

# Exploring the Role of Social Media in the Information Seeking Behavior of Millennials in Search of Safe Sex and Sexual Health Information

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore millennials' preferences when seeking safe sex (SS) and sexual health information (SHI) and whether or not this population views social media sites as preferred sources. Understanding the information preferences of millennials in this context can help educators better disseminate accurate and timely information. This study consisted of an online survey (n=82) which revealed that millennials are not using social media for SS and SHI, primarily due to concerns of accuracy. The survey did reveal that even though millennials believe medical professionals and schools are the best source for acquiring SHI, a majority of respondents (63%) indicated that they use internet websites as their primary source of information. Our research is meant to provide dialogue and background information for future research.

**Keywords:** Sexual Health Information; Safe Sex; Social Media; Information Seeking Behavior; Millennials

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## 1 Introduction

Access to accurate Safe Sex (SS) and Sexual Health Information (SHI) is important to millennials—18 to 34—year-olds, born 1982-1998, given the risk to their health and well-being that unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections pose. According to the National Congress of State Legislatures (NCSL) (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016), 25% of the sexually active population of the United States consists of 15-24 year olds. This group of young millennials acquires 9.8 million new cases of sexually transmitted infections (STI) per year and represents half of all STIs reported each year. While many members of the public may assume that schools are teaching millennials about the importance of practicing SS and promoting sexual health (SH), research shows that sexual education is inconsistent across the United States. In 2014, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention discovered that out of 44 states that participated in their study, less than 50% of states' schools were actually teaching the sixteen sexual education topics identified by the CDC as important. (The sixteen topics fall roughly into three categories: 1) information about preventing pregnancies and STIs using condoms; 2) information about sexually transmitted diseases and infections and their symptoms; and 3) mental health and communicating with partners about sex.) In addition, in early 2016, the NCSL stated that only 22 states and the District of Columbia require public schools teach SH and HIV education. The high risk of STIs combined with the inconsistency of sex education in schools necessitates a better understanding of where and how millennials acquire information about SS and SHI.

## 2 Literature Review

As digital natives, today's adult millennials grew up using computing technology and have been heavily exposed to mediated communication (Pew Research Center, 2014). Chandler (2016) defines mediated communication as all forms of communication that do not involve a face to face interaction, such as websites, games, and social media sites. Research shows that millennials also turn to mediated communication sites for health information. According to Escoffery et al. (2010), 72.9% of college students reported getting health information for themselves online via websites. Escoffery's study demonstrates that almost three out of four college students are likely to use mediated communication sources when seeking general health information.

According to Levine (2011) social networking sites, podcasts, and vodcasts are favorite digital media information sources that adult millennials use to seek information about SS and SH topics. Levine (2011) also suggests that traditional sources of information about SS or SH, such as parents, clergy, and schools, should better recognize the impact of mediated communication on millennials as a way to gain the attention of teens and young adults. In a 2015 study, the Common Sense Media (CSM) foundation found that teens spend an average of 2-3 hours per day on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest. The CSM study also found that 10% of teens say social media is their favorite media activity. It should be noted that millennials also get information about SS and SH from non-digital sources including books (fiction and nonfiction), magazines, and non-technological resources like billboards and posters (Levine, 2011).

## 3 Research Questions

While the literature review shows that both adult and young millennials turn to mediated communication sources when seeking SS and SHI, are mediated sources their preferred options? Also, given that teens spend multiple hours per day using social media, are social media sites the best places to disseminate SS and SHI? Our research study explores which sources of SS and SHI are preferred by millennials and whether or not social media is changing millennials' SS and SHI seeking behavior? Our research sought to address two primary questions:

- a) Do millennials prefer mediated communications as their source for safe sex and sexual health information?
- b) How is social media changing millennials safe sex and sexual health information seeking behavior?

## 4 Methods

Our study consisted of a mixed method approach, an integration of data and interpretation analysis, to explore millennials' information seeking preferences. The study included an online survey that consisted of 27 multiple-choice and forced ranking questions, and two open-ended questions. Multiple-choice and forced ranking questions were analyzed using R language while the responses to the open-ended questions were coded and explored for patterns. Survey questions were designed and arranged to collect information about a participant's information seeking behavior and preferences in regards to finding SHI. The population for this survey was drawn from a convenience sample drawn from the study authors' personal social networks and from Reddit postings on the subreddit, Sample Size, which provides an online space for participants to take online surveys.

## 5 Findings

Participants in the study (n= 82) self-identified to be between 18 and 34 years old. The majority of the survey participants were white and female, with some college education.

Overall, the survey revealed that 71.6% of respondents do not use social media as a means to seek out SS and SHI. Analysis of the open-ended questions revealed that 83% of our participants did not view

social media as a preferred source of information due to the perceived inaccuracy of the information. Additionally, 11% of participants cited concerns relating to subjective opinions on social media, and 6% of participants cited concerns of non-credible dialogue as reasons for not using social media to acquire SHI.

When asked to identify the best source for acquiring SHI, 28% of participants stated “medical professionals,” such as medical doctors or healthcare experts. 27% of participants selected “school/education” as the best information source. Interestingly however, while a majority of participants indicated that medical professionals or school/education are the best sources for acquiring SHI, 63% of participants said they personally acquire SS and SHI via mediated communication sources, such as websites like WebMD and Planned Parenthood.

There was little difference between female and male responses in terms of information preferences. However, out of our total number of respondents, 3 self-identified as neither male nor female. Of those 3, 100% indicated that they do use social media as a source to acquire SHI.

## 6 Discussion & Future Research

One important question raised by this study is why do millennials say medical professionals and schools are the best sources of SS and SHI, but prefer using mediated communication websites, but not social media, when acquiring information for themselves? Johnson (2014) states that out of five common habits people have when searching for health information, one of them is that people will look for information that is more accessible even if the source is not very credible or trustworthy. Our findings support Johnson’s claim that accessibility can be an important factor in information seeking behavior, particularly in the context of SHI. Participants’ perceptions of SHI on social media as inaccurate did not carry over to other mediated communication sources.

Surprisingly, the discrepancy between best and preferred information source was not present in the responses of participants who did not identify as female or male. Those participants favored using social media as a source of SS and SHI. Additional research is needed to understand why those participants preferred social media as a source of SHI. Issues relating to privacy, community support, gender, and sexual orientation may be important factors to consider for future research. Additionally, it is important to understand more fully the online sources that millennials actually use to find, develop, and share their knowledge of SS and SH.

## 7 Conclusion

This study found that despite the growing number of hours that millennials spend using social media, participants cited perceptions of inaccuracy as the most important reason for not using social media to gather SHI. In addition, although millennial participants cited medical professionals and schools/education as the best sources for acquiring information about SS and SHI, they did not use those sources when searching for information for themselves. Instead, mediated communications, in the form of internet websites, were preferred sources of information. Additional research is needed to improve and more fully understand the discrepancy in millennials SHI seeking behavior, as well as how millennials acquire and share that information.

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