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## The use of online media for health education

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### Abstract

Health information is one of the most accessible topics online. Worldwide, approximately 4.5% of all Internet searches are for health information and more than 70,000 websites disseminate health information. Online media is playing an increasingly important role in health education research and practice. In recent years, communication campaigns have become relatively more effective as a result of the increased use of preliminary evaluation research to formulate a campaign strategy and divide its messages and overall audience segmentation into specific sub-audiences, which are then reached with targeted messages. This paper tried to find out the real role of online media for disseminating health information and highlighted the comparative data of rural and urban areas of Amritsar district of Punjab, India, through Survey technique. A total of 200 respondents of urban-rural areas were selected randomly and their responses were collected with scheduled questionnaire method. To reduce treatment disparities, the main questions were targeted on the accuracy of health related content available on Internet.

**Keywords:** Health issues, health communication, health education, health promotion, internet, online media

### Introduction

Health is very important concept which needs many discussions and debates in India. According to World Health Organization "The health of all the public is rudimentary and fundamental to the achievement of tranquility and security and is based on the fullest co-operation of people and States". In another definition WHO asserts that health is a state of absolute mental, physical, and social well-being and not just confined to the absence of any disease or weakness. Health communication has become an important and powerful tool for promoting public health. Health communication principles are often used for various prevention and control strategies, including advocating for health issues, marketing health plans and products, educating patients about medical care or treatment options and the quality of health care to educate consumers about issues. At the same time, the availability of new technologies and computer-based media is expanding access to health information and raising questions about the similarity, accuracy of information, and effective use of these new tools. There is a need to train people to locate relevant websites where they can efficiently retrieve evidence based information and evaluate the same. The study was conducted with the objectives of determining the prevalence of use of online media for accessing healthcare information amongst literate adult population in an urban and rural area of Amritsar district, Punjab.

### Growing use of online media for health education

Online media provides abundant information at the click of a button, and hence, is used in various domains to gain knowledge. Especially in this new era, Internet-savvy populations, both young and old, are comfortable using technology. Health information is one of the most commonly researched topics, and access rates are ever increasing. Worldwide, it accounts for about 4.5% of all Internet searches. More than 70,000 websites disseminate health information, and about 50 million people seek health information (internet users 2012) [1]. With the advantages of interactivity, information modification, and anonymity, the Internet provides comprehensive access to health information. Thus, it enables individuals to control their care, choose health providers and feel empowered. It also helps to improve interaction between patients with health professionals.

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Using the Internet for health information can improve a person's confidence that what they are looking for can have an impact on their health. Although most health-related Internet use is associated with a current prognosis, the search for information about diet, fitness, and exercise on the Internet has also increased, suggesting that online Internet users are increasingly in health information.

### Advantages of the online media as a means of health education

The literature has identified various benefits associated with delivering health education via online media (Griffiths *et al.* 2006) [2]. First, the online media provides a low-cost means of information and support to a large number of individuals and may therefore have the potential to reduce the financial costs of health education. It also allows continuous health information to be given to each person, according to their health status and concern. In addition, the Internet has the ability to disseminate health information to certain specific population groups that may be previously unrecoverable or difficult to access through cones. For example, some studies have shown that men were less likely to seek help from health care professionals (Lane & Addis 2005) [3]. For them, the Internet can be a valuable source where they can seek help. Anonymity of the Internet also allows individuals to obtain sensitive or embarrassing health information. This is supported by research indicating that a condition that is considered stigma (such as HIV) may signal individuals to seek help from the Internet (Davison *et al.* 2000) [4]. The Internet also has the ability to remove geographic barriers, or physical boundaries that prevent individuals from receiving face-to-face support. The World Wide Web, email, newsgroups, online forums, chat rooms, instant messaging or online social media, etc., have a significant impact on health education. There are many ways in which the Internet has been used for health education. The first involves professional development. Several studies have investigated the use of the Internet for distance learning and continuing education on health-related courses (Ruiz *et al.* 2006) [5]. The second and most important one is the use of the Internet as an intervention channel. This includes the distribution of health information, or intervention systems aimed at helping individuals make changes in health behavior. In fact, research has documented the effectiveness of a wealth of health education or interventions that were delivered through various channels in the Internet. For example, professional online intervention systems have been developed for various health conditions. These online specially designed online intervention systems have combined health information provision with various components including joint support, questions and answers, and communication with experts or other system users. Several positive outcomes have been reported to be associated with the use of these online intervention systems, including greater use of active coping strategies, improved health behaviors, and improved mental health and quality of life (Lieberman *et al.* 2003) [6]. A recent analysis of 85 Internet health intervention studies showed that, on average, Internet interventions had a statistically small but significant effect on health behavior, with more widespread use of the theory, more behavioral changes associated with increased effect sizes Incorporation of techniques (Webb TL *et al.* 2010) [7].

The Internet has also provided an excellent medium for social interaction among patients who share similar backgrounds

and health concerns through online support groups. Most communications within online support groups work asynchronously on a 'bulletin board' format, with messages stored online for a short period of time by some others for individual reading at their convenience. Studies examining the provision of social support within these online groups and informational and emotional support were the most frequently exchanged among the group (Crook *et al.* 2012) [8].

The use of online support groups is found to be associated with positive outcomes, including improved mental health, improved quality of life, and a higher level of optimism, and greater use of active coping strategies (Houston *et al.* 2002) [9] and benefits do not appear to be in the group. There is a difference between those who read the messages made, and the posters posting the group and (Luxton *et al.* 2011) [10] post messages.

### Issues with delivering health education through online media

Despite the promise and potential of the online media, many important hurdles have to be overcome, including the vast digital divide that exists with the use of the Internet and which do not have such access. As the Internet population has grown, the digital divide is narrowing. However, individuals who are less educated, economically disadvantaged, older, and socially marginalized are the least likely to seek health information on the Internet and thus differ from "digital culture" (Eysenbach *et al.* 2002) [11] - Been separated. Recent data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project show that more than 90% of people between the ages of 18 and 49 used the Internet, while the figure fell to 85% among those aged 50-64, and increased to 58% of those 65+. These data suggest that people who are in greatest need of health information cannot take advantage of emerging technology. Another issue concerns the accuracy of health information on the Internet. As anyone can post information on the Internet, there is little control over the information posted on the website and the accuracy of the response. The anonymous nature of the Internet further accelerates the possibility of false identification that a person may claim to be an expert in the subject. It has been warned that some health information available on the Internet may contain inaccurate or non-evidence based information (Benotsch *et al.* 2004) [12]. In addition, low-income and low-education individuals are more likely to provide high reliability for unfounded Internet information, thus being more likely to misinformation from the Internet (Kalichman *et al.* 2002) [13].

### Data collection

During the survey, respondents from urban and rural areas of Amritsar district were covered, representing Majha zone of Punjab. Data was collected from 200 respondents selected randomly for the research purpose. The detail of data collected from urban and rural areas of Amritsar district is mentioned below in the form of tables.

### Percentage responses regarding authenticity of health related information available on different online platforms

Table 1: Google

	Agree	Disagree	Can't say	Chi-Square	P-Value
Urban	44 44.0%	45 45.0%	11 11.0%	6.464	.039
Rural	60 60.0%	28 28.0%	12 12.0%		

\*Correlation Significant at 0.05 levels

**Table 2: YouTube**

	Agree	Disagree	Can't say	Chi-Square	P-Value
Urban	49 49.0%	34 34.0%	17 17.0%	3.656	.161
Rural	48 48.0%	25 25.0%	27 27.0%		

**Table 3: Health Applications**

	Agree	Disagree	Can't say	Chi-Square	P-Value
Urban	50 50.0%	5 5.0%	45 45.0%	8.793	.012
Rural	68 68.0%	7 7.0%	25 25.0%		

\*Correlation Significant at 0.05 levels

### Outcomes of the Result

The above data shows that 44% respondents of Urban area and 60% respondents from rural area were satisfied with the health related content available on google and there is a significant difference of opinion of respondents (chi-square= 8.793 and P-Value=. 012) while a mix responses have been received in terms of YouTube as 49% respondents were satisfied with the content and 34% respondents were not satisfied with the content of urban area. On the other hand, 48% respondents were satisfied with the health related content and 25% respondents were not satisfied with the content from rural area and there is no significant difference has been seen in their responses (chi-square= 3.656 and P-Value=.161). Furthermore, a huge number of responses were received in the favor of health applications as 50% and 68% respondents mentioned that they are getting credible information from health applications and a significant difference has been seen in their responses (chi-square= 8.793 and P-Value=.012).

The above tables show that there is a still need for health care professionals or online support group administrators to regularly evaluate and monitor the content of message that is shared between members in the group so to minimize the chance of harm caused by misinformation on online media. Intervention is needed to provide patients information where they could obtain useful health information, and to educate them to evaluate the credibility of online information more critically. This can serve as a useful guide for health care professionals to improve the skills of patients so they could obtain useful information more effectively.

### Conclusion

The emergence of Internet technology provides many opportunities for health education to be delivered in a cost-effective manner. Current literature suggests that using the Internet for health education may possibly be beneficial. However, the digital divide and the quality of information posted on the Internet can act as barriers that individuals may benefit from using the health-related Internet. Health professionals need to be integrated on the Internet as an adjunct to their healthcare to continuously evaluate health information posted on the Internet and to educate the general public to obtain health information from a reliable source.

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