Adolescents Seeking Nutrition Information: Motivations, Sources and the Role of the Internet

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ABSTRACT

Much research exploring the potential of the internet for providing effective nutrition information to adolescents focuses on the design of websites and uses of the internet. This study takes a step back to investigate the specific reasons adolescents do and do not use the internet to learn about nutrition. This paper asks, "What motivates adolescents to select the internet when learning about nutrition?" Using in-depth interviews and a survey, two stages of the information-seeking process are examined: initiation and selection. Results reveal that because school classes are serving as a primary entry point for learning about this topic, even personal nutrition needs are often conceptualized as formal and education-related. The internet is less appealing than books and teachers for fulfilling those needs because adolescents primarily use it for social, not formal tasks. The paper concludes that educators should incorporate more directed use of the internet into nutrition classes and assignments.

Keywords: Adolescents, Education, Information-Seeking, Internet, Nutrition, Websites

INTRODUCTION

Scholars and educators have recognized the need to create wide-reaching programs for adolescents emphasizing skills-building for healthy nutrition and weight control (Ferraro, Thorpe, & Wilkinson, 2003; Middleman, Vazquez, & Durant, 1998). The internet has potential to serve this function by providing nutrition information to a large number of adolescents very quickly, with little cost compared to traditional methods of health communication (e.g., doctor visits, books, or community programs). Scholars have suggested that such approaches are promising because this age group spends considerable time online and might be open to new ways of presenting information and education materials using that medium (Buhia, Daleya, Fuhrmann, & Smith, 2008; Crutzen, deNooijer, Brouwer, Oenema, Brug, & deVries, 2009). Research has found, however, that their use of online nutrition resources is low (Crutzen et al., 2009; Skinner, Biscope, Poland, & Goldberg, 2003). However,
only limited research explicitly examines why this might be.

Much of the research exploring the potential of the internet in providing effective health and nutrition information to adolescents focuses on the design of specific sites, uses of the internet, or behavior change after exposure to specific information (Buhia et al., 2009; Crutzen et al., 2009). We take a step back to investigate how adolescents’ use of the internet for nutrition information relates to use of other information sources and to their day-to-day lives. Some research among adults suggests barriers to finding health information may be due to difficulties in identifying good search terms (Keselmann, Browne, & Kaufman, 2008), information overload (Skinner et al., 2003), or lack of tailored content (Flicker et al., 2004; Oenema, Brug, & Lechner, 2001). It is unclear, however, the extent to which and how such barriers influence adolescents’ choices among information sources. Therefore we ask, What motivates adolescents to select the internet as a source in learning about nutrition?

Using in-depth interviews and a survey, we examine adolescents’ motivations for using specific sources to learn more about what they eat and drink generally, with a focus on the role of the internet. We investigate what leads them to and away from internet resources, especially in relation to their school-related learning contexts. We focus on their thoughts and feelings about how the internet does and does not fulfill their nutrition information needs.

### Adolescents’ Use of Online Nutrition Resources

It has been suggested that adolescents use the internet to obtain health information, although this may be a small portion of their total time spent online. Purcell and Lenhart (2010) report that among the 93% of all U.S. teens (age 12 to 17) online, 31% have searched the internet for information on general health, dieting, or physical fitness. A national telephone survey of 1,209 youth found that 75 percent of 15-24 year olds who have ever gone online have gotten health information at least once (Rideout, 2001).

Borzekowski and Rickert (2001) found that...
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