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Fit4YAMs: Structuring a Lifestyle Intervention for Rural Overweight and Obese Young Adult Males Using Participatory Design



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Young adult males (YAMs) are understudied with respect to lifestyle interventions to address overweight and obesity in this group. This study reports on the participatory design of the structure and delivery of the Fit4YAMs text message–based lifestyle intervention for 18- to 25-year-old rural YAMs in Australia.

Methods: Two semi-structured focus group discussions were held with six overweight or obese YAMs. Sessions explored their preferences for the structure and delivery of a weight loss intervention. Focus groups were recorded, and the contents transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

Results: The YAMs were unanimous in their preference for a highly personalized intervention program, complete with personalized goal setting, personalized motivation and engagement strategies, and personalized text message content. A text message frequency of three–four messages per week was deemed optimal for this group. Minimal direct contact by the intervention team was requested, but with clear guidelines and reminders of key contacts whom they could contact should they require help and guidance. The YAMs also agreed that a comprehensive goal setting session and personalization session prior to commencement of the intervention would be best.

Conclusions: To engage rural YAMs in lifestyle interventions, a high degree of personalization of the program appears important. Although initially more time and resource intensive than a less personalized approach, it is essential to identify strategies to prevent and reverse weight gain in this hard to engage group. Maximizing their engagement using a more personalized approach could be the key to promoting long-term health outcomes in this group.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This study explores the preferences of rural young adult males for the structure and delivery of a text message–based lifestyle intervention. A high degree of personalization of all aspects of the intervention appears to be the key to engaging this underserved and understudied group.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Significant and rapid weight gain now tends to occur most often during young adulthood [1–3], with males gaining more weight at an earlier age than females [4]. Preventing or reversing obesity at this age is thus vital to reducing both current morbidity and the associated future chronic disease burden and increased mortality risk if the obesity persists into the later adult years [4–7]. In spite of this, young adult males (YAMs) are

understudied in weight loss research as compared to their female counterparts [8–11].

YAMs are a difficult group to engage in health promotion as they are less engaged with primary health care than young adult females [12]. However, YAMs are high users of mobile communication technology [13,14]. Increasing evidence suggests that text messaging support is effective at promoting weight loss in some population groups [15–17] and may be particularly successful in traditionally hard to engage groups, such as YAMs, because it utilizes push technology [18–20]. Our previous research with YAMs suggested that text messaging was a potentially useful source of support and motivation to adopt and maintain healthy lifestyle practices around weight loss [21].

There is limited understanding of why YAMs do not engage in health interventions and weight loss research [8,22,23], as well as a paucity of evidence regarding their preferences for a lifestyle intervention program in terms of both structure and content [11]. Interventions designed and implemented by content experts, without taking into account the perspective and preferences of the end user, run the risk of failing to engage and retain their participants, thus reducing the impact of the intervention [23,24]. To maximize engagement of YAMs in a lifestyle intervention, a participatory design process that incorporates their perspective on both the intervention structure and content is crucial [22,23]. The aim of this foundational study was to explore YAMs preferences for the structure and delivery of a text message-based lifestyle intervention for weight loss using participatory design processes. Rural YAMs in Australia have a higher prevalence of overweight and obesity than both urban YAMs and rural young adult females [25,26]; the study targeted this participant group.

Methods

This study was approved by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (H10687). Pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality. Direct quotes are presented in italics.

Participants and setting

Six overweight or obese YAMs were recruited by purposive sampling methods using traditional print media (flyers and advertisements) and face-to-face approaches. Inclusion criteria included males aged 18–24 years; currently living in a rural center (Bathurst, New South Wales, Australia); body mass index (BMI) greater than 25; waist circumference greater than 94 cm [27]; fluent in English; and cell phone ownership and ability to text. All participants provided written, informed consent.

Fit4YAMs participatory design process—intervention structure and delivery

Two semi-structured focus groups, each of 60 minutes in duration, were held with the six YAMs. A series of open-ended questions were used to prompt discussions (Supplementary File 1) while allowing flexibility for the interviewer to explore responses in more detail. The interactive group setting allowed participants to react and build on the responses of others, resulting in the production of data that might not be revealed in individual interviews [28,29]. Throughout the focus group, the

interviewer provided periodic verbal summaries of the participant's responses for confirmation purposes and to facilitate capture of dissenting viewpoints from among the group.

Focus groups were facilitated by C.D., an experienced qualitative researcher. K.M. and J.B. assisted with moderation, note-taking, and time management. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Primary thematic analysis was conducted by C.D., with a secondary independent analysis by J.B. The interpretive phase allowed for the identification of overarching themes and subthemes relating to perspectives and preferences of participants.

Results

Participants

The mean age of the six participating YAMs was 23 years (standard deviation [SD]: 1.5), with a mean waist circumference of 104 cm (SD: 7.4) and mean BMI of 29 (SD: 3.7). Two YAMs were obese (category 1) with BMIs between 30.0 and 34.9. The remaining 4 had a BMI between 25.0 and 29.9 and were thus overweight.

Two YAMs identified as indigenous. One had completed a trade qualification; a further two had completed university degrees; and three were currently at university.

Five had unlimited texting with their cell phone plan, with the other YAM on a text-limited monthly plan. The YAMs reported sending, on average, 10 text messages per day. They regularly exceeded their cell phone data allowance and had to pay additional costs.

A personalized intervention program

The YAMs desired a completely personalized intervention program covering goal setting, motivation and engagement strategies, and text message content:

The more personal the better it is.

YAMs want text messages to be purposely linked to their own weight, diet, and fitness goals. Texts should use their first name, personal data such as weight loss per week, and individual goals such as number of gym visits per week, or number of football games played per week. Text messages should not read like a generic message from a database:

But not fake personalized, anyone can stick my name in front of a message and I know that you didn't really, especially when they spell the name wrong!

YAMs also requested a personalized intervention plan with structured exercise and diet goals, taking into consideration their likes and dislikes (Table 1, theme 1).

The ability to set personal goals before the intervention begins and have these integrated into the intervention appealed. They requested realistic time frames with their larger goals segmented into shorter time frames. Two YAMs in particular commented on the relationship between the time frame given in an example text message "A year from now you will wish you had started today" and reaching their goals:

... a year from now, [expletive] I don't know what I'm going to be doing. It's too big a timeframe for me. A week from now yes, I wish I started a week ago, like it makes it more instant for me,

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