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Oluwakemi Odukoya

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Abstract

Background

Smoking remains a leading global public health issue, with young adults being particularly at risk. Online social networks and chat groups present scalable, cost-effective opportunities for delivering behavioural smoking cessation interventions with peer support and real-time engagement.

Aim

This systematic review evaluates the effectiveness of online social networks and chat groups for smoking cessation among young adult smokers aged 18–29 years.

Methods

Using PRISMA guidelines, a comprehensive search was conducted across MEDLINE, CINAHL, PsycINFO, and other databases. Eligible studies met PICO criteria and included interventions delivered via online social networks or chat groups. Primary outcomes were 7-day and 30-day abstinence and quit attempts. Only studies rated as medium or high quality using the JBI tool were included.

Findings

Search results yielded 10,852 records, of which thirteen papers (seven original studies) met inclusion criteria - two RCTs, two quasi-experimental studies and three pilot/feasibility studies. Six papers were secondary analyses of these studies. All the studies were conducted in the United States and Canada. Four studies used Facebook in closed, stage-matched groups moderated by trained facilitators while three used mobile apps with chat features. Participants were mainly non-Hispanic white, heterosexual young adults. Key features across the studies included daily prompts, text/multimedia content, and peer interactions. All studies reported improved cessation outcomes at 3 months. However, two studies reported no differences at 6 and 12 months respectively. Engagement varied but was mostly positive across studies. Higher engagement was associated with more quit attempts.

Significance for Research and Practice

This review highlights the potential of online social networks and chat-based interventions as effective, scalable tools for youth smoking cessation. However, long-term effectiveness remains uncertain. All studies were from North America, limiting global relevance. Future research should focus on generating evidence outside of North America and explore newer platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok or AI-enabled platforms

Keywords

Social networks, smoking cessation, Systematic review