments from selected newspaper articles and to give context to the comments, headlines pertaining to the obesity strategy published in online media. Using these data, we carried out a qualitative review of the headlines and comments and examined the associated likes and dislikes as a proxy of resonance of views with the wider community.

2.2. Ethics, consent, copyright, and data anonymisation

Ethical approval was awarded by the Manchester Metropolitan University ethics committee prior to data collection. We have followed the guidance for internet-mediated research from the British Psychological Society [17] and adhered to copyright laws in conducting this work. Direct consent could not be attained because of the nature of the data collection however; implicit consent was deemed to have been given by virtue of posting in an open forum. No directly identifiable data were collected, comments were disassociated from usernames prior to analyses.

2.3. Data collection

All headlines pertaining to the childhood obesity strategy published within 24 h of publication were collected using Google Alerts with the alert terms: "Online newspaper titles from which to collect comments were selected from the three national groups (Quality, Mid-range and Popular) identified by the National Readership Survey [18]. Our a priori inclusion criteria were national titles only and PC and mobile readership above 1,000,000 per year. On this basis the following publications were identified for inclusion: Daily Mail, Daily Telegraph, Daily Mirror, The Sun and The Guardian. Further inclusion criteria applied on the day of publication of the childhood obesity strategy were, running a story on the obesity strategy within 24 h of publication, and allowing user comments on the article. Articles from included newspaper titles were eligible for analysis if the obesity strategy was the main theme. Two researchers (RG and LOC) independently selected the articles from which to collect comments. There were no discrepancies between selections when compared. Comments along with the associated number of likes and dislikes were collected on the 18th–19th August, 2016. Comments submitted during the first 24 h after the publication of the strategy were included. As there was no time of publication published with the childhood obesity strategy we applied a cut point of 7 am on the 19th August to represent 24 h.

2.4. Data analysis

Headlines were grouped according to the type of publication they appeared in (e.g. news/medical/food industry publications).

Headlines and comments were imported into Excel where they were screened for personally identifiable content, profanities and calumny. Two researchers (RG and LOC) agreed all comments identified for censoring prior to redacting.