

Youth of color turn to TikTok for diet, fitness information

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Nearly 1 in 4 adolescents in the United States experienced obesity from

2017 to 2020, and youths of color experienced disproportionately higher obesity rates, at approximately 26 percent of Hispanic youth and 25 percent of Black youths ages 12-19 years, compared to 17 percent of White youth.

As nearly all teens use some form of social [media](#), a new study led by a Boston University School of Public Health (BUSPH) researcher has found that social media platforms are ideal digital spaces to engage adolescents of color on [healthy eating](#) and physical activity.

Published in the journal *JMIR Pediatrics & Parenting*, the study found that youth prefer to consult TikTok more than any other social media platform for information on healthy weight management.

There is limited research on social media-based weight management or obesity interventions for youth, and the study is the first to examine social media use and content preferences for weight management support among adolescents of color. Despite current concerns that [social media use](#) is contributing to worsening youth [mental health](#), the new study reveals that these [digital platforms](#) can still be valuable spaces to promote health, especially with strategies that are informed by youth perspectives and preferences.

"These findings highlight that it is critical for future interventions to be culturally tailored and consider the unique needs and experiences of adolescents of color," says study lead and corresponding author Dr. Monica Wang, associate professor of community health sciences at BUSPH and chair of the Narrative Office at Boston University Center for Antiracist Research.

For the study, Dr. Wang and colleagues utilized survey and focus group data on weight management behaviors, beliefs, and social media preferences among [high school students](#) ages 14-18 years in California

and Massachusetts.

Youth most frequently used TikTok, followed by Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. More than 80 percent of youth spent at least some time on TikTok, and 71 percent on Instagram.

TikTok was youths' favorite social media platform for learning new information about healthy weight management, but they enjoyed both TikTok and Instagram to communicate with others about diet and fitness. They prioritize information on physical and mental health, prefer receiving it from [health professionals](#) and peers, and need to be able to relate to the content.

The study notes that [youth](#) are aware of rampant misinformation on social media and, overall, they do still utilize websites more often than social media platforms to verify information.

The majority of participants said they began using TikTok to combat isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they enjoy the [platform](#) for its tailored content and versatility with making or watching videos, and multiple ways to engage with other users. On Instagram, they enjoy being able to share visual content and connect easily with influencers, celebrities, and other people both inside and outside of their networks.

These platforms provide several opportunities for "responsible and responsive" social media interventions, Dr. Wang says. Strategies for these interventions include:

- Creating [social media platforms](#) or campaigns that feature culturally diverse content to help adolescents of color feel represented and understood
- Establishing online peer support networks with a trained moderator to provide a supportive, inclusive space for

adolescents of color

- Offering virtual coaching and counseling, which can reduce barriers to health resources and provide individualized support with goal-setting and behavior change strategies
- Collaborating with positive role models who have established expertise in nutrition, fitness, and health who can help inspire and motivate adolescents of color
- Addressing mental health and promoting body positivity, which are important aspects of interventions to cultivate healthy weight management behaviors among adolescents.

"Ongoing evaluation and input from adolescents need to be part of the process to refine and improve the efficacy of social media interventions in promoting healthy behaviors among this population," says Dr. Wang.

More information: Sellenne Alatorre et al, Exploring Social Media Preferences for Healthy Weight Management Interventions Among Adolescents of Color: Mixed Methods Study, *JMIR Pediatrics and Parenting* (2023). [DOI: 10.2196/43961](https://doi.org/10.2196/43961)

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