

Improving the quality of health-related information on the internet is also key.

COVID-HL: A cross-sectional study on digital health literacy in university students in Germany

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Background:

Digital communication technologies are playing an important role in the health communication strategies of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The internet and social media have become important sources of health-related information on COVID-19 and digital health literacy is a key competence to navigate web-based COVID-19 information. This study aimed to investigate university students' digital health literacy during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany.

Methods:

A cross-sectional study among 14,916 university students from 130 universities in Germany was conducted using a web-based survey. Along with sociodemographics, the measures included five subscales from the Digital Health Literacy Instrument (DHLI), which was adapted to the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were analyzed using univariate and bivariate analyses.

Results:

Across DHL dimensions, the greatest difficulty was assessing the reliability of information and to determine whether it had commercial interest. Students indicated that they have problems finding the information they are looking for. Females achieved significant lower scores for information searching and evaluating reliability. Search engines, news portals, and websites of public bodies were most often used by the respondents to inform about COVID-19. Females were found to use social media and health portals more frequently, while male students used Wikipedia as well as YouTube more often. Social media use was associated with a low ability to critically evaluate information.

Conclusions:

Although digital health literacy is well developed in university students, a significant proportion of students still face difficulties with certain abilities to evaluate information. There is a need to strengthen the digital health literacy capacities of university students using tailored interventions.