



Social Media and HIV



Key Questions

How has social media been used in the HIV/AIDS sector and with what impact?

Key Take-Home Messages

- Through a review of the literature, we were unable to locate any evaluations related to the use of social media
- We identified four examples of Facebook pages provided by AIDS service organizations (ASOs) and other HIV/AIDS groups in Ontario
- We previously produced a rapid response summary entitled Effectiveness and impact of using the internet for prevention of HIV/AIDS, which presents results from a broader literature review. The summary is available at: <http://www.ohtn.on.ca/Pages/Knowledge-Exchange/Fact-Sheets.aspx>

The Issue and Why It's Important

With the internet increasingly being used as a source of health information, its potential as a method of HIV prevention and outreach is significant, especially given that interventions can be delivered anonymously and with minimal cost (1). Social media may provide the additional advantage of more actively engaging both people at risk for and living with HIV/AIDS in prevention strategies. In addition, social media could be used as a mechanism to provide peer training and/or education. However, before using social media in this manner, it is important to more fully understand its benefits, harms/risks (e.g., privacy issues) and costs.

EVIDENCE INTO ACTION

The OHTN Rapid Response Service offers HIV/AIDS programs and services in Ontario quick access to research evidence to help inform decision making, service delivery and advocacy. In response to a question from the field, the Rapid Response Team reviews the scientific and grey literature, consults with experts, and prepares a brief fact sheet summarizing the current evidence and its implications for policy and practice.

Suggested Citation:

OHTN Rapid Response Service. *Rapid Review: Social Media and HIV*. Ontario HIV Treatment Network, Toronto, ON, July, 2010

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What We Found

We were unable to identify any evaluations of the use of social media in the HIV/AIDS sector. However, we did identify a review of interactive safer sex websites (2). The review provides a table of websites that were identified through an exhaustive search of websites that was conducted. However, the search was conducted in 2004 and therefore, the results are not up to date (2).

Through a previous rapid response we completed about the use of the internet for delivering HIV/AIDS prevention (see <http://www.ohntn.on.ca/Pages/Knowledge-Exchange/Fact-Sheets.aspx>), we identified an extensive review of evaluations related to computer technology interventions (3) and a review about current trends in internet and phone-based HIV prevention programs (4). The former indicated “that computer-mediated interventions hold much promise for the future of HIV prevention efforts” and “that computer technology-based interventions have many advantages when compared to human-delivered interventions” including lower cost and greater flexibility (3).

The review of current trends in internet and phone-based HIV prevention by Ybarra & Bull (2007) highlighted that embedding internet prevention interventions on social media networking sites may be helpful for overcoming the challenges that have been experienced in attracting people to engage in these strategies (4). In addition, Ybarra & Bull (2007) note that chat rooms are a common place to meet partners and are therefore important for targeting prevention interventions. It is noted that several chat room interventions are in development, which includes the University of Minnesota’s HIPS unit MINTS-II - an Internet-based intervention aimed at reducing HIV risk behaviors among men who have sex with men who use the Internet to find sexual partners (4).

In order to provide locally relevant information, we have identified some examples of ASO Facebook pages that help to illustrate how social media is currently being used in Ontario. The examples of Facebook pages that we identified include:

- OutNPoz Toronto <http://www.facebook.com/ACToronto#!/group.php?gid=44396692471&ref=search&sid=532526112.1787969061..1>
- AIDS Committee of Ottawa Facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=17899260494>
- AIDS Committee of Toronto Facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/ACToronto>
- We, The Students Of Canada, Have HIV/AIDS <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2219997164#!/group.php?v=wall&gid=2219997164>

Factors that May Affect Local Applicability

The research literature we identified was focused on computer-based interventions for delivering HIV prevention interventions and not specifically on the use of social media. The review of websites that we did identify (2) was conducted six years ago and given the pace of advancement in social media since 2004, the findings are likely no longer relevant.

What We Did

We first scanned the articles used to develop a previous rapid response summary we produced in 2009 entitled *Effectiveness and impact of using the internet for prevention of HIV/AIDS* (see: <http://www.ohtn.on.ca/Pages/Knowledge-Exchange/Fact-Sheets.aspx>). We then conducted a related articles search in PubMed using one of the citations (3) we identified as being relevant from the previous summary and scanned the results (n=235). Next, we searched PubMed using text search terms (social media and HIV) and scanned the results (n=331) for any relevant articles. Lastly, we contacted staff from other ASOs in Canada in order to try and identify examples of how social media has been used and any evaluations that may have been completed.

References

1. Bowen AM, Williams ML, Daniel CM, Clayton S. Internet based HIV prevention research targeting rural MSM: Feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary efficacy. *Journal of behavioral medicine* 2008;31(6):463-77.
2. Noar SM, Clark A, Cole C, Lustria ML. Review of Interactive Safer Sex Web Sites: Practice and Potential. *Health Communication* 2006;20(3):233-41.
3. Noar SM, Black HG, Pierce LB. Efficacy of computer technology-based HIV prevention interventions: A meta-analysis. *AIDS* 2009;23(1):107-15.
4. Ybarra ML, Bull SS. Current trends in Internet- and cell phone-based HIV prevention and intervention programs. *Current HIV/AIDS Reports* 2007;4(4):201-7.

