

Information Needs and Behaviors of Women in Regards to Health

September 13, 2015

Women's health communities (I am using the plural because 'women' is not a monolithic category and differences in age, ethnicity, location, and socio-economic status affect both the context in which information is needed (Wathen & Harris, 2007) and the sources consulted for information (Bell, 2014)) serve health consumers who seek out resources as part of Everyday Life Information Seeking, defined as information concerns not related to employment (Savolainen, 2009). Women seek out health information in order to manage their own health and the health of their families (Wathen & Harris) and to take an active role in their health by seeking information both before and after visiting medical professionals as a way to supplement or better understand information provided by doctors (Warner & Procaccino, 2004, 2007).

The sources women consult in their health-information seeking include both formal and informal, and interpersonal and print resources. An example of a formal interpersonal resource would be a doctor, nurse, or other medical professional; an informal interpersonal resource could be a friend or family member; formal print resources include magazines, books, and websites produced by professionals, whereas web 2.0 content such as blogging and bulletin boards would be classified as an informal print resource (Warner and Proccaciono, 2004). In my preliminary research I am focusing on women's use of the internet in their search processes, as many of the communities I have identified function partly or solely online.

Different studies put the percentage of women using the internet to search for health information at different levels. Yoo & Robbins (2008) found that 80% of the married, white, well-educated women surveyed who used the internet in daily life also used it to search for health information, Warner and Procaccino (2004) found that 85% of the mostly white, college-educated, suburban respondents were likely to use the web as a source of health information. Rowlands, Loxton, Dobson, and Mishra (2015) reported that 43.45% of young Australian women used the internet for health information, and that experiencing stigmatizing or embarrassing health conditions increased the likelihood of doing so. Stigmatizing conditions were cited by Shifren, Johannes, Monz, Russo, Bennett, and Rosen (2009) as a reason for turning to the internet as well; they found 63.7% of women seeking anonymous help for distressing sexual problems via the internet or other print media felt at least moderate embarrassment, as compared to 43% embarrassment rate of women seeking formal care for the same issues. Confidentiality was also cited by Wathen and Harris (2007, 2004) as a reason rural women turn to the internet for health information, as well as a sense of stoicism and ownership of their health care. Bell (2014) reports that women of low socio-economic status struggling with infertility are less likely to use the internet for research than infertile women of high socio-economic status; these results cannot be extrapolated to other conditions, however, as Kim (2015) found that low income patients are just as proactive at searching for health information online as higher income patients, even though their general rates of internet usage are lower overall. Given the variance in behaviors among different populations of women, Williamson's ecological model of Everyday Life Information Seeking, in which information seekers' social location is considered a factor in their information searching behavior, should be considered in explanations of the difference in internet usage rates (Savolainen, 2009).

Despite the high rates of internet usage, most women reported typing key words into search engines as their main strategy for finding information online and expressed ambivalence over their ability to find useful and reliable information (Warner & Procaccino, 2004, 2007). This fits with Bates theory of berry-picking, in which users do not have a strategic search plan, and Zipf's principle of least effort that explains that the same search processes get used over and over again due to familiarity even when they are not the most effective (Stevens, 2014). The mixed feelings women have about the value of the information they have found can also be conceptualized as part of the six stage Information Searching Process, where users may feel confusion, frustration and doubt during the exploration stage (Kuhlthau, 1991; Warner & Procaccino, 2004).

References

- Bell, A. (2014). "I think about Oprah" Social class differences in sources of health information. *Qualitative Health Research*, 24(4), 506-516.
- Harris, R., & Wathen, N. (2007). "If My Mother Was Alive I'd Probably Have Called Her.": Women's Search for Health Information in Rural Canada. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 67-79.
- Kim, Y. (2015). Is seeking health information online different from seeking general information online? *Journal of Information Science*, 41(2), 228-241.
- Rowlands, I., Loxton, D., Dobson, A., & Mishra, G. (2015). Seeking health information online: Association with young Australian women's physical, mental, and reproductive health. *Journal of medical Internet research*, 17(5), e120. doi:10.2196/jmir.4048
- Savolainen, R. (2009). Everyday life information seeking. In *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, (pp1780-1789. doi: 10.1081/E-ELIS3-120043920
- Shifren, J., Johannes, C., Monz, B., Russo, P., Bennett, L., & Rosen, R. (2009). Help-seeking behavior of women with self-reported distressing sexual problems. *Journal of Women's Health*, 18(4), 461-468.
- Stevens, M. (Producer) (2014, May 30). Information behavior [Video lecture]. Retrieved from <http://hanakoa.sjsu.edu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer/Default.aspx?id=bae8d01c-9206-4ea3-ba6c-151afb3f6285>
- Warner, D., & Procaccino, J. D. (2007). Women seeking health information: distinguishing the web user. *Journal of Health Communication*, 12(8), 787-814.
- Warner, D., & Procaccino, J. D. (2004). Toward wellness: Women seeking health information. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 55(8), 709-730.
- Wathen, C., & Harris, R. (2007). "I try to take care of it myself." How rural women search for health information. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(5), 639-651.
- Yoo, E., & Robbins, L. (2008). Understanding middle-aged women's health information seeking on the web: A theoretical approach. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 59(4), 577-590.

Published by Lucy, in Uncategorized.

One reply

Michael Stephens says:
September 20, 2015 at 11:09 am



Nice job pulling together peer reviewed pieces. the RUSQ article is a good example of LIS-related user behavior research that will serve you well. be sure to explore article reference lists for more useful pieces.