

Running Head: Targeting single parents in preadolescent substance use prevention

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Abstract

Aim: This study investigates the internet as a resource for parent-based preadolescent substance use prevention information for African American single mothers receiving public assistance in the United States.

Methods: Thirty-two mothers with at least one preadolescent child participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews and usefulness studies eliciting information about their perceptions of the internet as an information and online resource for parent-based preadolescent substance use prevention. Themes were generated qualitatively through an iterative process of comparative analysis.

Findings: Findings reveal a consensus that the internet is convenient, comfortable to use, and provides accessibility to broad information. However, as related to parent-based preadolescent substance use prevention, participants reviewing established prevention sites (e.g., NIDA) noted that several lacked personal relevance (e.g., did not relate to life experiences and circumstances). These personal considerations override cultural concerns, although issues of representation (i.e., information related to group membership) were still important.

Conclusions: Online preadolescent substance use prevention information targeting African American single mothers would be useful and utilized as a resource if messages make sense within the day to day experiences of this ethnic group

Key Words: Preadolescents, Prevention, Internet

Targeting single parents in preadolescent substance use prevention: Internet characteristics and information relevance

Introduction

While there are numerous sources of intervention, families are a natural context for substance use prevention efforts (Miller, Alberts, Hecht, Trost, & Krizek, 2000). Unfortunately, many single mothers in the United States (US) with children under 17 years of age encounter challenges finding relevant parent-based substance use prevention information targeting preadolescents ages 9-12 (Lochman & van den Steenhoven, 2002). Many formal programs are not useful to them because they offer no childcare, no transportation and/or are conducted through uncomfortable group discussions (Lochman & van den Steenhoven, 2002). Recognition of these access barriers has led to greater emphasis on providing parents informal prevention information and tools (Partnership for a Drug-Free America® [PDFA], 2002).

Compared to more formal substance use prevention resources in school- and clinic-based settings, the internet can broaden access to less formal health resources (Pew Internet and American Life Survey [PIALS], 2006). Therefore, in this study we sought to assess how African American single mothers receiving public assistance in the United States perceive the internet as a means to obtain substance use prevention information for their preadolescent children.

Background

With the steady increase in use of the internet for health information among underserved populations, the internet has emerged as a feasible channel for providing information on substance use/misuse prevention (PIALS, 2006), and increasing the availability of web-based parenting resources. In 2000, 7.7 million African American families making less than \$15,000

annually used the internet (The Children's Partnership, 2002). Women and parents are the fastest growing African American demographic groups using the internet (Jackson et al., 2003).

Studies have shown that parents across socioeconomic groups and ethnicities who had increased access to online health information experienced greater home health management (Wagner & Greenlick, 2001); and African American parents of urban adolescents (n=419) want even more instruction in the use of internet as a resource in parenting (Cohall, Cohall, Dye, Dini, & Vaughan, 2004). The limited evidence suggests that providing lower income African American single parents with substance use prevention information online might increase their capacity to manage drug use issues. However, the value of internet use is based on the users' ability to find information as well as information that is relevant to their social and cultural behaviors and values.

Comprehensive Model of Information Seeking

The Comprehensive Model of Information Seeking (CMIS) provides a framework for assessing the relevance of channels and information in health prevention (Napoli, 2001). The CMIS posits that factors such as experience with the internet, demographics, beliefs, and salience influence perceptions of the channel (e.g., TV, radio, print sources, internet) and the usefulness of the information, which in turn, influences health-related action (Figure 1; Napoli, 2001). The present study involved one under-studied demographic group to describe how channel selection salience influences perceptions of health information usefulness.

Insert Figure 1

Usefulness involves perceptions of both the information and the channel that delivers it. Health information usefulness is the extent to which the information is applicable to individuals' health needs in their day-to-day lives (Napoli, 2001) while channel usefulness is predicated upon

characteristics ascribed to the channel (e.g., internet, TV, radio) that influence the ways in which the channel allows and restricts health-related actions (Kling, Rosenbaum, & Sawyer, 2005).

Channel usefulness influences whether or not an individual will use the internet as a resource and information usefulness influences what happens with the outcome of online activities.

The internet has proven to be an increasingly useful channel to low income or less educated populations (Gustafson et al., 2005). If given training and access to a web-based health program that includes diverse components (e.g., information services, support services, and decision-making services), studies have proven that lower income African American women will use it (Gustafson et al., 2005). The question remains, however, do they find the information online to be useful?

Historically, health information on the internet has not address the health realities of underserved groups (Kvasny & Warren, 2006). This paucity of resources is counter the US government's Healthy People 2010 policy goal to reduce substance abuse to protect the health, safety, and quality of life for all, especially children. Providing accessible and usable parent-based information is essential to this aim. To help address these gaps, the current study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do African American single mothers perceive the internet as a channel for accessing preadolescent substance use prevention information?
2. How do African American single mothers perceive the usefulness of parent-based preadolescent substance use prevention information on the internet?

Methods

Participants

Thirty-two participants were recruited from a city in the northeastern US. Inclusion criteria specified that participants self identified as an African American woman between 18 and 65 years of age who had used the internet to seek information, spoke/read English, were single mothers caring for at least one child between 8 and 12 years of age, and were receiving public assistance at the time of the study (i.e., established by income eligibility). The study was

approved by the Office of Research Protections at the Pennsylvania State University (PSU).

Comment [LK1]: I think that you should delete or rephrase this sentence to retain anonymity of the study participants.

Multiple recruitment strategies were used, including contacting participants in another ongoing study and utilizing two community liaisons. Participants were paid \$50-\$75 depending on interview length (1-2 hours) and provided food/beverages, transportation and childcare. Table 1 provides demographic characteristics of the 32 participants. Table 2 summarizes participants' computer use, internet use, and general online information seeking behavior.

Insert Table 1 and Table 2

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted by an African American female who shared socio-economic status, racial, gender, and single parent status with participants. Interviews were held in technology rooms with computer and internet access at an extension campus of the university and a neighboring family advocacy center. Participants gave their written consent to participate and then completed a baseline survey assessing age, income, education, and computer use, frequency of search for information, type of information sought, computer ownership, and location of computer use. The one-on-one interviews lasted 60-120 minutes and were audio-taped. During the first part, an interview script was developed to address the research questions (e.g., "What's your opinion of the internet as a way to get health information?").

Next, an additional 30-60 minutes were devoted to a usefulness interview where the participant used the internet and evaluated the self-reported relevance of parent-based substance use prevention information online using a “think aloud” protocol. Respondents verbalized what they were thinking to themselves as they searched the internet for health information. This allowed us to obtain both observation of online information seeking as well as users’ inferences, intuitions, decisions and reasons during task completion (Nielsen, Clemmensen, & Yssing, 2002). To begin the think aloud process the participant was provided a scenario, which had a predetermined format that was modified based on the information shared by the participant during the first part of the interview. These scenarios included issues such as, “You suspect that your son/daughter(s) is using marijuana. Although you have gotten advice on how to deal with this from several folks, you want more information and you decide to get this information online.” The participant was then directed to search for this information as they would if seeking information online in an informal context. All women began from the same webpage. Some used the address bar as the search tool while others searched from their favorite search engine (e.g., Yahoo.com). If necessary, the interviewer would give the key words to help the search (i.e., drug prevention, drugs, children and drugs). Additionally, the interviewer probed with questions modified from a research-based guideline (Koyani, Bailey, & Nall, 2003), while taking notes. The guideline recommended open-ended probe questions that asked about several items, including likes and dislikes of websites, trustworthiness, information relevance, design preferences, and information needs.

Data Analysis

All individual interviews were transcribed verbatim and entered with a spreadsheet documenting attributes on the demographic questionnaire into QSR NVivo (version 2.0; QSR

International). The Comprehensive Model of Information Seeking provided two *a priori* categories: *channel characteristics* and *channel usefulness*. To interrogate data related to channel characteristics an iterative process of constant comparison was employed (Miles & Huberman, 1994), beginning with computer-aided free coding. Ultimately themes were developed by grouping the units that were conceptually similar. Discrepancies that arose during the constant comparative process were resolved through discussions among co-authors and further review of the literature.

To interrogate data related to *channel usefulness* based upon audio taped think-aloud responses and field notes taken during observations, long-table approach in coding was utilized (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This approach integrated use of highlighters, tape, and index cards to identify portions of the usability transcripts in relation to *usefulness*. As before, an iterative process of comparing and contrasting was used, developing subcategories and then themes.

Results

Key qualitative findings are organized according to two major domains of the CMIS, channel characteristics and channel usefulness. Qualitative analyses resulted in the identification of factors related to these domains, including broad information, convenience, comfortable environment, useful and non useful information, and information requirements. The findings are described below.

Channel Characteristics

Participants were asked to share their views about the relevance of the internet as a resource for finding parent-based information about substance abuse prevention. Table 3 outlines the salient themes and thematic qualities related to channel characteristics. Illustrative quotes are provided.

Insert Table 3

Broad information (Table 3) emerged as a theme reflecting the consensus that the internet can provide unlimited and different information surpassing, even, what you might get from a health practitioner. One participant highlighted this view saying, “Like, the verbal information that your doctor is tellin’ you . . . if you go into a, a main database with all, with, um, unlimited information, there’s no tellin’ what else you might [can find.]” Additionally, there was general consensus among the participants that hyperlinks to additional websites facilitate this quality. Participants also viewed online health resources as more up to date. Another term used by the women to describe channel characteristics was “unlimited different information.”

Convenience evolved as another theme in relation to the perceived lack of stress and effort in seeking prevention information online. One participant shared, “It’s more hassle in society, I think [to seek information]. Than, actually, just jumpin’ on your computer.” Other women in the study mentioned that the internet allows the them the convenience of being able to ‘go to straight to what is needed with repeated access’, ‘saves time’, ‘use it easily’, and to ‘stay at home’.

The last theme was *comfortable environment*. This theme underscores the more relaxed way in which one can seek information, in addition to the seeking done at the users’ leisure. All the participants agreed that being able to click and print information privately and to have the ability to really seek out information make the internet a more relaxed means for seeking prevention information. The following participant stated it this way, “You can take your time and take notes on it and print it out and go back and save it, and if you wasn’t sure, you can go back and review it time and time again without traveling.”

Channel Usefulness

As described previously, participants were presented with a scenario and then instructed to begin seeking preadolescent substance use prevention information on the computer. They visited web sites of their own choosing and were asked to assess the usefulness of the information they found. In total the participants visited 14 sites including commercial and non-profit websites and government portals (Tables 4 and 5). The same sites were visited by multiple participants due to their propensity to utilize similar searching behavior (e.g., most choosing sites from the first page of search findings). This helps explain why only 14 sites were accessed by 32 participants. Some of the sites were a compilation of links to parenting information (e.g., <http://parentingteensabout.com>). Others represented substance use prevention programs for youth and parents (e.g., www.mcgruff.org) or vast portals with information for researchers, practitioners, parents, and youth (e.g. www.nida.nih.gov).

Insert Table 4

Factors of usefulness (Table 4) were varied, touching upon design and navigation, information, and credibility. Specifically, the prevention sites that participants found useful were designed for kids, teenagers, young males, and parents; addressed a specific need; and made a positive impression based upon design/look; and had no obvious advertisements. Navigation was found to be useful if they could maneuver through the page easily with clear links. Information was deemed relevant if it gave alternatives, used scare tactics, was to the point, and made sense in lived experience.

Comment [LK2]: Interesting. I would think that scare tactics were a turn off

Insert Table 5

Lack of usefulness (Table 5) also related to navigation, design, and content. For instance, if a site was not seen as useful if it was perceived to be designed for White users because it did not have people of color represented and/or lacked visual appeal (i.e., mostly text-based).

Additionally, usefulness was impeded when participants disagreed with some of the information or encountered repetitious information. Poor navigability (e.g., if the site went in circles) and repetitious links interfered with usefulness.

Insert Table 6

Information Requirements. Information requirements (see Table 6) provide insight into what the participants would consider salient information for preventing preadolescent substance use. Information that involved them and held their attention was seen as salient. This included information about community, parental role, parent/child communication, preadolescent substance use, and site design. For instance, the participants wanted information directly related to the practical issues of living within their communities, being a single mother, communicating with their children about drugs, and information on certain drugs (i.e., crack, club drugs). The participants were also clear about wanting the site to be interactive (e.g., social support) and visually appealing.

Discussion

The primary objective of the current study was to determine how African American single mothers who live in the US and receive public assistance perceive the usefulness of the internet as a channel for accessing and utilizing parent-based preadolescent substance use prevention information. The efforts of African American, single mothers to prevent their children from abusing substances are less likely to be effective if prevention information is inaccessible or irrelevant. Most of women in our study were frequent users of the internet in their homes. Further, many of them previously had used the internet to seek health-related and substance use prevention information. These findings support other reports that low-income, urban, African

American women have access to computers, utilize the internet, and seek health information online despite the financial challenges of being a single mother (Cohall et al., 2004).

For many mothers in the study the internet was viewed as an extremely useful resource for obtaining substance use prevention information. Mothers in this project described channel characteristics as related to their information seeking experiences and based on applicability to their health information seeking concerns—broad information, convenience, and comfortable information environment. The internet offered these mothers access to unlimited information.

Comment [LK3]: Should this be “useful”, not unlimited?

Consistent with previous research outlining the challenges with participating in formal parenting programs (Lochman & van den Steenhoven, 2002), the mothers saw online information seeking as offering the advantage of being home-based and therefore not requiring coping with transportation issues, hectic work schedules, and, childcare costs. For those parents who might feel intimidated by attending formal parent-based substance use prevention programs, the findings underscore the comfort of private online information seeking.

The optimism associated with channel characteristics, however, is challenged by the usefulness of the prevention websites. Findings reveal that these mothers were extremely clear about their likes and dislikes of substance use prevention sites, which included both technical (i.e., navigation, site design) and content (i.e., good information, not credible) specific issues. Sites that were easy to navigate, visually appealing, and contained personally relevant information for youth and parents were viewed as more useful.

Finally, the findings related to the participants’ information requirements underscore the importance of everyday life experiences as factors contributing to the use and non-use of the internet by marginalized internet users (Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004). Surprisingly, the relevance of information was not totally tied to cultural concerns as much as it related to personal

significance and relevance to their particular life circumstances (e.g., parental role, coping as single parent). . The participants felt that they needed as much information as possible in order to help them address multiple challenges in multiple ways. Findings indicate that information usefulness also is judged based on how well the substance use prevention information supports their parental role and parent/child communication. The mothers perceived a need for information representative of real life and direct experience. Highlighting the importance of channel characteristics and preference for interpersonal channels in seeking health information, the findings indicate that sites that provide options to chat with other mothers and talk with professionals were important considerations in site design.

Strengths and Limitations

This study investigates community-specific understandings and perceptions of the internet. While this approach provides a substantive exploration of the potential of the internet for substance use prevention among single, African American mothers, these findings may not generalize to all single mothers or to mothers in countries other than the US. Drawing upon a purposive sample introduces bias, whereby these findings only represent the insights of African American single mothers. The information requirements outlined in the results may only reflect the needs of the women in this study. Additionally, some women did not feel comfortable searching the internet from the study computer that was new to them and this may have inhibited their responses. This may have also hindered the depth of information they provided during the ‘think aloud’ due to the need to concentrate on using an unfamiliar computer. Lastly, the credibility of web-based health information is a concern and should be utilized with caution.

Comment [LK4]: This feels like it comes out of nowhere because the credibility of the information was not mentioned in the findings.

Conclusions

This study suggests that online preadolescent substance use prevention information targeting the perceived needs of African American single mothers would be useful and utilized as a resource. The CMIS provided a useful heuristic for investigating how channel characteristics and usefulness mediate the relationships between salience and the potential of seeking parent-based preadolescent substance use prevention information on the internet. These findings may be useful as a base for future research focused on choices and behavior in health information seeking. For instance, research might draw upon these findings to develop and test a measure for assessing site and informational preferences targeting African American mothers. Future studies should also draw upon a larger and more diverse sample to implement a comparative investigation focusing on causality suggested in the theoretical model.

In addition, longitudinal research is needed to see how various types of information are used or discarded. It may be, for example, that while the mothers indicated they needed more or different types of information, this 'needing more' may be a way of avoiding action in preadolescent substance use prevention. When they find useful information do they utilize it?

Finally, it is not clear if these findings are specific to substance use or would be applicable to other types of health information seeking or even to online searches in general. Is there something about the topic that makes these issues particularly salient or would they feel this way about information on flu season or even about clothing purchases. We are tempted to conclude that our findings would apply to other health information or even other highly salient topics. When much is at stake people are likely to examine information more carefully and evaluate it more harshly than more casual topics such as movies and restaurant reviewers. Future research is needed to clarify these issues.

Regardless of level of applicability to other situations, these findings are crucial for prevention researchers and practitioners. Channels and messages must make sense not only within 'traditional' notions of culture; they must also make sense within the day to day experiences of diverse ethnic groups. The design of prevention web sites for preadolescent substance use should accommodate how a community of parents perceives the usefulness of the web and prevention information to enhance child health outcomes. While this is a challenge for government websites, it might be wise for them to consider utilizing a multicultural approach of inclusion (Kar, Alcalay, & Alex, 2001) that also permits specialized, individualized (or tailored) searches. Therefore, a web-based substance use/misuse prevention resource, such as government websites might include information across diverse parenting status (e.g., single, married) and distinct cultural communities, including urban, rural, and suburban.

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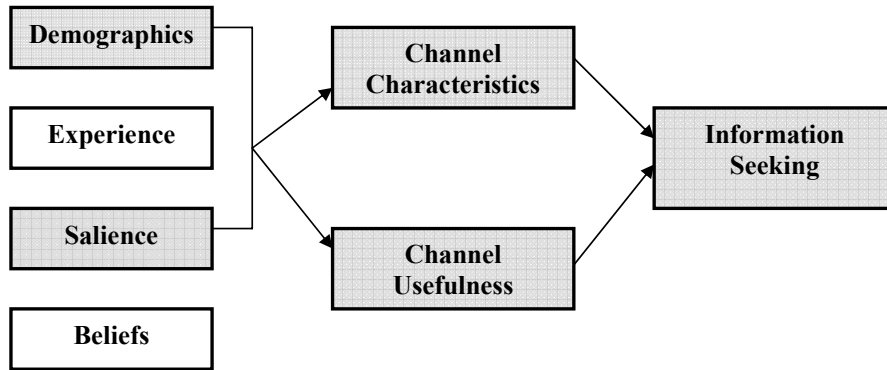


Figure 1. Comprehensive Model of Information Seeking (CMIS)

Table 1, Demographics of Mothers and Children

Mother, n=32	
Mean Age, Years	32.9
Range	23-53
Education, %	
Some HS	6.2%
HS	15.6%
HS Equivalency	25.0%
Community College	15.6%
College	21.8%
Children's Age, n=57	
6-8 years	26.3%
9-12 years	45.6%
13-15 years	28.0%
Household Income/year	
<\$7,000	31.2%
\$8,000-10,000	9.3%
\$11,000-14,630	18.7%
Refused to Answer	40.6%

Table 2, Computer and General Information Seeking Behavior

Computer Use Location	
Home	62.5%
Work	21.8%
Library	18.7%
Friend/Relative	21.8%
Other	9.3%
Years of Computer Use	
Median	1
Internet Use/Week	
Mean	4.31
Range	1-25
Online Info Sought	
Health	31.2%
Education	31.2%
Employment	21.8%
All Kinds	25.0%
Relaxation	40.6%
Child/Home	18.7%
Chat/Other	12.5%

Comment [LK5]: Is this hours per week?

Notes: Participants chose more than response for computer use location and online information sought.

Table 3, Channel Characteristics	
Theme	Qualities
Broad Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unlimited different information • Access to links • More up to date
Convenience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go straight to what you need • Have repeated access to what you need • Time saving • Easy to do • Do not have to leave your home
Comfortable Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Click and print • Private • Can take your time

Table 4, “Useful” Web-based Substance Use Prevention Sites

Prevention Sites	Utility
www.nida.nih.gov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Designed for prevention needs
www.drugfree.org parentingteensabout.com www.new-hope-recovery.com www.streetdrugs.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Like information
www.positiveaction.net	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No advertising; to the point ▪ Designed for teenagers ▪ Positive impression ▪ Gives alternatives ▪ Easy to navigate
www.kidshealth.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Designed for young males ▪ Easy links and navigation ▪ Appealing to and designed for kids
www.talkingwithkids.org/drugs.html	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Site makes sense to real life ▪ Like scare tactics ▪ Designed for parents

Table 5, “Not Useful” Web-based Substance Use Prevention Sites

Prevention Sites	Utility
www.streetdrugs.com	▪ Not credible
www.mcgruff.org	▪ Disagree with some information
www.drugpower.com	▪ Designed for White Users ▪ No information ▪ Not relevant
www.project7thgrade.org	▪ No people of color
www.preventionpartners.com	▪ Site goes in circles, poor navigation ▪ Designed for adults substance users
www.kidscontract.com	▪ Would not use contract to prevent drug use
www.oas.samhsa.gov	▪ Not visually appealing ▪ Repetitious links and information

Table 6, Information Requirements in Internet-based Preadolescent ATOD Use Prevention

Theme	Requirement
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Low income/inner city issues ▪ Information on community ▪ African American culture and multicultural information ▪ Issues single mothers face, discussion of family structure
Parental Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Images and stories about motherly love ▪ Address different causes for child acting out (i.e., depression, pressure) ▪ Family impacts
Parent/Child Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Information on talking with male children ▪ Communication taking place all along ▪ More realistic examples of parent/child communication ▪ Information that is raw, tell it like it is for children ▪ Resistance strategies (how to say no) and life skills (how to teach not to be follower) ▪ Information/games for kids and for parent/child online interaction
Preadolescent Substance Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Information for kids regarding abusing parents and for abusing parents ▪ As much information as possible (i.e., all drugs, what are drugs, look like, side effects) ▪ More info on crack, marijuana, club drugs ▪ Causes and effects, how addicted, consequences ▪ Only need information on new drugs
Site Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ability to chat with other moms ▪ Ability to talk with professionals 24/7 ▪ More vivid imagery, such as pictures
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Spirituality ▪ Don't know what needs to address