

U.S. Social Media Use and Health Communication

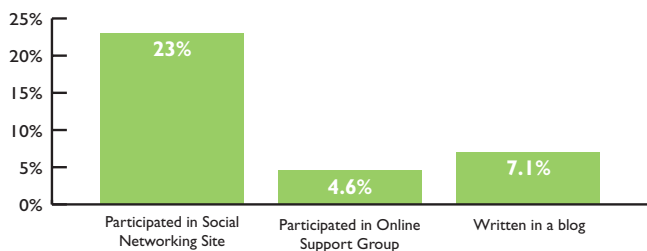
Characteristics of Internet and Social Media Users

Surveys routinely find that more than two-thirds of U.S. adults use the Internet, and about 60 percent of those online say they use the Internet to look for health or medical information. Although studies continue to show that ethnic minorities and those who are older, less educated, and less healthy are more likely to be non-Internet users, a more nuanced picture of this “digital divide” is beginning to emerge, particularly with the advent of social media and mobile technologies.

Advances in Internet technology heralded the advent of new social media applications that facilitate user-generated content and the ability to interact and collaborate online, transforming communication patterns from being unidirectional and passive to active and participatory. HINTS data from 2008 show that 27 percent of Internet users participate on some type of social media platform. Involvement on social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter has been especially remarkable, quadrupling between 2005 and 2009, and these sites have become leading channels for communication about business, politics, and health. Among the HINTS respondents from 2008, 23 percent said they used these types of SNS sites, with 7 percent saying they were bloggers and 4.6 percent indicating they participated in online support groups.

These social platforms are thought to hold health-enhancing potential, and many public health practitioners and organizations have begun using them for health education, interventions, and social marketing. However, there is little research on the impact these new technologies have on population health, and the studies that have been conducted have produced conflicting results.

Social Media Use Among Internet Users (HINTS, 2008; n=5,078 [69%])



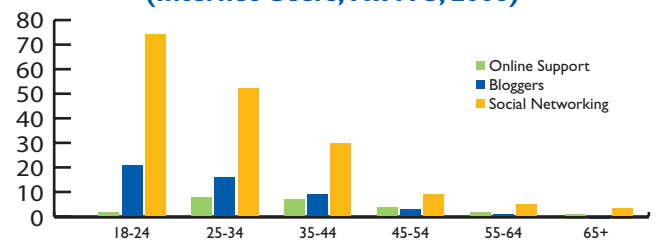
Age Plays a Significant Role in Internet and Social Media Use

Studies using HINTS data from 2008 confirmed prior research showing that as a group, people 65 years old and older are much less likely to use the Internet than are those in any other age group, with about two-thirds of them reporting they do not go online. People in the next younger age group (55–64 years old) were nearly twice as likely to use the Internet. That trend continues as age declines, with Internet use at its highest level (85 percent) among younger adults 18–24 years old.

Usage gaps are even more pronounced with respect to social media, with just 8 percent of Internet users in the oldest age group using such platforms compared with more than three-quarters in the youngest age group. There are also differences in the types of platforms used by those in various age groups. For example, Internet users age 18–24 were the least likely to use online support groups (OR=.98), but were the most likely of any group to be bloggers (OR=19.11) and to use social networking sites (OR=47.85). Across all age groups, the odds of participating in social networking and in blogging decreased as age increased.

Although social media use is growing and may hold promise for health professionals to communicate with target populations in new and interactive ways, HINTS research suggests that careful consideration must be given to the differing needs and traits of various audiences, particularly those related to age.

Social Media Use by Age (Internet Users; HINTS, 2008)



Quick Facts

- More than one-quarter of U.S. adult Internet users participate in social media.
- The only consistent predictor of social media use is younger age.
- People age 65 and older rarely report using social media platforms of any kind.
- Despite inequalities in Internet access, use of social networking sites does not vary significantly by race, ethnicity, or social group.

Influence of Health Status on Social Media Use

In addition to age, HINTS 2008 research reveals that several health-related factors must be taken into account when considering differences in social media participation.

For example, those who perceive themselves as less healthy, experience psychological distress, or have a personal experience with cancer are more likely to have participated in an online support group. In addition, individuals who have been diagnosed with cancer at some point in their life are much less likely to use social networking sites than are those who have no personal history with the disease; similarly, family members of cancer survivors are much more likely to use SNS than are cancer survivors. The same is true of blogging, although to a much smaller degree. HINTS data also show that SNS use is associated with higher levels of psychological distress, even when controlling statistically for the influence of other variables. This anxiety is not seen with general Internet use, suggesting it is uniquely associated with these social applications.

How Can This Inform Your Work?

HINTS data suggest social media presents opportunities for communicating with the public about health topics and may hold potential for narrowing the existing health disparity gaps. As new communication programs and eHealth interventions are developed, several factors must be considered, including:

- **Age of the target population:** Younger age is the single most important predictor of social media use, indicating that communicating about health through social media platforms can be expected to have the broadest reach and impact with younger generations, while they currently are likely not suitable for connecting with those age 55 and older.
- **Race/ethnicity of the audience:** Once on the Internet, people with low levels of education and racial/ethnic minorities are just as likely to use social networking sites. Social media may provide opportunities to reach traditionally underserved populations.
- **Type of social media platform:** Online support groups continue to be useful for people who are in poorer health and those who have experience with specific diseases such as cancer—either personally or through a family member or friend.
- **Message to be communicated:** Social media may permit information to reach a wider audience than traditional media, but where targeted messages are needed, these platforms may not be the most effective option.

About HINTS
<http://hints.cancer.gov>

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) fielded the first Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS) in 2002 and 2003, surveying 6,369 Americans. Subsequent surveys followed in 2005 (5,586 Americans surveyed) and 2008 (7,674 Americans surveyed). HINTS was created to monitor changes in the rapidly evolving field of health communication. The survey data can be used to understand how adults use different communication channels to obtain health information for themselves and their loved ones, and to create more effective health communication strategies across populations.

HINTS *Briefs* provide a snapshot of noteworthy, data-driven research findings. They introduce population-level estimates for specific questions in the survey and summarize significant research findings that are a result of analyzing how certain demographic characteristics influence specific outcomes. Many *Briefs* summarize research findings from recent peer-reviewed journal articles using HINTS data.

For More Information on Cancer

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- Visit <http://cancer.gov>
- Order NCI publications at <https://cissecure.nci.nih.gov/ncipubs/>
- Visit [Facebook.com/cancer.gov](https://www.facebook.com/cancer.gov) and <http://www.youtube.com/ncigov>

References Used in This HINTS Brief

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