



## Exploring how perceived threat and self-efficacy contribute to college students' use and perceptions of online mental health resources



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### ABSTRACT

Drawing from prior fear-appeal and information seeking research, this study explored how perceived threat and self-efficacy predicted college students' use and perceptions of online mental health resources. Results showed that perceived vulnerability was a modest, yet robust predictor of visiting any Internet website and joining an online support group, while self-efficacy modestly predicted greater perceived usefulness and trust for online support groups. Although numerous interactions emerged between self-efficacy and perceived threat, the impact of these relationships on use and perceptions of these services varied significantly. In particular, at higher levels of self-efficacy, perceived severity negatively predicted use of online services yet also positively predicted trust in these resources. Furthermore, results showed that vulnerability was only associated with favorable judgments of web services at lower levels of efficacy. Overall, the findings suggest that self-efficacy and perceived threat play a small, yet significant role in explaining online mental health information seeking outcomes; however, the exact nature by which these factors operate together to influence one's use and larger impressions such resources remains unclear.

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### 1. Introduction

College students often struggle with mental health issues when grappling with a university environment filled with academic and social pressures. While mental health concerns are prevalent among people this age (Andrews, Hall, Teesson, & Henderson, 1999; Substance Abuse, 2009), prior research indicates that many young adults will not search for help that sufficiently addresses the severity of their condition (Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007; Sullivan, Arensman, Keeley, Corcoran, & Perry, 2004). Furthermore, when seeking assistance, the on-campus services offered may be inadequate. Recent data found that 62% of students who dropped out of college with mental health issues acknowledged the main reason being the challenge of managing school with mental health (National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI], 2012). The same study also found that nearly 40% of students seeking mental health services reported appointment wait times of 5 days or more (NAMI). Given both the reluctance to seek treatment as well as the possible inadequacies of on-campus services, it is critical to isolate factors that motivate college students to seek out other resources.

The Internet is one resource that has become increasingly more appealing for adults seeking health information. The web offers substantial advantages including greater personal anonymity (with the exception of IP addresses), privacy, and convenience. Most importantly, while mental health stigma deters many from seeking out certain resources for treatment (Corrigan, 2004), the relative personal anonymity of the web provides some security against this social persecution (Berger, Wagner, & Baker, 2005). Research indicates that the majority of college students report using the Internet to acquire general health information and nearly half of all students indicate that they have frequently searched the web for this information (Escoffery et al., 2005). However, although recent studies conducted outside the US suggest many young adults are also using online resources to manage mental health issues (Horgan & Sweeney, 2010; Oh, Jorm, & Wright, 2009), there is little research exploring what contributes to young adults perception and use of these services.

To that end, this study examines how specific psychosocial factors contribute to students' use and perceptions of online mental health resources. Perceived threat and self-efficacy, factors frequently examined as predictors of physical health behavior (Rogers, 1975; Witte, 1994) and information seeking for physical health issues (Johnson & Meischke, 1993; Turner, Rimal, Morrison, & Kim, 2006) are explored as predictors of students' previous use and attitudes toward web services. In addition to addressing the

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independent contribution of these factors, this study aims to extend prior fear appeal research (Witte, 1992, 1994) by investigating the interaction of threat and efficacy on students' use and perception of these resources.

## 2. Online information seeking and mental health

Information seeking reflects purposeful attempts to attain information from specific information sources (Johnson, 1997). Information seeking from different sources can be used to fulfill specific functions. Schooler, Flora, and Farquahar (1993) posit that people will seek more extensive details from resources that provide more information, such as skills to manage one's health issues. For example, interpersonal relationships and health care providers are often a key source of health information (Lenz, 1984; Pecchioni & Sparks, 2007). Consequently, for many college students information seeking may reflect seeking out friends and family members for assistance, as well as consulting directly with a health care provider.

Although these traditional resources (as well as traditional forms of mass media) are useful outlets to obtain health information (Napoli, 2001), the Internet is increasingly becoming an attractive channel to acquire useful health knowledge. The advantages of online health information seeking are abundant, including opportunities for interaction, social support, and tailored search options, while simultaneously maintaining one's relative personal anonymity (Barker, 2008; Berger et al., 2005; Cline & Haynes, 2001; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Lambert & Loisel, 2007). Prior research indicates that nearly three-fourths of college students report ever using the Internet to acquire health information and nearly half of all students indicate that they have frequently searched the web for this information (Escoffery et al., 2005).

Communication research examining online health information seeking has primarily addressed physical health issues (Han et al., 2010; Johnson & Meischke, 1993). However, recent data shows that the percentage of adults seeking mental health information online rose from 22% in the year's 2002–2006 to 28% in 2008 (Fox & Jones, 2009). Few studies (Horgan & Sweeney, 2010; Oh et al., 2009) have specifically examined young adults perception and use of online mental health resources. These investigations, which were conducted outside the US, suggest that young adults value online mental health information. One recent study conducted at an Irish university found that roughly 31% of young people had sought out mental health information online (Horgan & Sweeney). Preferences for this medium centered on themes of accessibility, anonymity, and integrity. In addition, Oh et al. found that following a brief vignette describing someone with a mental health problem, over 70% of Australian adults aged 18–25 rated "looking up a website" as being helpful for that person (p. 295). While these studies offer evidence that students value and frequently use online mental health resources, researchers have yet to clearly address the health-related and social elements that motivate use. The following sections draw on previous research in the domain of physical health issues to examine specific psychosocial factors (perceived self-efficacy, threat, and public stigma) that may assist in explaining students' use and perceptions of online mental health resources.

### 2.1. Efficacy and threat appraisal

#### 2.1.1. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, or the perceived ability to execute behaviors necessary to achieve specific goals (Bandura, 1997) has been extensively researched as a predictor of healthier behaviors (see Bandura, 2004). Importantly, these self-perceptions also translate into greater health information seeking behavior. Johnson (1997) posits that one's "perception of the extent to which he or she can

control events" may impact information-seeking behavior (p. 73). Research has found that those with a greater feeling of control and self-efficacy are more likely to seek health information, whereas those in more powerless states are less likely (Harris, 1998; Lee, Hwang, Hawkins, & Pingree, 2008; Leydon et al., 2000; Lichter, 1987). Overall, both theoretical and empirical research supports a positive relationship between efficacy and information seeking. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**H1.** Self-efficacy will be positively associated with use of online mental health resources.

The comprehensive model of information seeking (CMIS) postulates that efficacy beliefs are one of various health-related factors that contribute to greater perceived utility of information resources (Johnson, 1997). Based on the authors' search, only one study has assessed the association between self-efficacy and perceptions of online health information (Rains, 2008). Results of that study showed that an Internet-specific measure of self-efficacy was positively associated with more favorable attitudes concerning the quality of health information on the web. Drawing from this research as well as the CMIS, the following is predicted:

**H2.** Self-efficacy will be positively associated with favorable impressions of online mental health resources.

#### 2.1.2. Threat appraisal

Perceived threat is often also posited as a central predictor of health behaviors (Rogers, 1975; Rosenstock, 1974; Witte, 1992). Threat appraisals reflect situations in which people examine elements that raise or lower the probability they will alter behavior, employ a protective behavior, or do both (Neuwirth, Dunwoody, & Griffin, 2000). These evaluations result from perceptions of personal severity and vulnerability to the threat (McMath & Prentice-Dunn, 2005). Severity involves the seriousness of a specific threat whereas vulnerability refers to how likely one is at risk (Umeh, 2004; Witte, 1992). Although perceived severity and vulnerability are frequently combined to form one perceived threat measure (e.g., Turner et al., 2006; Witte, 1992), researchers have also investigated the unique relationship each has with a given health behavior (e.g., McKinley, 2009; Umeh, 2003).

In addition to the utility of perceived threat for explaining specific health behaviors, various theoretical models include this concept as a predictor of information seeking action (e.g., Johnson, 1997; Turner et al., 2006). For example, initial tests of the CMIS assessed subjective probability and fear of cancer (combined into a 'perceived salience' construct) as health-related factors that indirectly predicted information-seeking behavior through perceived utility of the information source. In addition, three theoretical approaches drawn from the fear appeal literature – protection motivation theory (PMT), the extended parallel processing model (EPPM), risk perception attitude framework (RPA) – examine how personal threat is linked to information seeking and information avoidance (Neuwirth et al., 2000; Turner et al., 2006; Witte, 1992).

With few exceptions (Johnson & Meischke, 1993) prior research suggests that perceived threat is associated with health information seeking (Brouwers & Sorrentino, 1993; Neuwirth et al., 2000; Rains, 2007; Rippetoe & Rogers, 1987; Turner et al., 2006). This leads to the following predictions:

**H3a.** Perceived severity will be positively associated with use of online mental health resources.

**H3b.** Perceived vulnerability will be positively associated with use of online mental health resources.

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