



Health anxiety in the digital age: An exploration of psychological determinants of online health information seeking



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ABSTRACT

This study examined factors that may influence health information seeking behaviors among adults. A sample of 245 American adults participated in the study. Structural equation modeling was used to model the relationships between gender, neuroticism, health anxiety, Internet efficacy, Internet use and health information seeking. Results support a model in which health anxiety mediates the relationship between neuroticism and information seeking. In this model, Internet efficacy was also identified as a mediator between Internet experience and information seeking. Logistic regression analyses were used to identify an association between health anxiety and the use of online support groups. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

As offline health care costs continue to rise, health information represents one of the most popular search destinations online, as the Internet's attributes of convenience, ease of use, ability to reach large audiences and interactivity render it an attractive information source (Bull, 2011; Bundorf, Wagner, Singer, & Baker, 2006; Peterson & Fretz, 2003; Walther & Boyd, 2002; Whitten, Kreps, & Eastin, 2009). In order to better understand how people utilize online health applications, we need to further explore the determinants and facilitators of their use. As such, a closer examination of how various psychological and communicative processes work to influence one's inclination to seek out health information online is in order.

A key influence on inclinations to seek out online health information is health anxiety. Health anxiety can be defined as "a persistent fear of illness or disease that often involves the misinterpretation of bodily symptoms as signs of serious illness" (Jones, Hadjistavropoulos, & Gullickson, 2015). The condition can range along a continuum from little (or no) health anxiety to full-blown hypochondriasis. Due to similarities between this and other disorders (i.e., panic disorder & obsessive-compulsive disorder), research suggests that health anxiety may be categorized as an anxiety disorder (Cleveland Clinic, 2014).

To date, health anxiety has been associated with a number of negative outcomes. Those who suffer from elevated levels of health anxiety utilize medical services at a greater frequency and incur higher medical costs than those who do not (Barsky, Ettner, Horsky, & Bates, 2001). These individuals also experience elevated levels of concern when obtaining routine medical care (Miles & Wardle, 2006).

Given these findings, it is possible that feelings of health anxiety may also influence one's inclination to seek out health information online. According to Fox and Duggan (2013), 72% of U.S. adults with access to the Internet have sought out health information online in the previous year; and one-third of American adults have used information found on the Internet as a diagnostic tool. As a consequence, a small but growing body of literature addresses the role health anxiety plays in information seeking behavior (Baumgartner & Hartmann, 2011; Eastin & Guinsler, 2006). Anecdotally, health-anxious individuals who seek out information online have been dubbed "cyberchondriacs" (Cohen, 2007).

To date, little work has assessed the role of health anxiety in the process of information seeking. Furthermore, researchers have yet to assess the specific information sources utilized by health anxious individuals. To replicate and extend past work, the present study explores the influence health anxiety has on one's inclination to seek out health-related information online. In particular, this examination integrates concepts from psychological and communication theories to model the relationships among social locators, personality traits, health anxiety, and information seeking behavior.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Information seeking

Information seeking has been defined as an active effort in which an individual searches for information (Niederdeppe et al., 2007) to satisfy an informational need or goal. Often, this behavior is initiated in response to uncertainty associated with one's health (Guillaume & Bath, 2004). Explorations of online health information seeking behavior have, to date, examined information seeking related to various health issues including cancer (Dickerson, Reinhart, Boehmke, & Akhu-Zaheya, 2011; Niederdeppe et al., 2007), healthy eating behavior (McKinley & Wright, 2014), and health care reform (Thompson, Bevan, & Sparks, 2012).

Information seeking is of particular interest because of the variegated behavioral outcomes. In a recent review of health information seeking methods and measures, Anker, Reinhart, and Feeley (2011) identified behavioral outcomes that have been linked with health information seeking. Outcomes linked to health information seeking include failure to adhere to medical recommendations (Weaver, Thompson, Weaver, & Hopkins, 2009), intention to discuss health information with one's provider (Hong, 2008), and treatment decisions (Warner & Procaccino, 2004). In spite of recent interest in the utilization of the web as a health information source (Fox & Duggan, 2013; Maguire et al., 2011; Rains, 2008), surprisingly little is known about how various psychological and communicative factors influence one's inclination to retrieve health information online.

2.2. Biological sex

Biological sex has been identified as a personal characteristic that plays a key role in the seeking process. Dobransky and Hargittai (2012) found that sex significantly predicted online health information seeking for information related to health treatments, such that females were more likely to seek out health information than males. This work is consistent with a raft of studies suggesting that females are more avid information-seekers in a variety of health-related contexts – ranging from general health information seeking to cancer-related information (Atkinson, Saperstein, & Pleis, 2009; Finney Rutten, Squiers, & Hesse, 2006; Petty, 2012) – perhaps owing to their more cautious nature in risk contexts (Booth, Cardona-Sosa, & Nolen, 2014). Based on that rationale, we posit that:

Hypothesis 1. Biological sex will predict information seeking such that females will be more likely to seek health information than males.

2.3. Health anxiety

In addition to social locators, past work has found feelings of anxiety and worry to be associated with information seeking behaviors. A test of the Planned Risk Information Seeking Model identified affective risk response (i.e., worry and fear associated with a focal risk) as a significant predictor of intention to seek out health information (Kahlor, 2010). Therefore, individuals experiencing feelings of concern or fear may have turned to various information sources in an attempt to relieve this tension.

Research addressing health information seeking contexts has identified a connection between health anxiety and online information seeking. A study completed by Muse, McManus, Leung, Meghreblian, and Williams (2012) found that individuals who experienced high levels of health anxiety reportedly sought out health information online more frequently and spent more time

searching for health information online than those who experienced low levels of health anxiety. An additional investigation completed by Eastin and Guinsler (2006) found that online information seeking moderated the relationship between health anxiety and utilization of healthcare services. Specifically, a significant positive effect was identified between online health information seeking and making a physician appointment among individuals with moderate and high levels of health anxiety. Baumgartner and Hartmann (2011) also explored the relationship between these two variables and found that online health information seeking resulted in greater worries among health anxious individuals compared to less health anxious individuals.

2.4. Neuroticism

Considering additional factors that may impact the online health information seeking process, the big five personality taxonomy is a theoretical framework positing that humans range from low to high on the personality traits of openness to new experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (e.g., Eysenck, 1997; John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). These traits have been explicated to account for individual differences and explain why people respond differently in similar circumstances (Hill & Gick, 2011; Krishnan & Atkin, 2014; Randler, Stadler, Vollmer, & Diaz-Morales, 2012; Raynor & Levine, 2009; Tan & Yang, 2014).

While the big five taxonomy can encompass the context of health affordances, one trait (i.e., neuroticism) has been consistently linked to negative health outcomes (Friedman, Kern, & Reynolds, 2010; Williams & Wiebe, 2000). Neuroticism is an “enduring tendency to experience negative emotional states” (Bates, Monahan, & Rhodes, 2012, p. 486). In particular, neuroticism is characterized by the traits of depressed, anxious, guilt, tense, low self-esteem, shy, moody, and irrational (see Galauner, Pettey, Beatty, Rudd, & Atkin, 2014).

In a 2005 meta-analysis, Malouff, Thorsteinsson, and Schutte (2005) established a clear and consistent link between neuroticism and various clinical disorders. In particular, neuroticism has been associated with indicators of poor mental health such as depression and anxiety (Uliaszek et al., 2010). Previous work has also linked neuroticism to severe health anxiety (or hypochondria). Specifically, Cox, Borger, Asmundson, and Taylor (2000) found a strong and positive association between health anxiety and neuroticism. In the same year, Ferguson (2000) established a significant, strong, and negative correlation between fear of disease and a construct which is closely related to neuroticism, emotional instability. Assuming that the same kind of neuroses that spawn emotional instability will also spur health anxieties and that health anxieties will subsequently lead to health information seeking online, we posit that:

Hypothesis 2. Health anxiety will mediate the relationship between neuroticism and online health information seeking.

2.5. Internet efficacy

Additional factors, such as efficacious feelings, may influence one's likelihood of seeking out health information online. According to social-cognitive theory, self-efficacy is “concerned with people's beliefs that they can exert control over their motivation and behavior and over their social environment” (Bandura, 1990, p. 9). Bandura (1990) notes that people's beliefs or feelings of self-efficacy influence what they chose to do, how much effort to put into a task, and how an individual will persist when trying to engage in a behavior.

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