



Informational social support and online health information seeking: Examining the association between factors contributing to healthy eating behavior



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the nature of the relationship between informational social support and components of online health information seeking and how this process influences college students' healthy eating intentions. Results showed that social support was positively associated with online information seeking and more favorable impressions of nutrition/healthy diet information on the web. In addition, although social support was not associated with healthy eating intentions, all three information-seeking measures significantly predicted this outcome – even after controlling for numerous health-related factors. Additional mediation tests showed that social support had an indirect impact on healthy eating intentions through use as well as through a multi-step process involving perceptions of online resources. Overall, these results suggest that by raising health consciousness, informational support may trigger online health information seeking leading to healthier lifestyle intentions.

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1. Introduction

Public health concern over the U.S. obesity epidemic has stimulated research addressing information resources that may facilitate healthier lifestyle decisions. Although the public has access to a tremendous amount of health information via both mediated and interpersonal channels (Lewis et al., 2012), it is less clear how specific resources uniquely contribute to healthy eating habits and whether these distinct information channels operate together to predict these outcomes.

Of the various information resources accessible to the public, the Internet has become a particularly attractive venue for gaining knowledge on various health concerns. Research shows that more than 60% of adults report having sought out health information online (Fox & Jones, 2009). Consequently, researchers must continue to explore factors that motivate people to seek online health information as well as whether increased use of online resources results in better health decisions. This study seeks to investigate a process through which social support and online health information seeking operate together to impact healthy eating behavior.

First, this study examines how diet and weight-focused informational social support predicts online information seeking and more favorable perceptions of online nutrition/healthy diet websites. Second, building on prior research exploring the indirect impact of social support on health outcomes, this study examines whether online information seeking mediates the relationship between informational support and healthy eating intentions. Overall, this study offers further insight into the relationship between different informational health resources as well as the importance of information seeking in healthier lifestyle decisions.

2. Online information seeking and health

Information seeking is defined by Johnson (1997) as the “purposive acquisition of information from selected information carriers” (p. 26). While physicians, family members, and traditional forms of mass media (e.g., television, radio) are useful outlets to obtain health information (Napoli, 2001), the Internet has also become an appealing resource to obtain health information. The web offers numerous advantages for those seeking health information, including anonymity/privacy, the ability to find information tailored to the user's needs, and the potential for interactivity and social support (Barker, 2008; Berger, Wagner, & Baker, 2005; Cline & Haynes, 2001; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Lambert & Loiselle, 2007). Based on these characteristics, it is not surprising that 74% of

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college students reported ever using the Internet to acquire health information and more than 40% indicated that they had frequently searched the web for this information (Escoffery et al., 2005).

For numerous reasons, it is crucial to examine what drives college students to seek out online nutrition and diet information. First, the prevalence of obesity in the U.S. remains high, with more than one-third of the adult population obese (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2012). Another rationale for investigating students' motivation to search online for nutrition and diet information is that obesity is linked to a variety of serious long-term health problems including cancer, type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, and stroke (Centers for Disease Control, 2012). Consequently, the Internet may be a valuable resource for college students as they seek to prevent serious obesity-related health problems in the future.

Importantly, among young adults, substantial increases in weight occur between the ages of 18 and 29 (Mokdad et al., 2003). While obesity rates are lower among college students than adults overall, recent data shows that the prevalence of overweight and obesity among this group has increased from 27.4% in 2006 to 29.2% in 2011 (American College Health Association, 2012). Overall, the college years mark a key transitional time frame for health behavior (Harris, Gordon-Larson, Chantala, & Udry, 2006). Thus, the web may play an important role in providing students with helpful information that buffers the possible negative influence other environmental factors have on college student's weight.

3. Social support and information seeking

Social support refers to the ways in which people interpret information, affective comfort, and general assistance (through actions and words) offered by others (Segrin & Domschke, 2011; Wallston, Alagna, DeVellis, & DeVellis, 1983). Ultimately, social support is a reflection of the relational transactions occurring between people (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). This involves an interpersonal exchange whereby the provider of social support assists the recipient in managing the challenges and uncertainty associated with a given situation (Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003).

Social support has important implications for healthy lifestyle decisions. In particular, one's network of family and friends serve as a crucial resource for gaining health knowledge (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). In addition, social support has often been studied for its relationship with people's dietary habits (e.g., Chlebowski & Garvin, 2006; Gallant & Dorn, 2001; McKinley, 2009; Thornton et al., 2006). Research has found that diet and weight-focused informational support – the type of support examined in this study – has been found to correlate with healthy eating behavior (McKinley; Thornton et al.) as well as lower BMI scores (Herzer, Zeller, Rausch, & Modi, 2011).

Although this research shows that social support contributes to health knowledge and eating behavior, based on prior research it is unclear what relationship exists between support and diet-specific health information seeking among college students, as well as the possible significance of this association for healthy lifestyle decisions. To address how support may be associated with health information seeking, two alternative perspectives are examined.

3.1. Compensation perspective

Case (2007) posits that information seeking reflects a “response to a need or gap in your knowledge” (p. 5). Expanding on this argument, recent research (Han et al., 2010; Shaw et al., 2008) suggests that information seeking may be triggered by the desire to fulfill psychosocial needs. Based on assumptions drawn from the comprehensive model of information seeking (CMIS; Johnson &

Meischke, 1993), some researchers have noted that because online health information satisfies psychosocial needs, it can compensate for social support deficits (Han et al.).

Unfortunately, the uniqueness of prior studies and the inconsistencies in findings make it challenging to assume a negative relationship between support and online nutrition/healthy diet information seeking. In particular, the majority of prior research examining this relationship assessed the information-seeking behavior of those being treated for breast cancer (Fogel, Albert, Schnabel, Dittkoff, & Neugut, 2002; Han et al., 2010; Shaw et al.). Two studies involving online breast cancer information seeking from one specific source supports this hypothesis (Han et al.; Shaw et al.). Conversely, another study exploring support as an outcome measure and assessing online breast cancer information seeking through use of any Internet site found a significant, positive relationship between these health resources (Fogel et al., 2002). In addition, to further complicate comparisons, studies indicating a negative association employed one particular support measure tailored to cancer patients (Han et al.; Shaw et al.), whereas others utilized a broader and more extensive support scale (Fogel et al., Percheski & Hargittai, 2011). Overall, these inconsistent results suggest that the nature of the relationship between social support and online health information seeking remains relatively unclear. Thus, an alternative perspective must be explored to assess whether and how student's level of support triggers health information seeking.

3.2. Health consciousness perspective

While not directly addressing social support, assumptions drawn from the health consciousness literature (MacInnis, Moorman, & Jaworski, 1991; Park & Mittal, 1985) offer a competing perspective on the relationship between interpersonal assistance and health information seeking. The health consciousness perspective argues that through interpersonal communication with close others, individuals will become more conscious of making healthier lifestyle decisions. Specifically, as others share more health knowledge, the individual is likely to become more involved in her health and more motivated to engage in healthier actions. Consequently, those who are more health conscious will engage in healthier activities, including health information seeking (Dutta-Bergman, 2005a; Moorman & Matulich, 1993). Research testing this hypothesis showed that increased interpersonal communication both directly predicted higher levels of health information seeking and indirectly predicted this outcome through healthier eating behavior (Dutta-Bergman). To the authors' knowledge, only one study has addressed the relationship between social support and online health information seeking among college students (Percheski & Hargittai, 2011). In that study, results showed that there was a non-significant, positive association between support and information seeking. The authors noted that the results were consistent with previous data supporting how adults use online health information to complement existing/traditional health resources (Neustadt & Robinson, 2002; Tian & Robinson, 2008).

In sum, there are two competing arguments involving the relationship between informational support and online nutrition/healthy diet information seeking. The compensation perspective stipulates that information seeking is the result of specific information needs left unfilled by interpersonal resources. Alternatively, drawing from the health consciousness literature, a competing perspective is that through the receipt of more information from others, individuals will become health conscious, resulting in more proactive information-seeking behavior. This leads to the following research question:

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