Young women and online health information: A study of credibility, access, and usability.

Samantha Kinlin | University of Minnesota | Department of Writing Studies

"Nearly *9 out of 10 adults* have difficulty using the everyday health information that is routinely available in our health care facilities, retail outlets, *media*, and communities."

-National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2010)

Overview

This project reviewed current research on the design and use of online health information, analyzed the efficacy of a select group of current health information websites designed specifically for women, and explained ways to improve communication of health information topics to young women online according to established standards related to credibility, access, and usability.

Methods

Methods of Website Analysis:

- Selected a list of websites based on site traffic and popularity, including links specifically recommended for women on Oprah's website.

- Applied Janice Reddish's outline for designing good home pages:
  1. Be findable through search engines.
  2. Identify the site.
  3. Set the site's tone and personality. Inspire confidence and trust.
  4. Help people get a sense of what the site is all about.
  5. Continue the conversation quickly.
  6. Send each person on the right way.

The full list of websites I included in my analysis is as follows:

Healthy Women (http://www.healthywomen.org/)*
MedlinePlus – Women's Health (http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/womenshealth.html)
National Institute of Heath (http://www.nih.gov)
Resolve: The National Fertility Association (http://www.resolve.org/)*
WebMD – Women's Health (http://www.webmd.com/women/default.htm)
Girl's Health (http://www.girlshealth.gov)
Women's Health: Office on Women's Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (http://womenshealth.gov/)*
Young Women's Health (http://youngwomenshealth.org/)*

* - recommended in Googling Your Way Back to Health: What the Web's Health Sites Can Offer)

Credibility

Credibility: A strong correlation exists between the visual design of a website and perceived credibility. Conversely, users react negatively to health information websites that contain advertisements or are ".com" websites.

- Only one of the websites I analyzed has a .com domain name (WebMD).

- Only three websites had advertisements or sponsorships on them.

WebMD (.com)	Resolve: The National Fertility Association (.org)	Healthy Women (.org)
• Monsanto	• Merck • Ferring Pharmaceuticals • Various Fertility Centers/Clinics	• Pfizer • Prevention Magazine • Bed Bath and Beyond

Access

Access: One suggestion for improving access to health information resources for young women is through the use of social media. Social media resources can be easily accessed at home or from a smartphone, either through a web browser or a mobile app. According to the Pew Research Center, 77% of women online use Facebook, 21% use Twitter, and 42% use Pinterest.

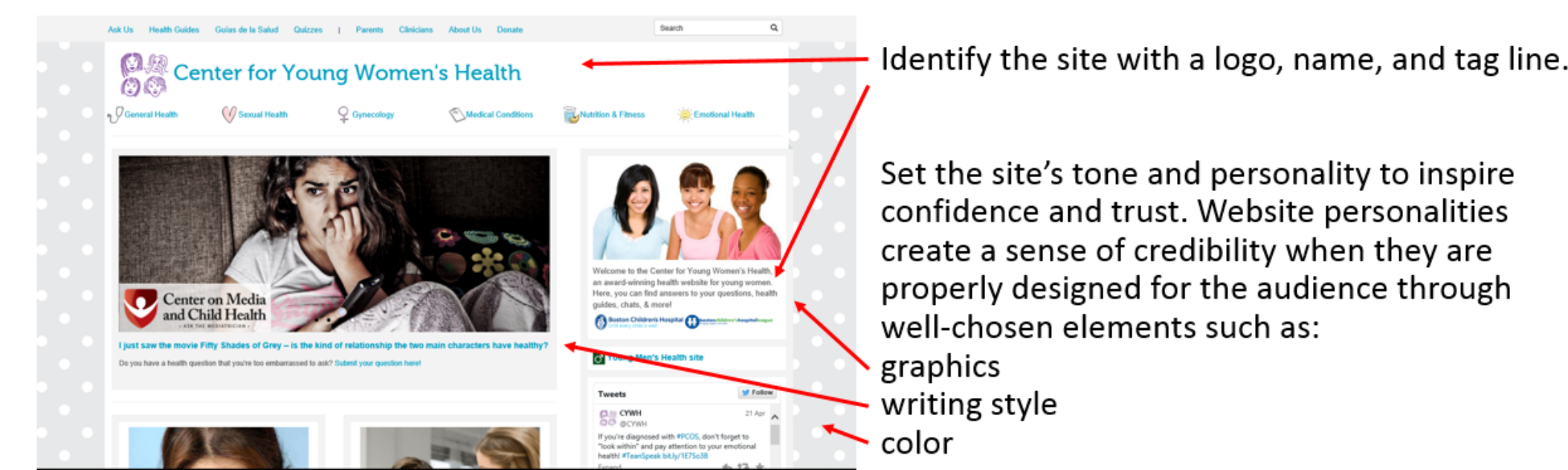**Health Information Websites and Links to Social Media:**

	Facebook	Twitter	Pinterest	YouTube
Girl's Health	X	X		
Healthy Women	X	X		
MedlinePlus – Women's Health	X	X		
National Institute of Heath	X	X	X	X
Resolve: The National Fertility Association	X	X	X	X
WebMD – Women's Health	X	X	X	
Women's Health: Office on Women's Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services	X	X	X	X
Young Women's Health	X	X		X
	Min: 2, Max: 4, Mean: 3.0			

Usability

Center for Young Women's Health
http://youngwomenshealth.org/

A well-designed home page should mostly be short descriptions, links, and "calls to action." Users should be allowed to start tasks right on the home page, and should be offered a variety of methods for finding information.
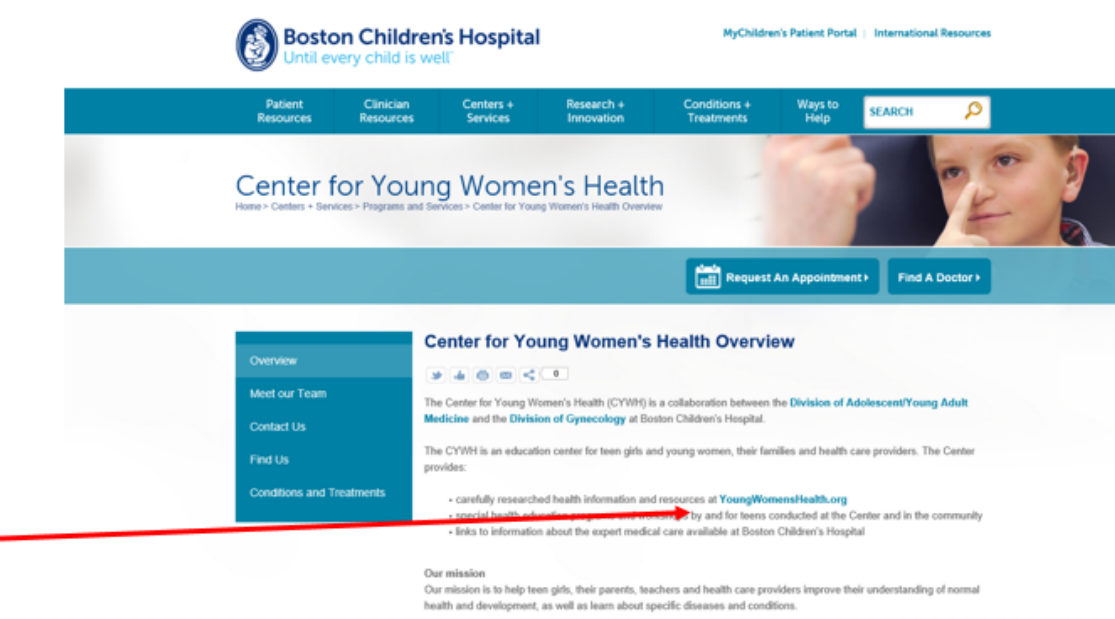
Identify the site with a logo, name, and tag line.

Set the site's tone and personality to inspire confidence and trust. Website personalities create a sense of credibility when they are properly designed for the audience through well-chosen elements such as:
graphics
writing style
color

Center for Young Women's Health
http://youngwomenshealth.org/

A well-designed home page should be findable through search engines.
Users should be able to find the site by using their own keywords in a search.

Website is only the first Google result if you search specifically for "young women's health" – language I would argue few young women would use

If you search for "young women's health" with Bing, the top result is for the Boston Children's Hospital overview of the program, which a user would have to visit and then locate the link to the Center for Young Women's Health website

Other Findings

- The first recommendation in the 2010 National Plan for Improving Health Literacy is *Adopting User-Centered Design.*

- Every .gov site I analyzed offers a Spanish translation. WebMD.com does not, and neither do two of the .org sites.

- GirlsHealth.gov has the most readable website, with a Flesch-Kinkaid Grade Level of 4.4. Half of the websites I analyzed are written at a high school reading level. Jakob Nielson recommends websites for teenagers be written at a *6th grade level or lower*, especially if the website has a broad audience of teens and their family members and friends.