

Patterns of Access and Trust in HIV/AIDS Information Sources among University Students

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ABSTRACT

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a life-threatening virus that can lead to Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS); therefore, prevention and accurate information are essential. University students actively seek health information, yet easily accessible sources are not always the most reliable. This study aimed to analyze patterns of access, levels of trust, and the frequency of searching for HIV/AIDS information among university students. A cross-sectional study was conducted involving 134 students with a mean age of 18.1 ± 0.6 years, the majority of whom were female (64.2%). Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analyzed descriptively. The internet was the most frequently accessed source of HIV/AIDS information (66.42%) and showed the highest search frequency (mean = 3.25 ± 0.72), followed by schools (23.88%; mean = 3.12 ± 0.74). In contrast, healthcare professionals and parents were less frequently utilized, despite being perceived as more credible sources. Overall, the findings indicate a mismatch between accessibility, trust, and information-seeking intensity among university students. Integrating credible sources, such as healthcare professionals and educational institutions, into accessible digital platforms is necessary to enhance HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention efforts.

Keyword : HIV; AIDS; information sources; university students

ABSTRAK

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) merupakan virus yang mengancam jiwa dan dapat berkembang menjadi Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS); oleh karena itu, upaya pencegahan dan penyediaan informasi yang akurat sangat penting. Mahasiswa secara aktif mencari informasi kesehatan, namun sumber yang mudah diakses belum tentu merupakan sumber yang paling dapat dipercaya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pola akses, tingkat kepercayaan, dan frekuensi pencarian informasi HIV/AIDS pada mahasiswa. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain potong lintang dengan melibatkan 134 mahasiswa dengan rerata usia $18,1 \pm 0,6$ tahun, di mana sebagian besar responden berjenis kelamin perempuan (64,2%). Data dikumpulkan menggunakan kuesioner terstruktur dan dianalisis secara deskriptif. Internet merupakan sumber informasi HIV/AIDS yang paling sering diakses (66,42%) dan memiliki frekuensi pencarian tertinggi (rerata = $3,25 \pm 0,72$), diikuti oleh sekolah (23,88%; rerata = $3,12 \pm 0,74$). Sebaliknya, tenaga kesehatan dan orang tua relatif jarang dimanfaatkan meskipun dipersepsikan sebagai sumber yang lebih kredibel. Secara keseluruhan, hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya ketidaksesuaian antara aksesibilitas, tingkat kepercayaan, dan intensitas pencarian informasi HIV/AIDS pada mahasiswa. Integrasi sumber informasi yang kredibel ke dalam platform digital yang mudah diakses diperlukan untuk meningkatkan kesadaran dan upaya pencegahan HIV/AIDS.

Kata kunci : HIV; AIDS; sumber informasi; mahasiswa

1. INTRODUCTION

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) infection and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) remain major global public health challenges due to their chronic nature, life-threatening consequences, and the need for lifelong antiretroviral therapy. Despite substantial progress in treatment and global control strategies, HIV infection has not yet been cured, and new infections continue to occur worldwide (Piot et al., 2015; UNAIDS, 2024). These conditions underscore the continued importance of prevention efforts and health education as core components of HIV/AIDS control. Strengthening public awareness through accurate, evidence-based health information remains essential to reduce transmission and improve long-term outcomes (Whiteside, 2016).

Public awareness and understanding of HIV/AIDS are strongly influenced by the quality of information sources accessed by individuals. Inaccurate or misleading information may reinforce misconceptions, contribute to stigma and discrimination, and ultimately hinder effective prevention behaviors (Mahajan et al., 2008; Treichler, 2020). Conversely, credible sources such as healthcare professionals and educational institutions play a crucial role in delivering scientifically grounded messages that promote informed decision-making and positive health behaviors. Health education initiatives that emphasize moral and healthy lifestyles have also been shown to support the internalization of preventive values among young populations (Wulansari et al., 2025).

Advances in information and communication technology have significantly transformed the way people seek health information, particularly among young adults. Internet-based platforms and social media provide rapid and convenient access to health-related content, including information about HIV/AIDS. However, the accuracy and credibility of online information are highly variable, and health-related misinformation remains a persistent concern (Chou et al., 2018). Limited health literacy in the digital era may further complicate individuals' ability to critically evaluate online information, potentially widening the gap between access to information and accurate understanding (Kim & Xie, 2017).

University students represent a population of young adults who are highly engaged with digital media and actively seek health information online. Studies have shown that young adults frequently rely on easily accessible online sources when searching for health information, even when these sources are not perceived as the most trustworthy (Stifjell et al., 2025). Although knowledge acquisition is an important first step, the translation of HIV/AIDS knowledge into preventive behavior remains inconsistent, particularly when information is obtained from sources lacking credibility or contextual relevance (Obeagu et al., 2023). This reliance on convenience over credibility may limit the effectiveness of HIV/AIDS prevention efforts among students.

Although previous studies have examined HIV/AIDS knowledge and information-seeking behaviors among adolescents and young adults, limited attention has been given to the discrepancy between the most frequently accessed information sources and those that are most trusted by university

students. Understanding patterns of access, levels of trust, and information-seeking behavior is essential for designing effective health communication strategies that align accessibility with credibility. Therefore, this study aims to examine patterns of access and trust in HIV/AIDS information sources among university students as a basis for strengthening educational and preventive interventions.

2. METHOD

This study employed a cross-sectional design conducted among university students, involving a total of 134 respondents. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire that included respondents' demographic characteristics, the most frequently accessed HIV/AIDS information sources, the most trusted sources, and the frequency of HIV/AIDS information seeking from various sources, including parents, schools, the internet, and peers. The frequency of information seeking was measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from never to very often. Data analysis was performed descriptively by presenting frequency distributions, percentages, as well as mean values and standard deviations.

3. RESULT

Demographic Characteristics

A total of 134 university students participated in this study, with a mean age of 18.1 ± 0.6 years. Most respondents were female (64.2%). More than half of the participants were aged ≤ 18 years (58.2%), while 41.8% were older than 18 years. The detailed demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Characteristic	Category	N (%)
Age (years)	Mean \pm SD	18.1 \pm 0.6
	17 years	16 (11.9)
	18	62 (46.3)
	19	56 (41.8)
Sex	Female	86 (64.2)
	Male	48 (35.8)

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 134)

Most Frequently Accessed and Most Trusted HIV/AIDS Information Source

The internet emerged as the most frequently accessed source of HIV/AIDS information among students, whereas healthcare professionals were perceived as the most trusted source. Schools occupied an intermediate position in both access and trust, while parents were least utilized. A

comparison of the most frequently accessed and most trusted HIV/AIDS information sources is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Most Frequently Accessed and Most Trusted HIV/AIDS Information

Information Source	Most Frequently Accessed n (%)	Most Trusted n (%)
Internet (websites, social media, YouTube, etc.)	89 (66.42)	16 (11.94)
Teachers / Schools	32 (23.88)	9 (6.72)
Healthcare professionals	9 (6.72)	107 (79.85)
Parents	3 (2.24)	1 (0.75)
Others	1 (0.75)	1 (0.75)

Sources (n = 134)

Frequency of HIV/AIDS Information Seeking

Differences in HIV/AIDS information-seeking frequency were observed across information sources, with students relying more on easily accessible platforms than on interpersonal or professional channels. This pattern highlights the dominant role of accessibility in shaping information-seeking behavior is presented in Table 3.

Table

3.

Information Source	Mean ± SD	Interpretation
Internet	3.25 ± 0.72	Frequent
School	3.12 ± 0.74	Occasional–Frequent
Peers	2.89 ± 0.75	Occasional
Parents	2.69 ± 0.75	Rare–Occasional

Frequency of HIV/AIDS Information Seeking by Source (n = 134)

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a clear discrepancy between the most frequently accessed and the most trusted sources of HIV/AIDS information among university students. Although the internet dominates as the primary source of access, healthcare professionals and educational institutions are perceived as more credible yet remain underutilized. This pattern aligns with evidence from studies on Online Health Information Seeking Behaviour (OHISB), which indicate that young adults tend to prioritize convenience, immediacy, and anonymity over source credibility when searching for health information online (Bratland et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2021). Such preferences are particularly evident when the topic involves sensitive health issues such as HIV/AIDS.

The higher frequency of information seeking through online platforms observed in this study further reflects broader trends in digital health information behavior. Online media provide rapid access to large volumes of information, allowing users to explore health topics privately and autonomously. However, reliance on online sources does not necessarily

translate into accurate understanding or appropriate health decision-making (Wang et al., 2021). Previous studies have shown that while digital platforms increase exposure to health information, they may also contribute to misinformation and fragmented knowledge, especially in the absence of sufficient health literacy (Bratland et al., 2024).

The limited utilization of healthcare professionals as information sources, despite their high level of trust, may be influenced by structural and psychosocial barriers. Research among people living with HIV/AIDS has highlighted that stigma, fear of judgment, and limited interaction with healthcare providers can reduce engagement with formal health services (Igwe et al., 2022; Nyblade et al., 2019). Among university students, similar concerns—combined with the sensitivity of HIV-related discussions—may encourage reliance on anonymous information sources rather than direct consultation with professionals.

Educational institutions occupy an intermediate position in both access and trust, suggesting their potential as strategic channels for HIV/AIDS education. Previous studies among university students have demonstrated that structured educational interventions significantly improve knowledge and attitudes toward HIV/AIDS prevention (Rachmawati et al., 2022; Khofiyah & Islamiah, 2018). However, the effectiveness of such interventions depends on their accessibility and relevance to students' information-seeking habits. Integrating institutional health education into digital formats may therefore enhance reach and engagement.

The implications of these findings emphasize the need for adaptive HIV/AIDS health communication strategies. Effective prevention efforts should bridge the gap between credibility and accessibility by embedding

trusted information within digital environments commonly used by students. Evidence from public health communication and social marketing studies suggests that well-designed digital campaigns, including social media-based interventions, can positively influence health awareness and behavior when they are engaging, relatable, and evidence-based (Freeman et al., 2015; Caron et al., 2023). Furthermore, empowerment-oriented and stigma-reduction interventions may strengthen community resilience and encourage more open engagement with credible information sources (Wong et al., 2026).

Overall, this study underscores the importance of aligning health communication strategies with the information-seeking behavior of university students. By leveraging digital platforms while maintaining the involvement of healthcare professionals and educational institutions, HIV/AIDS education initiatives may become more effective in improving awareness, reducing stigma, and supporting prevention efforts among young adults (Wulandari et al., 2024; Safitri et al., 2022; Khairani et al., 2023).

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that university students predominantly rely on easily accessible online sources for HIV/AIDS information, despite perceiving healthcare professionals and educational institutions as more credible. The mismatch between access, trust, and information-seeking frequency highlights the influence of convenience, anonymity, and digital habits on students' health information behavior. These findings underscore the need for HIV/AIDS communication strategies that integrate credible sources into digital platforms commonly used by students. Strengthening the digital presence of healthcare

professionals and educational institutions may enhance the accuracy of information, reduce stigma, and support more effective HIV/AIDS prevention efforts among university students.

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