



Understanding consumer health information-seeking behavior from the perspective of the risk perception attitude framework and social support in mobile social media websites



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study integrates the risk perception attitude framework and social support to examine factors influencing consumers' intentions to seek health information in mobile social media websites.

Method: We develop a research model consisting of four social support dimensions, perceived health risk, health self-efficacy, and health information-seeking intention. A survey is conducted among patients with non-serious conditions. A two-step approach of structural equation modeling is used to test the research model.

Results: Among the four dimensions of social support, tangible support and appraisal support significantly influence perceived risk, whereas emotional support and esteem support significantly influence health self-efficacy. Perceived health risk and health self-efficacy significantly influence the health information-seeking behavior intention of consumers. Specifically, health self-efficacy significantly moderates the relationship between perceived risk and behavior intention.

Conclusions: This study highlights the integrated effects of social capital and risk perception attitude framework on health information-seeking intention. It examines relationships among perceived health risk, health self-efficacy, and behavior intention in the mobile social media context. The findings help understand effects of social capital factors on perceived health risk and health self-efficacy.

1. Introduction

The rapid developments of mobile telecommunication and enhanced accessibility to mobile Internet have prompted an increasing number of individuals to turn to mobile devices in obtaining various types of information. A typical example of such information is medical and health information [1]. Pew Research Center reported that 31% of cell phone owners and 52% of Smartphone owners seek health or medical information through their phones [2]. Mobile social media websites, which refer to social media tools or applications in mobile phones, expand connectivity and enable mobile phone users to connect to social media anytime and anywhere. Nielsen reported that the time spent by Americans on mobile social media websites accounted for 63% of the year-over-year growth in the overall time spent on social media [3]. People increasingly realize the importance of health, and health information can aid in making decisions about treatments, as well as provide a coping mechanism for those with chronic illnesses [4]. Thus, individuals often seek health information in mobile social media websites when confronted with the possible threat of illness [5]. They

access a diverse array of mobile social media websites, such as blogs, wikis, virtual communities, and the electronic word-of-mouth through mobile devices, to seek for answers to specific diseases, research questions, and support issues. In China, common mobile social media websites include Sina Weibo (www.weibo.com), a comprehensive website for users to tweet their views on all kinds of issues including healthcare), Douban (www.douban.com), QQ zone (www.qqzone.qq.com), Tieba (www.tieba.baidu.com), Zhihu (www.zhihu.com), and haodaifu (www.haodf.com), among others. These mobile social media websites support members to forge relationships, share individual stories, boost their knowledge ability, and subsequently increase access to peers; thus, these mobile social media websites tend to be acceptable resources in helping individuals acquire both health-related social support and medical knowledge [6–8]. Although the specific content of health information may vary, people seeking health information may primarily intend to search additional details about their symptoms and obtain support from other members who experience a similar health condition in the mobile social media sites.

Health information seeking has been studied in the Internet context.

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Lagoe and Atkin concluded that health anxiety, gender, and Internet efficacy positively affected health information seeking [9]. McKinley explored the nature of the relationship between informational social support and components of online health information seeking [10]. Kim et al. examined the role of social support and social networks in health information-seeking behavior among Korean American adults [11]. Other researchers have also examined the issue of health information seeking [12,13]. However, research in health information-seeking behavior of mobile social media websites still lacks systematic and comprehensive understanding. This study aims to investigate the factors influencing consumers' health information-seeking behavior in mobile social media websites.

Risk perception attitude (RPA) framework is extensively used in predicting consumer's motivation to engage in self-protective behavior [14]. Consumers seek health information to obtain useful information for predicting/improving their health, which is consumers' self-protective behavior. Studies have examined the predictability of RPA framework for consumer health information behavior [14–16]. A strong motivation of this study is to take a further step on previous research and to expand the purview of the RPA framework by examining whether it would be really effective to study users' health information seeking behavior through social media.

On the one hand, the distinctiveness of health information lies in its specialty, where only professionals have and solid health knowledge via systematic training. The misunderstanding on or the improper use of health information may increase health risks, which would consequently worsen the existing health status of consumers. Thus, perceived risk may thus be negatively related to consumers' seeking behavior. On the other hand, consumers with ability to cope with their own health issues may be more likely to think that online health information could be helpful for improving their health conditions, thus reinforcing their health information seeking behavior. Therefore, perception of health risk and health self-efficacy may also influence an individual's decision to seek health information from mobile social media websites.

Previous studies have used some other theories to examine health information seeking behavior, such as theory of reasoned action (TRA) [17]. The main difference between RPA and TRA is that the former examines effects of perceived risk and health self-efficacy on health seeking behavior, whereas TRA focuses on effects of attitude and subjective norm [18]. As attitude was found to significantly affect the behavior in existing research literature [19,20], there is no motivation for this study to further examine this research issue from a TRA theoretical perspective. In addition, health self-efficacy may increasingly influence people's health information seeking behavior with the use of more sophisticated information technology. Moreover, the particularity of health information is that it may lead to irreversible consequences if it is not properly understood or used. Perceived health risk would thus affect health information seeking behavior. As a result, we adopted the RPA theoretical perspective rather than other theories like TRA in the current study.

Perceived health risk may be influenced by consumers' personality traits such as self-efficacy that is often related to past experiences [21]. Social support has been proposed as a central concept for health and well-being, and it has demonstrated a positive effect on health outcomes. Social media websites are communities; hence, when individuals confront health issues, they follow friends, family, and other patients who have similar symptoms to gain understanding and support, thus obtaining emotional support [22]. Prior research indicates that individuals' perceptions are related to both the informational and normative effects of their proximal social networks [23]. Consumers who have chronic conditions often go online to seek others who have similar issues. To obtain social support from their peers, consumers spend time and effort in seeking health information in mobile social media websites. Therefore, perceived social support can be considered a predictor of perceived risk and self-efficacy.

In addition, several control variables affect consumers' health

behavior. For example, the ability to cope with conflicting information varies by socioeconomic status, such as education and annual household income [24]. Thus, we also examine the control effects. Given that health is always a sensitive and critical issue, patients with serious diseases may have apprehensions seeking health information through mobile social media websites. Therefore, this study primarily focuses on users with non-serious diseases.

This paper is organized into seven sections. Section 2 describes the theoretical background, research model, and hypothesis development. Section 3 presents the research methodology. Sections 4 and 5 provide and discuss the results of hypothesis testing. Section 6 summarizes the implications of our findings for research and practice, as well as the limitations. Section 7 presents the conclusions of this study.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. RPA framework

Risk perception attitude framework is used in predicting consumer motivation to engage in self-protective behavior [14]. It explains the effects of perceived risk and perceived self-efficacy on behavior. Perceived risk refers to the uncertainty of people seeking health information, whereas perceived self-efficacy denotes "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" [25]. The current study aims to investigate health information-seeking behavior; thus, we use the construct "health self-efficacy," which signifies "individuals' beliefs about their ability to manage their health" [26].

Consumers must have confidence that they can overcome the perceived risk of negative health outcome. Moreover, the tendency to engage in a health behavior rises as health-related efficacy increases [27]. An individual calculates the perceived benefits of taking action against the perceived negative consequences that could result from engaging in the health behavior. Previous studies have asserted the importance of perceived risk for individuals' health behavior. For instance, the health belief model posits that increases in perceived risk motivate self-protective behavior [28]. Similarly, protection motivation theory hypothesizes that the probability of an event occurring and its detrimental effects mediate cognitions about the means of coping with a perceived threat [29]. Following incorrect information related to the specific symptoms could cause potential physiological and psychological damages [30]. If particular questionable or unreliable means of treatment or medication are adopted as a result of information interception, the consequences could be highly severe. Consumers are more likely to exert additional effort on collecting health information in mobile social media websites when they perceive less risk to cope with their health issues. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

■ H1: Perceived risk is negatively related to behavior intention.
 ■ H2: Health self-efficacy is positively related to behavior intention.

■ H3: Health self-efficacy moderates the effect of perceived risk on behavior intention.

2.2. Social support

Social support pertains to the "resources exchanged with others through one's social ties" [31]. It has been extensively examined as an important factor in predicting consumers' health beliefs. Consumers in mobile social media websites can create a group based on different health topics, identify with others in the group, and share health information with them [32]. Previous studies have highlighted the positive effects of social support on various health outcomes [6,33]. Social support is a multi-dimensional concept, which consists of various dimensions [34,35]. Compared with Internet seeking, users can gain more social support from social media, including emotional support,

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