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## Wired and Worried: Understanding Users' Emotions while Web Searching for Health Information

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### Abstract

To-date, most of the research concerning online health information search has focused on how users search the Web and how they evaluate health information. Despite the concerns raised on the impact of online health information on users' emotions, there is little research done in this field. In this paper, a critical analysis of the previous studies on Web searching for health information is done and it is found that emotions in Web searching for health information is scanty addressed area. As an exploratory study, an interview is conducted on frequent health information seekers and "emotions during searching" emerged as one of the major themes. The gap in the literature and the results from the exploratory study shows that there is a need for further research to delve deeper into understanding users' emotions during Web searching for health information.

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### 1. Introduction

Internet makes it much easier for general public to seek health information themselves. However, in spite of many advantages of online health information, there are many problems (e.g. poor quality of information, information overload, users' lack of health information literacy etc.) associated with it. A few studies have also addressed the consequences of online health information by addressing its impact on users' negative emotions<sup>[1]-[6]</sup>. As Web searching (series of users' actions between logging on and logging off a Web search system such as search engines<sup>[7]</sup>) has become the predominant form of health information access worldwide, it is important to gain a deeper

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understanding of users' search process. Thus, the objective of this paper is to conduct a review of past studies in Web searching for health information and to identify the research gaps if any.

## 2. Past studies in web searching for health information

In response to the problems associated with online health information and their significant impact on users' healthcare decisions, efforts have been made to understand users' search process during searching online for health information. Studies on understanding how users search the Internet for health information have enhanced the knowledge of users' search strategy and some of the pitfalls they usually encounter. Qualitative studies conducted by Eysenbach & Kohler<sup>[8]</sup> to observe users' online health information searching techniques found that majority of the search queries entered contained a single keyword and participants rarely went beyond the first page of search results. It was also found that participants did not check the quality criteria while retrieving health information. An observational study conducted by Hansen et al.<sup>[9]</sup> on adolescents found that search engines were the main source of access and the participants accessed the first few results. It was observed that participants did not consider the source of the content when searching. In a similar study by Hargittai et al.<sup>[10]</sup>, over 25% of participants mentioned that they chose a website because the search engine had returned that site as the first result.

Along with how users search for online health information, it is also important to understand how they evaluate the credibility and relevance of the information obtained. In a study by Peterson et al.<sup>[11]</sup> on consumer experiences in searching for and evaluating health information online, researchers have found that the study participants quickly rejected the sites that were slow to load and that had pop-up advertisements. Sillence et al.<sup>[12]</sup> have found that their study respondents evaluated health websites based on design features (such as layout of the website, navigational aids provided) and content factors (such as credibility and relevance of the information). Given the huge choice of health websites available, it appears that people are not prepared to put up with poorly designed interfaces<sup>[13]</sup>. Studies by Harris et al.<sup>[14]</sup> and Rains & Karmike<sup>[15]</sup> have also showed that the presence of design features on health websites is positively associated with perceptions of website credibility. In an observational study conducted by Buhi et al.<sup>[16]</sup> on understanding how college students search and evaluate online sexual health information found that students' perception of website credibility was dependent mainly on the domain names of the sources.

Further, in a study on identifying users' relevance judgments of health information, Crystal & Greenberg<sup>[17]</sup> have found that users were evidently looking for cues that could connect a document from general search engine to their particular problem of interest. While evaluating a typical document retrieved from Web search engine, users considered the title of the page, the description below it, date, URL and format of the document as relevant. Observational studies and interviews were conducted on college students to examine their health information search and appraisal behaviours<sup>[18]</sup>. The results indicated that familiarity with health websites and confidence in search strategies were major factors affecting their search and evaluation behaviours. It was also observed that participants judged the quality of websites by the design features. Such websites selected by the participants as credible were evaluated by health experts. Contrary to participants' evaluation of quality, health experts judged the websites to contain unbalanced, superficial, and unsubstantiated information. Although these studies have highlighted the importance of design features in evaluating the quality of health websites listed, most of the quality frameworks developed such as HONCode<sup>[19]</sup> and E-Health code of ethics<sup>[20]</sup> for evaluating online health information ignore the design features for assessing the quality of the content. As Mokhtar et al.<sup>[21]</sup> concludes in their review of research, people rely most heavily on design elements judging information quality even though it is not listed in the critical evaluation skills recommended for judging quality.

Few studies in online health information search have identified distinctive challenges in searching such as difficulty in searching due to unfamiliar terminology<sup>[22]</sup> and difficulty in determining the quality of health information<sup>[23]</sup>. In an observational study, Toms & Latter<sup>[24]</sup> observed users searching for health-related topics using Google search engine. Results indicated significant problems in query formulation and in making efficient selection from results lists. In a study on young adults searching online for sexual health information<sup>[25]</sup>, it was found that many of the participants struggled to find the required information.

Some of the studies in Web searching for health information have investigated the impact of online health

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