

Nonprofit health organizations increase health literacy through social media

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As the presence of social media continues to increase as a form of communication, health organizations are searching for the most effective ways to use the online tools to pass important information to the public. Now, researchers at the University of Missouri have found that nonprofit organizations and community groups appear to be more actively engaged in posting health information and interacting with the public on Twitter than other types of health-related organizations, such as health business corporations, educational institutions and government agencies.

"[Twitter](#) may be more appealing to nonprofit organizations because it creates a barrier-free environment that allows these organizations to share important information through real-time exchanges without significant efforts," said Hyojung Park, a doctoral candidate at the Missouri School of Journalism. "Unlike business organizations such as pharmaceutical companies, nonprofit health organizations and [advocacy groups](#) may suffer from lack of funding, staff, and other resources in developing and implementing communication strategies for health intervention and promotion programs. Thus, it is likely that nonprofit organizations and support groups recognize the rapid growth of Twitter and its value as an inexpensive but highly effective communication tool."

In her study, Park explored how health-related organizations use Twitter, which is a popular social media outlet, to promote [health literacy](#) in society and to raise awareness of their brands and manage their images. The study included a content analysis of 571 tweets from health-related organizations. Park found that nonprofit health groups do an effective

job of incorporating interactive elements into their communication planning.

"Recent studies have shown that most social media users want organizations to be actively involved in social media and to communicate and engage the users directly," Park said. "Nonprofit health groups do a great job of this, which helps them communicate their health messages and, ultimately, to increase health literacy in the community."

Park also found that about 30 percent of health "[tweets](#)" were actually re-published or "re-tweeted" by readers who found the information useful or interesting. These retweets result in an even larger audience for the health messages. Park says that this shows how dynamic and multidirectional communication on social networking sites such as Twitter hold great potential for health-related organizations to increase the awareness of health literacy, share resources, and foster public discussion. Park hopes future research will shed even more insight into how health organizations can effectively communicate their messages.

"There is a need for understanding how to use social networking sites as a cost-effective communication tool to deliver important health information and increase health literacy," Park said. "With an understanding of users of social networking sites and potential supporters for health organizations, this line of research may also help those organizations design health messages tailored to target audiences, as well as develop communication strategies for a general audience."

More information: This study was published in the *Journal of Health Communication*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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