



Full length article

Health information seeking in the Web 2.0 age: Trust in social media, uncertainty reduction, and self-disclosure

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 January 2015

Received in revised form

24 August 2015

Accepted 28 November 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Social media

Online self-disclosure

Trust

Uncertainty reduction

Online health information seeking

ABSTRACT

Self-disclosure is purposeful disclosure of personal information to other people, and online self-disclosure on health-related issues is important in promoting a safe and sound online health environment. The present study investigates the ways in which youths engage in online self-disclosure of health-related issues in the Web 2.0 age. We examine how self-disclosure is driven by the level of trust in social media and uncertainty reduction actions, i.e., seeking information to verify and challenge the prescription after visiting medical professionals. Comparative surveys were conducted in Hong Kong, South Korea, and the U.S., respectively. Compared to their counterparts in South Korea and the U.S., youths in Hong Kong were significantly more likely to disclose personal health issues with peers online. Hong Kong youths also held the highest level of trust towards health-related information on social media. Meanwhile, both the level of trust in social media and uncertainty reduction actions were positively associated with online self-disclosure.

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1. Introduction

New media have become important channels for seeking and sharing health-related information. Scholars believe that new media, especially social media, have great potentials to support information searching and decision-making on self-care and health-related issues (Miller & Bell, 2012). A recent report suggests that more than a third of U.S. adults would turn to the internet to search the medical condition they or someone else might have (Fox & Duggan, 2013). Nonetheless, the proliferation of new media in health care also poses several problems and challenges. First, the quality of the health-related information on social media is far from perfect, which are often inconsistent, misleading, and not trustworthy (Pant et al., 2012). A few studies have indicated that peoples' trust of online health information is a major factor that influences their follow-up actions after information search, for example, to further discuss health-related topics, or to be willing to share health information (Hou & Shim, 2010; Metzger & Flanagan,

2011; Ye, 2011; Yun & Park, 2010). Second, people are now more likely than before to engage in online health information seeking to verify or even challenge the prescriptions offered by medical professionals, especially when they experience incongruence or uncertainties about a certain prescription. Based on a national survey of 3,014 adults living in the U.S., the Pew research report indicated that 60% of the so-called "online diagnosers" (i.e., those who consulted online media for health-related issues) living with chronic conditions ever talked with a medical professional about the information they found online, and about one in five of this group of people reported that the clinician offered a different opinion (Fox, Duggan, Rainie, & Purcell, 2013).

Therefore, in order to promote a friendly online health environment, it is important that users feel comfortable to engage and disclose themselves in the cyberspace. Focusing on the concept of self-disclosure, the present study seeks to examine the extent to which trust in social media and uncertainty reduction strategies would lead to self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is purposeful disclosure of personal information to another person. Self-disclosure on health issues is important because it is a strategy that helps consumers to manage health-related information (Checton & Greene, 2015). As proposed by Frattaroli (2006), self-disclosure has health benefits and is closely associated with physical and mental well-

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being. Hence, we ask: To what extent would people disclose their personal health issues with others online? How do trust in online health information sources and uncertainty reduction actions influence online self-disclosure of health-related issues?

2. Self-disclosure in the cyberspace

Self-disclosure is defined as an “act of making yourself manifest, showing yourself so others can perceive you” (Jourard, 1971, p. 19). It can be considered as one of the strategies for individuals to manage the information acquired (Checton & Greene, 2015). Self-disclosure was found to play an important role in the online communication process. For instance, in the development of a romantic relationship, self-disclosure helped individuals to collect information about the communicators and to project future interactions (Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2011). Meanwhile, Wang, Jackson, and Zhang (2011) found that online communication via instant messaging was positively correlated to online self-disclosure for adolescents. They also discovered that for boys and for those who experienced high social anxiety, online communication via instant messaging had a greater impact on online self-disclosure.

The proliferation of social media provides new channels for sharing and self-disclosing health-related information (Rutsaert et al., 2013). As noted by Checton and Greene (2015), to take care of a chronic illness, one needs to manage information on the illness, while sharing health information with others is a crucial part of such information management strategies. The reason is that, as argued by Walton and Rice (2013), self-disclosure was a reciprocal benefit-exchanging process where, after one's disclosure, an equal or greater disclosure from the others was expected. Other studies found that people disclosed themselves to others because they believed the disclosure would bring returns in terms of encouragement and empowerment (Zolowere et al., 2008). Self-disclosure generates pre-commitment between the people, which in turn encourages “a leap of faith and reciprocal self-disclosure” (Henderson & Gilding, 2004, p. 487) and facilitates interpersonal communication. A recent survey suggested that, of the 8% of internet users in the U.S. who indicated that they had made health-related posts online, nearly half of them said they were sharing their personal health experience (Fox, 2014). For those who had two or more chronic conditions, they were more likely to post a health-related question or share their own personal health experience online in any way, compared to their counterparts who had fewer chronic conditions. Hence, self-disclosure plays an important role in the online health information seeking process.

3. Trust in social media, self-disclosure, and health outcomes

The level of trust in communication channels and institutions has been found to be an important predictor of self-disclosure, as trust reduces perceived risks and costs associated with disclosing private or sensitive information (Chen & Sharma, 2013). For example, a secondary data analysis of the 2009 Pew survey in the U.S. revealed that the level of trust in individuals and institutions was associated with the level of trust in the internet, whereas trust of the internet positively predicted one's disclosure of identifiable information online (Mesch, 2012). Similar findings were shown in Dutch internet users, where trust in government organizations strongly influenced individuals' disclosure of personal data among the users (Beldad, van der Geest, de Jong, & Steehouder, 2012).

In a similar vein, scholars discovered that self-disclosure of health-related issues was promoted by trust, a feeling of safety, and an obligation to others (Zolowere et al., 2008). Paiva and colleagues (2011) found that self-disclosure on sensitive health issues, i.e., the HIV-related issue, required a high level of mutual trust, and the

disclosure happened more frequently among close partners and those who were also HIV-positive (Paiva, Segurado, & Ventura Filipe, 2011). A study carried out in rural China suggested that trust was rated as the first reason for people to disclose sensitive issues, followed by a feeling of needing help, and a feeling of close friendship (Ding, Li, & Ji, 2011). Using the data from the 2007 Health Information National Trends Survey, Hou (2010) found that trust in online health information was a significant predictor of conducting health-related activities via the internet. Similarly, Huh, DeLorme, and Reid (2005) discovered that the higher level of trust in online drug-related information, the more likely one would engage in three types of behaviors, including communicating doctors, talking with others, and seeking more health-related information. Additionally, Chen and Sharma (2013) drew upon the social capital theory and concluded that the level of trust in other users on social networking sites was positively associated with the degree of self-disclosure. Hence, based on the above discussion, we propose that:

H1: Trust in social media is positively associated with self-disclosure online.

4. Uncertainty reduction and self-disclosure

As stated earlier, the trend of consumer-centered health services would lead to an increasing number of health-related consumers via new media (Yun & Park, 2010). For example, nearly one-third of internet users reported that they had consulted online reviews or rankings of health care services or treatments (The Internet and Health, 2012). When there is a lack of sufficient information from traditional medical professionals, uncertainties arise and online media provide individuals with an opportunity for further information seeking and sharing so as to evaluate, verify, or even challenge the prescriptions (Fox et al., 2013).

Theoretically, cross-checking health information through both online and offline channels is similar to the “online disinhibition effect” (Suler, 2004). The disinhibition effect states that people would “say and do things in cyberspace that they would not ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel less restrained, and express themselves more openly” (Suler, 2004). Uncertainties lead to communication practices such as information-seeking behaviors, while people tend to observe and check other people's behaviors by participating in a number of strategies to seek more information about others (Berger, 1979). In other words, uncertainty reduction actions are likely to generate self-disclosure. As researchers discovered in studying the online dating process, “online daters may be more likely to seek confirmatory information about potential partners early in the process, as a basis for calibrating their own self-disclosure” (Gibbs et al., 2011). Similarly, Courtois and colleagues (2012) found that both passive uncertainty reduction strategies (i.e., passively looking at acquaintances' online profile to get more information) and active uncertainty reduction strategies (i.e., actively communicating with the acquaintances) were positively associated with the degree of self-disclosure to the acquaintances (Courtois, All, & Vanwynsberghe, 2012). Meanwhile, their studies found that uncertainty reduction actions positively mediated the effect of social anxiety on the level of certainty about the respondents' friends (Courtois et al., 2012). Gibbs and colleagues (2011) also found that the frequency of taking uncertainty reduction actions were affected by concerns of online dating, such as security and privacy, whereas uncertainty reduction actions were positively linked to self-disclosure (Gibbs et al., 2011).

Informed by the above empirical findings, we argue that, if an individual experiences uncertainties after visiting a doctor, he/she is more likely to open up him/herself to discuss personal health-related issues. As mentioned earlier, self-disclosure is a benefit-driven activity. If one has experienced inconsistencies with the

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