

Chapter 1: Understanding the Impact of ICTs on Youth Nutrition

Didactic Unit 1: How ICTs affect youth behavior and eating habits

1. Introduction:

ICTs are part of our daily tasks, being present in different areas of the society; their functionalities have modified traditional processes, generating an enormous transformation. Perhaps this has been possible due to the direct links of ICTs with our lives. In addition, they have a strong influence with the way we think, act, work, have fun and interact, including our nutrition habits.



2. Description:

Let's start with the main situation. It has been a fast revolution of how we have changed the consumption of media. In the past, we only had TV, magazines, street ads where the society had few references and models that could lead to certain behaviors.

Now, everybody has a wide access to different types of contents starting from the palm of our hands. Every time we want to see something, we only take our mobiles and push a button. Cell phones are not only a technical device, they have turned into a personal and social object, subject, like no other, to the influences of trends and fashion. In the case of teenagers, it becomes a determining element of individual and group identity. For this generation, cell phones are objects that have always existed, a fact that makes them experts in choosing the medium, place and for its use. There are two sociological explanations for the success of cell phones among young people. On the one hand, Ling, 2002, launches an enormously fertile concept, in which the acquisition of a cell phone is considered a “rite of passage”, being an object of initiation into adolescence. On the other hand, Forutnati and Manganeli, 2002, speak of “virtual brotherhood”, a phenomenon understood as the feeling of fraternity that arises among young people for sharing feelings, emotions and thoughts. The younger ones see the cell phone as a game console and adopt a playful attitude towards it (Oksman and Rautiainen, 2002). Mobiles have several meanings in the lives of young people. It is a natural and important part of their daily lives and is used as a means of organizing daily activities; it has also become a means of building a social bond and defining one's own space in relation to others (Oksman and Rautianinen, 2002). These devices intervene significantly in socialization because they allow the adolescent's identity to be defined both individually, by personalizing their mobile in various ways, colors, tones, etc., and collectively by creating a special group language, text messages and missed calls .

People, especially youngsters, consume media many hours per day, especially on their mobiles. This is making that every day we are exposed to hidden and unhidden messages promoting unrealistic body standards and unhealthy eating habits. Many youngsters are not aware of the unhidden messages they are consuming .

Some examples of how ICTs and media affect youth behavior and eating habits are:

- **Streaming Platforms and videos:**

They frequently propagate false signals regarding body image by showcasing thin and fit individuals in protagonist roles that prioritize attractiveness, aptitude, social success, physical strength, heroism, popularity, etc. On the opposite, characters with overweight, are sometimes relegated to secondary or stereotypical roles, such as villains, victims of bullying, comedic relief, etc. By implying that overweight people lack the traits necessary to be heroes or romantic leads and by linking their value or pleasure to physical change, these representations reinforce negative stereotypes. This duality can create unrealistic expectations about body size and self-worth.

- **Music:**

Different songs, music videos and social media feature lyrics that sexualize and objectify women, placing heavy emphasis on slim waists, curvy figures and tone bodies. An example of this, are many reggaeton songs which are very popular in Spanish speaking countries. This is causing self-objectification in youngsters, valuing themselves based on their physical bodies.

- **Influencers:**

This is a marketing strategy that is becoming very effective to reach many people. Companies are contacting influencers, who have high quantities of followers, to promote their products. In some cases, influencers might promote specific products or diets for monetary gain, regardless of their health implications.

Not all of them consume the product they are promoting, even in videos they could say that it is their favorite one. It is important to understand that in some cases they are only complying with the marketing campaign.

- **Digital tools:**

Young people are using digital technologies daily, for example, softwares and filters, to edit their pictures to “improve” their bodies. Constantly seeing "perfect" pictures can have a detrimental effect on one's body image and self-esteem, encouraging some young people to aim for unachievable physical standards.

- **Advertising**

We are exposed to advertisements for fitness programs, weight-loss goods, and "ideal body" trends by following particular websites or interacting in social media, which might encourage harmful habits. Algorithms have an important role in personalizing and sharing similar content day by day.

- **Cyberbullying:**

Some people use body image that damage the self-esteem of the most vulnerable. It is an increasingly prevalent factor in young people who have experienced an eating disorder.

3. How to Apply This Knowledge:

In order for ICTs to stop being a threat in the development and maintenance of eating disorders, it would be important to take into consideration the following aspects:

- Be aware of the messages you receive in the online and physical world and restrict the access to information that promote bad eating behaviors. Furthermore, do not follow content that is making you feel not self-worth, uncomfortable with some parts of your body, etc.

- As a youth worker, media literacy is a useful tool to teach young people to become more active and critical consumers of media in relation to appearance, in order to avoid the development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors. Media literacy interventions have been shown to decrease social comparison and internalization of the thin ideal. Thus, media education presents the best opportunity to counteract harmful messages and images on screens and in print media. It involves teaching young people to be intelligent and wise consumers of all media. (Hogan et.al. 2008)
- Advertising should show healthy, normal-sized media figures, as this reduces anxiety about one's own body appearance. This requires the development of regulations regarding the avoidance of hiring unrealistic-looking models and actors, with the aim of ensuring that new generations internalize what a healthy body really is.
- Families should limit children's exposure to the media, talk to them about the messages they receive from ICTs; promote healthy eating; boost physical activity; and encourage participation in activities that increase self-control and self-esteem.
- It is important to address self-objectification (the tendency to view one's own body as an object and to be evaluated by appearance) as a strategy in programs to prevent and treat eating disorders. (Durán et.al. 2013) (Szabók, 2012).

4. Interactive Resources:

Watch a discussion of the impact that social media has on our perceptions of food and health:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFqyYO-WdUE&t=77s>

5. Sources:

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