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# Research in Developmental Disabilities



## Characteristics of international websites with information on developmental disabilities



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 27 May 2014  
Accepted 29 May 2014  
Available online 19 June 2014

#### Keywords:

Websites  
Internet  
Developmental disability  
Autism  
Autism spectrum disorder  
Down syndrome  
Learning disability  
Intellectual disability  
ADHD  
Google  
International

### ABSTRACT

The Internet often serves as a primary resource for individuals seeking health-related information, and a large and growing number of websites contain information related to developmental disabilities. This paper presents the results of an international evaluation of the characteristics and content of the top 10 ranked results (i.e., not including sponsored results – pay-per-click) returned when one of five terms related to developmental disabilities (i.e., ADHD, autism, down syndrome, learning disability, intellectual disability) was entered into one of six country specific Google online search engines (i.e., Australia (<https://www.google.com.au>), Canada (<https://www.google.ca>), Ireland (<https://www.google.ie>), New Zealand (<https://www.google.co.nz>), the United Kingdom (<https://www.google.co.uk>), and the United States (<https://www.google.com>)) on October 22, 2013. Collectively, we found that international consumers of websites related to developmental disabilities will encounter different websites with differing content and terminology, and should be critical consumers to ensure they locate the information they are seeking.

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## 1. Introduction

The Internet often serves as a primary resource for individuals seeking health-related information (Akram, Thomson, & Morton, 2008; Fox & Duggan, 2013; Khoo, Bolt, Babi, Jury, & Goldman, 2008), with at least half, if not three-quarters of Internet users conducting monthly searches for health information (Cole, Suman, Schramm, Zhou, & Tang, 2012; Fox & Duggan, 2013). With the rapid advancements in technology over the past two decades, the Internet has the potential to be a convenient and “unprecedented revolution in the capacity to access and disseminate information” (Garcia, Teruel, Calduch, Frias, & Blasco, 2005, p. 468). However, given the proliferation of uncensored information available through the Internet, concerns remain about the accuracy and quality of available information (Eysenbach, Powell, Kuss, & Sa, 2002; Scullard, Peacock, & Davies, 2010; Silberg, Lundberg, & Musacchio, 1997). Although several quality evaluation instruments have been created (e.g., Bernstam, Shelton, Walji, & Meric-Bernstam, 2005; Boyer, Selby, Scherrer, & Appel, 1998; Eysenbach & Kohler, 2002), these instruments can be difficult to use and thus are likely not likely to be utilized by the general public (Bernstam et al., 2005).

A large and growing number of websites contain information related to developmental disabilities (Mackintosh, Myers, & Goin-Kochel, 2005; Reichow, Shefcyk, & Bruder, 2013), and parents of children with developmental disabilities are likely to

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use the Internet to find information concerning their child's disability or suspected disability (e.g., Akram et al., 2008; Bussing et al., 2012; Knapp, Madden, Wang, Sloyer, & Shenkman, 2011; Roche & Skinner, 2009). However, there is little research documenting the characteristics or content of these websites. Previous efforts have shown that much information can be found on websites related to developmental disabilities, albeit with varying levels of quality (e.g., Bussing et al., 2012; Chowdhury, Drummond, Fleming, & Neufeld, 2002; Di Pietro, Whiteley, & Illes, 2012; Reichow et al., 2012, 2013; Stephenson, Carter, & Kemp, 2012). Furthermore, online information has been shown to be biased and influenced by for-profit industries, such as pharmaceutical companies (Mitchell & Read, 2011; Schwartz, 2013). Since parents of children with developmental disabilities increasingly seek and rely on information from the Internet to make important decisions, it is essential to evaluate these sources of information. This paper presents the results of an international evaluation of the characteristics and content of websites that were located by searching five common terms related to developmental disabilities across six English-speaking countries.

## 2. Objective

While evaluations of websites related to developmental disabilities have been conducted, these studies have focused exclusively on websites originating from a search of a single country (e.g., Charman, 1999; Reichow et al., 2012, 2013). Since parents of children with developmental disabilities worldwide are increasingly seeking and relying on information from the Internet to make important decisions, it is essential to evaluate these sources of information. This paper presents the results of an international evaluation of the characteristics and content of websites that were located by searching five common terms related to developmental disabilities across six different English-speaking countries.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Sample

Our sample consisted of the top 10 ranked results (i.e., not including sponsored results – pay-per-click returns) returned when one of five terms related to developmental disabilities; (i.e., ADHD, autism, down syndrome, learning disability, intellectual disability) was entered into one of six country specific Google online search engines on October 22, 2013. Thus our total sample included 300 websites, which are listed in Online Appendix A. Prior to beginning our study, we contacted colleagues in Australia, United Kingdom, and Canada and asked them to run searches using their country's Google search engine. Examination of the searches conducted in the countries and searches conducted by our research team as described above showed that the main results were the same. Hence, we conducted independent searches for each term using the Google search engine for six different countries: Australia (<https://www.google.com.au>), Canada (<https://www.google.ca>), Ireland (<https://www.google.ie>), New Zealand (<https://www.google.co.nz>), the United Kingdom (<https://www.google.co.uk>), and the United States (<https://www.google.com>). In addition to using each country's specific Google search engine, we set the location feature on our computer within Google to each respective country (i.e., when searching Google UK, we set our location within Google to United Kingdom). We chose to use Google because it is the search engine with the largest market share in each respective country (Return on Now, 2013). Although we did not have a new computer on which to run the searches to control for search history effects, we conducted the searches using a newly loaded web browser (i.e., Google Chrome) on a computer for which all search history and cache had been deleted, thus helping to control for search history effects.

### 3.2. Data collection

Two trained raters independently coded 13 characteristics of each website. All disagreements were resolved through mediation. The first four variables included basic information about the website including: (a) the *country* of the search engine returning that result, (b) *keyword* searched to yield the result being evaluated, and (c) the *origin*, or country from which the website originated. We coded the origin by attempting to determine the physical location of the individual or group responsible for creating or hosting the website. We also coded whether a website's use of the term "*learning disability*" was used to (1) describe a specific learning disability, (2) describe an individual or class of individuals characterized by an IQ < 70 and deficits in adaptive behavior, or (3) the website used the term to describe both 1 and 2. We coded these terms to examine differences in vernacular across countries. In Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United States, the term "*intellectual disability*" is typically used to refer to an individual with an IQ lower than 70 and deficits in adaptive behavior. In the United Kingdom, this individual might be referred to as having a learning disability, which refers to a separate diagnostic category in the other countries in our sample.

*Top-level domain* was coded into one of five categories (.ca, .com, .gov, .ie, .org, or other). Websites containing an *advertisement* were those with a link (either image or text) that redirected the user to a commercial site. Websites containing *attribution* (references) were websites containing citations of peer-reviewed sources. Websites with *authorship* displayed the names of one or more authors of the information provided on the page. We coded a website as having *current* information if there was evidence it had been updated during the 2013 calendar year. Websites with a *disclaimer* contained a statement that the information contained in the website should not replace the opinion of a qualified professional or a general

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