Using online health forums to serve underserved communities

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Vagelis Hristidis, a professor of computer science and engineering at the University of California, Riverside. Credit: UC Riverside

University of California, Riverside researchers believe results from their recently published paper on how people use social media and online

health forums can help reach underserved communities and prevent the spread of misinformation.

The paper published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* found men and women used social media and online health forums differently. It also found that blacks and medically underserved populations use such platforms less frequently than other groups.

The researchers from UC Riverside's Bourns College of Engineering also discovered that age played a role in the frequency that people use social platforms and discussion forums.

"Few people over 65 are participating in such forums when one would expect that, given that they have more health problems, they would be more active on these forums," said Vagelis Hristidis, a professor of computer science and engineering, who is an author of the paper. "We also found that in places with more access to doctors and fewer uninsured people, people go more frequently to healthcare forums, although one might think that lack of healthcare access would make people use these forums more.

Other findings by Hristidis, Shouq Sadah, Moloud Shahbazi, and Matthew T. Wiley, who are current or former graduate students of Hristidis, revealed that men and women use the sites studied (drugs.com, dailystrength.org, WebMD, Google+ and Twitter) for different purposes.

Women use drug review websites and health forums to talk about specific conditions, while men prefer social sites such as Google+ and Twitter to share and comment on health news, and healthcare policy, Hristidis said.

"One application for these results is for public health officers who want to approach specific or underrepresented demographics. If you can

assign health experts to take part in some online communities they can help users avoid misinformation or dispense healthy lifestyle advice," Hristidis said.

More information: A Study of the Demographics of Web-Based Health-Related Social Media Users, *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 2015.

Provided by University of California - Riverside

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