

The Research File



Summary from the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute and ParticipACTION

Issue 4 Apr 2014

Getting the Message Out: Increasing Physical Activity through Social Marketing

To date, strategies aimed at improving physical activity have not resulted in substantial increases in activity at the population level; in fact research has consistently shown that a large proportion of the Canadian population remains insufficiently active. The question then remains, what mode(s) of communication would be most effective for promoting population-level behaviour change? A social marketing strategy such as the use of mass media campaigns for increasing physical activity has been gaining attention; and is considered as one part of a comprehensive communication approach to increase and/or sustain regular physical activity.¹ Mass media campaigns have shown promise in other health-related areas, but the evidence for its effectiveness for physical activity is limited.² In Canada, mass media efforts for physical activity dates back to the early 70s with the launch of ParticipAction.²

The main focus of this research file will be to summarize the findings of a study conducted by Leavy and colleagues; which aimed at reviewing the literature on the effectiveness of physical activity mass media campaigns.



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The authors examined 3 components of these campaigns: 1) evaluation design 2) use of theory, conceptual frameworks, formative research 3) effect on outcomes (proximal, intermediate and behavioural).²

Methodology

Leavy et al. conducted a literature search in a number of databases and identified 18 (adult-focused) articles, which described physical activity campaigns. To be included for review, articles must have been published in English, between 2003 and 2010. Additionally, articles had to be peer-reviewed, available in full-text, have a population focus, describe a mass media or social marketing campaign for physical activity, and report on the evaluation method and post-evaluation design.²

Study results

Study characteristics: Sixteen of the 18 campaigns included in this review were conducted in 'high-income' countries; the remaining 2 were from 'middle-income' countries. These campaigns were disseminated through varying channels (e.g., television or radio commercials, public service announcements, paid and unpaid print, etc.).² Campaign duration also varied from 8 weeks to over 2 years.²

Evaluation design and sampling:

Studies differed in the type of study design, for the most part studies were non-experimental (n=12); followed by quasi-experimental (n=5) and mixed (n=1).²

The campaigns also differed immensely in the type of evaluation methods used; the majority provided baseline and follow-up measures, while 6 campaigns only provide post-campaign measurements.² The majority of campaigns (78%) utilize random sampling methods.²

Conceptual theory or framework:

Messages across the 18 campaigns were developed using a variety of theories and frameworks or a combination of both (the most commonly used being the social ecological model).² Roughly half of the studies used formative research.² A number of studies also conducted pilot testing of campaign messages with small groups.²

Campaign effects: Reporting on exposure of campaign messages were quite mixed. A number of studies (n=15) provided quantitative measures of the dose of exposure, however, measures varied in studies.² Recall was reported in most studies (n=15), whereby the majority reported using a combination of both prompted and unprompted awareness.² Prompted recall of messages ranged from 17% to 95%.² A number of campaigns reported different levels of awareness among certain subgroups; a number of studies reported higher levels of awareness among women, those with tertiary-level education, physically active women, and women whose children are active.² Of those that assessed intermediate effects (n=7), 3 studies found changes in intention to be active (albeit only 1 was significant). Changes in behavior were assessed in 15 campaigns, among these only 7 reported significant changes in physical activity levels.²

References:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Strategies to Prevent Obesity and Other Chronic Diseases: The CDC Guide to Strategies to Increase Physical Activity in the Community. Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2011. Accessed on Feb. 27, from: http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/downloads/P_A_2011_WEB.pdf
- Leavy JE, Bull FC, Rosenberg M, Bauman A. Physical activity mass media campaigns and their evaluation: a systematic review of the literature 2003-2010. *Health Education Research.* (2011); 26(6); 1060-85.

What have we learned?

This review found mixed findings on the overall effectiveness of mass media campaigns. The review also found that despite an improvement in evaluation since an earlier review in 2004, limitations do still exist including the need for more use of theory-based and formative evaluation and the use of appropriate outcome measures which are tied to the study objectives.²

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