

From Surveillance to Intervention: Using Social Media for Skin Cancer Prevention

Sherry L. Pagoto, PhD
University of Massachusetts Medical School

Abstract

Skin cancer is the most prevalent cancer in the US and the only cancer in which prevalence has been increasing annually for decades. Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation is the most preventable risk factor. The International Agency for Research on Cancer has classified UV radiation from tanning beds as a Group 1 carcinogen, along with tobacco and arsenic; yet 14% of young women have used tanning beds in the past year. Indoor tanning interventions developed in the research literature have had poor reach because unlike people with other cancer risk factors (e.g., smoking, obesity) tanners do not seek help to quit tanning and are resistant to anti-tanning messages. A major intervention challenge is how to expose tanners to health messaging that would appeal to them. Social media may be a way to communicate health messages to tanners as well as parents of minors who tan, given that indoor tanning requires parental permission in most states. In this talk, a series of studies will be presented on 1) the social media habits of young women who tan indoors; 2) a content analysis of tweets using terms “tanning salon” or “tanning bed” on Twitter; 3) the proportion of tanning-related tweets that are made by tanners versus public health organizations, 4) the prevalence of reports of indoor tanning burns and injuries on Twitter, and 5) the acceptability of social media as platform for parents of teenage daughters to receive health messages. Findings revealed that young women who engage in indoor tanning are heavier users of social media relative to their peers who do not tan, indoor tanners can be easily identified on Twitter (465 tanners/day identified with 2 search terms), very few public health messages were observed among tanning-related tweets, many tweets were found to be reports of burns and injuries incurred from indoor tanning, and parents of teens are amenable to receiving health education via social media. The design and methods of two intervention approaches leveraging social media, one targeting young adults who tan, and another targeting parents of teenage girls, will be discussed.

Bio

Dr. Pagoto is a Professor in the Department of Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School (UMMS) and co-founder of the UMass Center for mHealth and Social Media. A licensed clinical psychologist by training, her program of research is focused on leveraging technology to increase the impact and reduce the cost of delivering health behavior interventions. She has 4 federally funded studies on this topic. She has had federal funding for her program of

research for 14 years and has published 148 papers in peer-reviewed journals. She is also co-director of the Indoor Tan-Free Skin Smart Campus Initiative which is a national initiative aimed at severing relationships between universities and tanning salons. She has received several awards for her work including the UMass Medical School Women in Science and Health Achievement Award in 2015, The Obesity Society Pioneer in mHealth/eHealth Award in 2014, Society of Behavioral Medicine Early Career/Young Investigator Award in 2006, and the Western Michigan University Distinguished Alumni Award in 2011. Devoted to science communication on social media, she has ~12K followers on Twitter and is a frequent contributor to blogs at US News and World Report, Psychology Today, and KevinMD.com.