

Trending tweets greatest amplifier of dodgy diets

Dietitians are highlighting the need for health professionals to be social media savvy and to reshare their colleagues' posts to help tackle nutrition misinformation online.

This comes as new research presented today at the Dietitians Australia National Conference uncovered how retweeting is the greatest amplifier of fad diet posts on Twitter.

As social media continues to transform the way we communicate, Accredited Practising Dietitian Melissa Eaton explored how people talked about fad diets on Twitter and the relationship between these conversations and mental health.

“While social media is a way we connect online, we found that those who use Twitter mostly reshared ‘fad diet’ posts, rather than talking to each other about the diet,” said Melissa.

“Even for those who had just a few followers, retweeting allowed their message to be shared far and wide. This shows that the messages we post on social media have the power to influence more people than we realise.”

Within a team of researchers, the PhD student from the University of Wollongong examined conversations about ‘fad diets’. These were defined as diets that promised quick weight loss with minimal effort through the restriction of macronutrients or certain foods, rather than encouraging sustainable, long term dietary change.

Health and nutrition are some of the most common topics where misinformation is reshared, and as fad diets can make unreasonable health claims, they are a clear example of this.

“Social media allows global communities to easily connect and share their views on the things they are passionate about. Given how easy it is to share these messages through retweeting, it’s important to take a moment to consider the credibility of a message before reposting,” said Melissa.

“While there might be evidence to support the use of a certain diet for a particular group of people, it becomes an issue when restrictive diets are promoted as a ‘cure-all’ way of eating for the general population.”

This study also found an emerging association between mental health and online communication of fad diets, including a potential link between restrictive diets and poorer mental health.

“While more data is needed to better understand this link, it highlights that it’s important for influencers to encourage their followers to seek information that is right for their health, rather than following the blanket advice of others,” said Melissa.

“Social media shows us the topics that are trending – and as health professionals we need to work together as a community to reshare posts that supports people interested in nutrition to access the right information.”

When reading nutrition information on social media, Melissa shares this advice:

“Be sure to follow those with qualifications in nutrition and dietetics – and steer clear of posts that promote ‘quick-fixes’ and encourage things like detoxes and ‘cure-all’ diets,” she said.

“At the end of the day, we all have individual health needs – so it’s best to seek nutrition information that is tailored to you from an Accredited Practising Dietitian.”

This research is one of over 200 abstracts being presented at the Dietitians Australia National Conference. Stay across the conversation and see ‘What’s Possible?’ in nutrition science by following #DA2021.

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Media enquiries

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Note to editors: Dietitians Australia is the leading voice of nutrition in Australia, representing dietitians nationally and advocating for healthier communities. Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) is the only national credential recognised by the Australian Government as the quality standard for nutrition and dietetics services in Australia.