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## Policy and Practice Brief: Social Media to Enhance Indigenous Tobacco control

The first research paper from the *Social media to enhance Indigenous tobacco control* project has been published in the journal *Health Promotion International*. The paper, "Social media and health information sharing among Australian Indigenous people" concluded:

*"Health promotion content designed for social media needs to take into account Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander views of health and wellbeing, the importance of culture and identity and a recognition of the wider marginalisation and discrimination which threatens cultural identity. Approaches which build on the social capital generated by supportive online environments may be more likely to generate greater traction than confronting and emotion-inducing approaches used in mass media campaigns for some health topics such as smoking."*<sup>1</sup>

### Key findings:

- Facebook is the most popular social media platform
- Popular posts: featured children, Aboriginal content, new, positive and practical info. Unpopular posts: gross, biomedical, sad and negative messages.
- Tobacco control content is not currently widely shared on Facebook. Confronting negative messages, traditionally used in tobacco control campaigns through legacy media, may need to be adapted for social media.
- The most appealing health related posts were positive and provided new information. This aligns with Sydney University research which found the most common communication technique was "positive emotional appeal, closely followed by testimonial, while the least common was the use of fear appeal".<sup>2</sup>
- Facebook can be a supportive online environment which can result in offline support.
- Facebook posts generated offline interactions even though there was no visible interaction online.
- Facebook users tend not to click on links which take them away from Facebook.

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## Facebook health posts: what are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Northern Territory sharing?

The overall aim of the *Social media to enhance Indigenous tobacco control* research project is to consider how social media can be effectively used in tobacco control. It's a 3 year project made up of 4 studies. Study 1 was an exploratory study to see if people share tobacco control messages within their usual social media activity.

23 community based peer researchers who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander from Darwin, Alice Springs and Arnhem Land were employed. Some participants were smokers, some ex-smokers and some were never smokers. The youngest participant was 18, the oldest over 60.

Over 8 weeks in 2016 the community based researchers monitored their social media accounts for any post relating to health. We received 1178 screen shots of social media posts from participants. Content included obvious health-related issues such as mental health through to a range of broader social determinants of health including the importance of celebrating positive Aboriginal identity and the impact of racism and trauma.

### Health related content

#### Mental health

Mental health was the most popular topic. Mental health posts were seen to be unambiguously supportive. This contrasted with quit smoking posts and posts about alcohol consumption which participants identified as possibly being "preachy".

Other Australian research has also found that mental health posts are popular on FB.<sup>3</sup>



#### Food and diet

Food posts were prominent. Through interviews we found food photos were often about looking for healthy eating habits to manage conditions like type II diabetes. Posts about hunting and consuming bush tucker were also prominent. These posts were strongly tied up with Aboriginal identity and wellbeing, connected with the desire to actively practice and ensure cultural survival for both physical and mental well-being.

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### Celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity

Most participants shared examples of positive messages about Aboriginal identity which included posts about remote community festivals. Researchers discussed the importance of celebrating cohesive communities, challenging negative media portrayals of Aboriginal people, and promoting cultural practice.

### Alternative medicine

Scepticism about western ‘white man’s’ medicine and the influence of corporate organisations on health and environment were significant themes. Several posts highlighted bush medicine and natural therapies as having a role in health and healing. Specific therapies featured included medicinal use of cannabis and alternative therapies such as lemon juice and turmeric for cancer.



### Community and family support, strong relationships

Family cohesion was paramount to wellbeing – the risk of being alienated for raising an issue that might cause offence, like smoking habits, could be more harmful than the negative impacts of smoking. A striking aspect of much of the content was the desire to be supportive.

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## Smoking

Results from this study suggest that tobacco control content is not currently widely shared on Facebook. These results suggest that confronting negative messages, traditionally used in tobacco control campaigns through legacy media, may need to be adapted for social media.

## **Types of Facebook users**

All participants used social media multiple times a day. However participants engaged in different ways. Six broad user types were identified and depending on content or circumstances users could slide between user types.

## Observer

These users rarely liked or shared content and were unlikely to create their own posts. Observers skimmed social media like flicking through a magazine. However some used Facebook messenger as a communication device instead of text messaging. Notably, these users were all younger participants in our study.

Observers, and all other user types, showed a reluctance to click on links. This finding is in line with other research: "Facebook users are reluctant to leave Facebook for an external site. Only 1% of these users actually click on the link".<sup>2</sup>

## Post sharer

These users shared posts regularly however similar to observers their engagement with posts was shallow. Post sharers saw Facebook as a way of raising awareness and sharing potentially important information with their networks. Decisions about what to share were often based on headings – frequently participants did not read information before sharing.

## Positive supporter

Positive supporters engaged, particularly with personal content, in a way which publicly displayed support to their contacts. Online engagement was often subtle, and sometimes simply a case of liking a post to show approval. Conversely, participants would sometimes withhold likes or refrain from commenting on content they didn't like. One user explained it was important not to react to a post which celebrated heavy drinking. She did not want to enforce these social norms she considered harmful.

## Educator

People in this category actively looked for information to educate others. They also used Facebook content for self-education. Educators were more discerning about the type of content shared (and received). Their interests were more focused than the previous three categories.



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## Expert

Participants in this category did not self-identify as experts instead they displayed caution about what they would comment on or share. For experts, there was a sense that you need to have credibility or be qualified (formally or informally) to share health related content.

## Influencer

Influencers actively challenged injustice and questioned social norms with the intention of creating social change. These could be local issues or systemic issues which affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Influencers blurred their personal and professional identities on Facebook whereas the other user types use Facebook as a personal platform.

## **Connection between online and offline interaction**

Our research found Facebook can be a supportive online environment which can translate to offline support and increased social capital. We found Facebook posts generated offline interactions even though there was no visible connection online; for example participants talked about using messenger, calling or visiting friends and family instead of responding online to a Facebook post.

We also found a strong desire amongst participants to preserve and foster relationships and avoid lateral violence on Facebook. Our research contrasts with previous work which found examples of lateral violence on social media amongst Aboriginal communities.<sup>4</sup>

Our research participants expressed that Facebook was a positive experience compared to the “ongoing impacts of colonisation, structural discrimination, marginalisation and their fight to keep culture alive”.<sup>1</sup>

## References

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2. Shibasaki, S., K. Gardner, and B. Sibthorpe, Using Knowledge Translation to Craft “Sticky” Social Media Health Messages That Provoke Interest, Raise Awareness, Impart Knowledge, and Inspire Change. *JMIR mHealth and uHealth*, 2016. 4(4): p. e115.
3. Kite, J., et al., Please Like Me: Facebook and Public Health Communication. *PLoS One*, 2016. 11(9): p. e0162765.
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