An evaluation of the use of online social support groups for people with type 2 diabetes.

Enhanced Community Care

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Background

Online social support groups are any virtual social space where people come together to get and give information or support, to learn, or to find company. They allow users with a similar condition such as type 2 diabetes (T2DM) to join an online group with peers and healthcare professionals. These groups can be open (public) or closed (private/ invitation-only).

Closed online social support groups offer an attractive option for the delivery of group-based self-management behavioural support interventions as they may:

- help us to reach audiences that may be difficult to reach (e.g. due to geographical/ mobility/ time limitations)
- allow for increased audience sizes
- offer our users a choice to interact with their healthcare through more varied avenues
- offer a safe and supported online group with a healthcare expert as an alternative to unmoderated online spaces

The digital team of the HSE Communications Division, in collaboration with the Integrated Care Programme (ICP) for Chronic Disease National Diabetes Self-Management Education and Support (DSMES) team, received Sláintecare integration funding to research the use of online social support groups for those with chronic conditions, including T2DM.
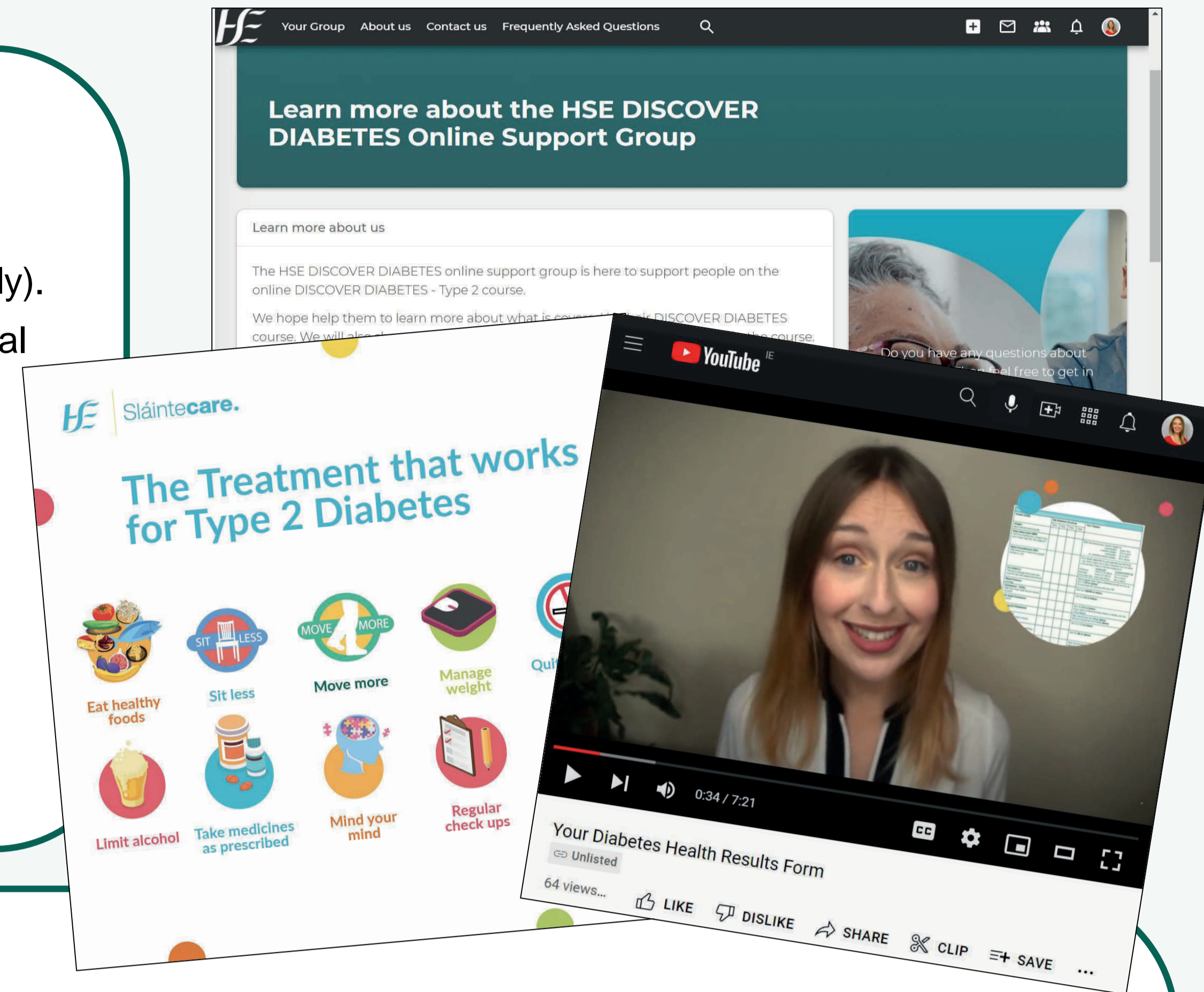
Research design

A pilot group was launched on an independent online-community platform from 8/11/2021-22/1/2022.

Participants were recruited from 4 DISCOVER DIABETES – Type 2 (DDT2) courses, which are self-management support courses for people with T2DM. These 4 courses were run by community dietitians across Community Healthcare Organisations 4, 5 and 8. The online social support group ran in parallel with the courses.

A content calendar for the group was created by the project dietitian in the HSE digital team. The content used and reflected the learning journey through the DDT2 course and contained text, image and video-based content prepared by the project dietitian. A voice, tone and language guide for the project was prepared by the project dietitian to ensure consistency across the content and moderator replies to posts/comments. The content calendar was reviewed by the National Clinical Specialist Dietitian, DSMES team.

The group was moderated by the project dietitian, who posted the content and replied to participant posts/comments.

Evaluation used a mixed methods approach over three phases:

- Phase 1 was an initial pre-commencement survey.
- Phase 2 was a quantitative and content analysis of HSE participant engagement in the online social support group.
- Phase 3 collected experiences of participants in post-delivery qualitative interviews.

A research team from The Irish Institute of Digital Business in Dublin City University assisted to formally assess the closed online social support group through analysis of user interactions, patient activation measures and user confidence/trust in technology.

Results

Phase 1 - Initial pre-commencement survey

14 people completed the pre-commencement survey. 71% (n=10) of respondents were female, and 79% of respondents were aged 40yrs or over.

Some of the key results from the survey included:
- All but one respondent used the internet at least daily.
- Use of social media was less frequent, with only 8 (57%) of respondents using this daily.
- 85% (n=12) showed a medium-to-low level of anxiety when using technology
- 71% (n=10) had low effort expectancy in relation to social media use.

Overall, these results suggested that the relatively infrequent use of social media by the respondents would not represent a major barrier to their active participation in this online social support group.

Phase 2 - Quantitative content analysis

12 users created an account on the platform. During the trial, engagement on the platform included 60 posts, 38 comments and 30 likes.

Phase 3 - Post-delivery qualitative interviews

5 users took part in the post-delivery qualitative interviews.
Themes and subthemes emerging from these interviews on enablers to the effectiveness of the group included:

Themes	Sub-themes
Accessibility (to healthcare professionals)	Location convenience for learning Time convenience Asynchronous learning
Informational support provided by the facilitators and the group	Trustworthiness of healthcare professionals Encouragement to interact Protected time with healthcare staff
The emotional support available within the online community	Shared identity Shared experiences

"So even though we were meeting virtually and stuff like that, I don't think it took away from the experience. - You kind of got to know people, I suppose, without meeting them personally. If people had similar challenges and all the rest of it as well, I suppose a little bit of common support or whatever you call it."

"Mostly at night-time, I'd go on [the online social support group forum]. I might have a question or something, "Oh, what was that about again?" And I'd go to my notes and then I go back into the videos and stuff like that. And that's the way I used it. And I use it about what once a day. Now I'm using it maybe once or twice a week, so I am."

"There's no other forum for getting that information. Not reliably, in my opinion, right? And not presented in such a coherent way, an easily digestible way, and I mean that every pun intended."

"There's an online, it's like a WhatsApp group or whatever, I don't know what way to put it. It's ended since, and I thought that was very good, because there was different topics every day, and you could put questions. There was somebody there qualified that could answer them and give you guidance as well. "

Conclusion

- Online social support groups can improve the service user experience through digital access to health professionals, informational support and signposting and reassurance and emotional support from health professionals and peers. They are a viable new pathway of digital self-management support in the community for those with type 2 diabetes in Ireland.
- Service users, the HSE digital team, ICP Community Diabetes Dietitians and the ICP for Chronic Disease National DSMES team have guided the design, implementation and evaluation of this intervention. This close collaboration between stakeholders has enabled people with type 2 diabetes in Ireland to access effective and integrated care by providing digital access to trusted information and self-management support services. This integrative working of stakeholders and service users was recognised at the 2022 International Conference on Integrative Care, with our research poster on innovative digital channels for diabetes self-management (including this project) receiving a "Special Mention" Award.
- This project has paved the way for further development of self-management digital services within the HSE. Findings from this project are guiding the production of protocols for similar future projects for other conditions also. The value of clinician staff, such as the senior dietitian, within the HSE communications team was also recognised through this project and will be utilised in future projects.

Sláintecare.