

Can social networking help consumers get healthier?

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Can social networking sites help people make wise health decisions? A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* says it depend on people's willingness to take action on the information they gain from the sites.

Using [social networking sites](#) to obtain [health information](#) and advice is controversial. Critics say the sites can confuse, give inaccurate information, or prevent people from seeking professional advice. They doubt [consumers](#) can carry the burden of complex [medical decisions](#), and worry that social networks can actually harm naďve consumers by encouraging them to engage in self-diagnosis and self-treatment.

Authors Rama K. Jayanti (Cleveland State University) and Jagdip Singh (Case Western Reserve University) closely monitored use of an Electronic Bulletin Board dedicated to thyroid disease and treatment over the course of ten months. Based on random selection, they analyzed six threads representing 392 distinct postings with 7,825 text lines by 80 unique individuals. They sought to determine if consumers can learn from these sites, how they learn, and how the learning empowers them.

In general, they found many benefits to using online communities for health advice. A three-stage process of reflecting, refining, and exploring is the key to effective use of the online sites, they say. The value of the online community is that it "facilitates learning by collectively transforming everyday individual experiences into usable knowledge," they write.

"We found that the community can collectively enable learning for individual members who often fail and falter on their own." By sharing their experiences, participants enlarge their repertoire of actions that affect their health. "Together these characteristics transformed helpless individuals into empowered patients who effortlessly changed physicians, switched medications, and modified diets."

However, the value of online community depends on how individuals choose to act on the information. "Productive inquiry alone is not sufficient to empower individuals," the authors write. "Community inquiry broadens the action choices available to its members. Action, however, is an individual choice."

The authors advise policymakers to lead the way in promoting learning in social communities so that consumers can empower themselves for informed decision-making and a better quality of life.

More information: Rama K. Jayanti and Jagdip Singh. "Pragmatic Learning Theory: An Inquiry-Action Framework for Distributed Consumer Learning in Online Communities." [Journal of Consumer Research](#): April 2010

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