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## **Social media patterns reveal public concerns about direct-to-consumer genetic testing for health**

*Consumers worry that results can be too easily misinterpreted.*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – “Individuals increasingly turn to social media platforms such as Twitter to gather information and discuss health-related experiences,” new research suggests.

The research is being presented at the Society of Behavioral Medicine’s (SBM’s) 40th Annual Meeting & Scientific Sessions.

In the study, titled “Too Direct? A Content Analysis of Direct to Consumer Social Media Tweets,” researchers examined the public’s response to the FDA’s authorization of the first direct-to-consumer (DTC) test by 23andMe, Inc. that provides information about an individual’s risk for three BRCA1/2 mutations (linked to breast and ovarian cancer).

DTC health testing enables individuals to learn more about their health—such as predispositions to specific cancers—without going through a healthcare provider or health insurance company.

“While the uptake of DTC genetic testing has increased over time, awareness about these tests remains low,” the authors write, “recent studies show that people learn about potential risks and benefits of health applications, such as DTC testing, from social media and the internet.”

The researchers examined patterns in social media activity the week following the FDA’s announcement about 23andMe, Inc. They found that there was a significant increase in conversation on Twitter consisting of roughly 11,000 tweets that specifically mentioned the authorization. The majority of users shared resources, opinions, and personal experiences with DTC health testing.

“This research sheds light on the prevalence of social media and how users are frequently turning to these platforms to seek and share health-related information,” said co-author **Brittany L. Andersen, MA**, a PhD Candidate at Boston University College of Communication’s Division of Emerging Media Studies.

The study found that a significant number of posts detailed potential concerns of DTC testing for health. The most commonly referenced concern was that consumers could falsely assume that a negative 23andMe test result is definitive.

In addition, the researchers note that health educators can leverage social media sites such as Twitter to provide informational resources for consumers and combat potential instances of misinformation in the future.

The research team will present the findings on March 6, 2019 at 6:30 PM E.T. during a poster session at the SBM Annual Meeting, being held in Washington, D.C. Authors **Caitlin G. Allen, MPH** and **Megan C. Roberts, PhD** are SBM members.

**Conference Program**

<https://www.sbm.org/UserFiles/file/am19-pro-v11.pdf>

**About SBM**

The Society of Behavioral Medicine (SBM) is a 2,400-member organization of scientific researchers, clinicians, and educators. They study interactions among behavior, biology, and the environment, and translate findings into interventions that improve the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities ([www.sbm.org](http://www.sbm.org)).

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