



Online nutrition information seeking among Australian primigravid women



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ABSTRACT

Background: optimal nutrition in pregnancy is crucial for short and long term health in both mother and child. While a large proportion of pregnant women utilise the internet for informational support during pregnancy, little is known about online practices relating to food and nutrition in pregnancy.

Methods: a qualitative study; Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 16 primigravid women to explore their approaches and preferences when accessing and engaging with pregnancy-related nutrition information online. Women who had accessed the Internet for pregnancy related nutrition and food information were recruited via snowball sampling from South East Queensland, Australia. Data were analysed in accordance with descriptive phenomenology.

Findings: food and nutrition information-seeking practices were highly varied but followed a similar overall pathway. Six broad themes were identified “triggers”, “access and navigation”, “appraisal”, “changes in searching frequency”, “preferred features” and “engagement with communication approaches”. Women preferred online sources that were easy to navigate and presented information clearly. Experience as well as fact based communication appeared to satisfy different informational needs.

Key conclusions and implications: women search for food and nutrition information online in similar ways to other pregnancy issues. Opportunity for engaging with women online regarding a range of food and nutrition topics may be limited to early in pregnancy unless prompted to via conversations with antenatal service providers. Health practitioners have a role to play in helping women source evidence-based web sites. There is opportunity for organisations with mandates to support women to optimise diet quality during pregnancy, to improve user experience building on key preferences identified in this study to increase appeal and engagement by pregnant women.

Introduction

Adequate nutrition has a vital role during pregnancy in maximising the health outcomes of the mother and infant (Abu-Saad and Fraser, 2010). An increased awareness of healthy eating can subsequently translate to improved eating habits for the mother (Huberty et al., 2013) and her family (McLeod et al., 2011; Szwajcer et al., 2007), promoting positive physical and mental health in the long term (Szwajcer et al., 2012) and minimising the incidence of chronic disease (Kunz and King 2007). Pregnant women, especially those in their first pregnancy, appear to have increased awareness regarding the concepts of healthy eating, and have been known to actively seek nutrition-related information (Szwajcer et al., 2007; Szwajcer et al., 2009) and use of the Internet in pregnancy is high (Gao et al., 2013; Grimes et al., 2014).

Pregnant women use the Internet to educate themselves before and

after antenatal appointments (Huberty et al., 2013), and to share experiences and seek support (Cohen and Raymond, 2011; Sherman and Greenfield, 2013). However the amount of information available is often overwhelming (Maher and Lowe 2015; Koh, and Rudd 2015). In addition, recent research suggests the accuracy of available nutrition information online is problematic (Storr, 2016). It is known that the presentation of information and user experience factors influence user engagement with information on the internet (Al-Maskari and Sanderson, 2010).

User experience features that appeal to perinatal women generally include central website for information, easy to read (Hearn et al., 2013) and web sites that provided regular updates related to stage of pregnancy (Bernhardt and Felter, 2004; Hearn et al., 2013). Information online is communicated in both narrative and paradigmatic forms. Narrative forms are based around story-telling and focus on personal experience, whereas paradigmatic forms focus on relating

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factual information and statistical evidence instructively (Hinyard and Kreuter, 2007). Narrative communication of general pregnancy information appears to provide emotional and social support for pregnant women and mothers (Cohen and Raymond, 2011; Lagan et al., 2010; Song et al., 2012) and paradigmatic information sources are important to pregnant women (Huberty et al., 2013; Lagan et al., 2010). At present, it is unclear how narrative and paradigmatic forms of communication and content features are used in a nutrition context and which pregnant women prefer. In addition, there is limited research into how pregnant women acquire food and nutrition information online, and limited work is available about the Australian experience.

Given the importance of food and nutrition in pregnancy, and the ubiquitous nature of the Internet as an information source, it is important to explore pregnant women's approaches and preferences regarding food and nutrition-related information when online. These insights are needed to better understand and address the food and nutrition information needs of pregnant women, and tailor support for constructive use of the Internet for informational support. Thus the aim of this study was to explore the approaches and preferences that Australian primigravid women (meaning no previous births) use when accessing and engaging with nutrition information online.

The objectives of the study were:

- To explore the online nutrition-related information seeking practices of primigravid women
- To investigate what food and nutrition web related features women prefer
- To explore what forms of communication (narrative or paradigmatic) pregnant women engage with and prefer when interacting with pregnancy nutrition-related information online

Methods

This qualitative exploratory study was based on descriptive phenomenology and borrows the techniques of constant comparison, data saturation and coding from grounded theory (Creswell, 2009; Liamputtong, 2010). Qualitative research design was considered appropriate for this study due to the exploratory nature of seeking to understand pregnant women's lived experiences of engaging with nutrition information online (Creswell, 2009; Liamputtong, 2010) and is consistent with a phenomenological approach (Lopez and Willis, 2004).

Participants and recruitment

Participants in this study were primigravid women at any stage of pregnancy, aged 18 years or older, had accessed the Internet during their pregnancy to search for pregnancy nutrition-related information, and could read and comprehend English. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit through community health centres, as well as work and social networks in south Queensland, Australia.

Table 1
Primary interview questions.

Objectives	Corresponding questions
Forms of communication utilised; Practices applied to access and engage online information	What food or nutrition-related searching or browsing online have you undertaken since becoming pregnant?
Practices applied to access and engage online information	How have you used the Internet to search for or obtain food and nutrition information during pregnancy? Can you recall some of the words you used when searching for food and nutrition-related information on the Internet? How have you found the quality of pregnancy food and nutrition-related information online?
Preferred web related features	Can you comment on the detail and level of explanation of food and nutrition-related pregnancy information online? Can you recall some of your preferred/most visited pregnancy web sites? [Favourite sites were located on a computer and questions were asked to prompt discussion of impressions (Bernhardt and Felter 2004) and preferences.]

Recruitment continued until the researchers perceived that data saturation was achieved (Seidman, 2013).

Written or verbal informed consent was obtained prior to the initiation of questions during interviews. Participants received a \$20 gift voucher at the conclusion of the interview as reimbursement for their time. Ethical approval (S/13/557) for the study was given by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the primary researcher's institutional facility.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants between May and August 2014. The interviews took place either in person in a private room at the participant's preferred location, or via skype or telephone where distance was an issue. The interviews took between 30–60 minutes each, and were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Interview questions (Table 1) were designed by the authors to answer the research questions which related directly to women's subjective experiences. The flow of questioning was informed by the focus group guide used by Bernhardt and Felter (2004) in their study of online general pregnancy information seeking. Interviews were facilitated by the primary researcher (CR) and followed a semi-structured framework of topic questions using a 'funnel' approach, which allowed for exploration of issues of interest and to clarify any ambiguities (Liamputtong, 2010). The interview questions were pilot tested on two multiparous women given both their accessibility to the researchers and to preserve all possible participants for the study. It was determined that women who had been pregnant would relate to the questions and could also provide feedback on the wording of questions. Topic questions were subsequently altered to enhance clarity of questions and flow (Gillham, 2000). The interviewer was a non-pregnant dietetic female honours student. Participant demographics were collected via questionnaire at the close of the interview.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and de-identified. NVivo 10 (NVivo 2012) was used for electronic coding and data management. Data immersion occurred concurrently to data collection in order to develop a better understanding of the responses and manage the quantity of data (Creswell, 2009; Liamputtong, 2010). Analysis of participant narratives focused on identifying the common features in participant experiences – a key feature in descriptive phenomenology (Lopez and Willis, 2004). In addition, the research questions were used as a guide. Information on websites accessed by participants was categorised as narrative and/or paradigmatic by the primary researcher. Key characteristics which were used for categorisation of sites included: 2) Referenced, fact based health information provided by government or credentialed health care provider (paradigmatic); 2) forums (narrative); 3) Domain name extension (e.g.com).

The first transcript was analysed inductively (Liamputtong, 2010). The codes that emerged from this transcript were then sorted into

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