

Chapter 10

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.

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

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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.

Online Nutrition Information-Seeking

Information-seeking models provide effective frameworks within which to examine the influences and outcomes of online searches. Models that incorporate user thoughts, feelings, and conceptualizations help scholars focus on the process of a search and provide insight into nuances about barriers and successes from the user's point of view. Kuhlthau (1993, 1991) used interviews to develop a model of the information search process that divides a search into six stages: initiation, selection, exploration, formulation, collection, and presentation. Each stage represents a task in the information-seeking process, and analysis focuses on how users make sense of information as they encounter it. Marchionini (1995) notes that in an electronic environment, information-seekers are presented with new challenges, such as great volumes of information and new technologies, resulting in changes to their expectations about receiving, retrieving, and using information. Understanding the motivations for selecting online nutrition information resources, then, requires examining conceptualizations of the internet in relation to nutrition topics.

We focus here on initiation, or motivations for a search, and selection, or identifying topics and sources for information, because we are particularly interested in how educational contexts influence adolescents' motivations to use the internet to learn about nutrition. It is important to note, however, that the subsequent stages of this model address what users encounter in a search, as well as how they apply that information to their needs. Such steps are fundamental aspects of assessing the effectiveness of online resources for nutrition education, and require further research.

Adolescents' Use of Online Nutrition Resources

It has been suggested that adolescents use the internet to obtain health information, although

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