Seeking Health Information on Social Media: A Perspective of Trust, Self-Determination, and Social Support

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ABSTRACT

In the past few years, social media has changed the ways that health seekers seek health information. However, despite the tremendous growth of social media applications in the health-care industry, trust is still among the biggest challenges for social media health services in gaining greater acceptance. Drawn from previous literature on self-determination theory, social support, and trust, this study investigates people’s intentions to seek health-information on social media. The authors carefully selected a sample from Italy with subjects who already had experience in seeking health information on social media. The empirical results show that informational support, emotional support, and the satisfaction of people’s autonomy and relatedness needs play an important role through trust in influencing people’s health-information-seeking intentions on social media. This study is among the first to adopt the theories of self-determination, social support, and trust to investigate people’s intentions to seek health information on social media.

KEYWORDS
Emotional Support, Health-Information-Seeking, Informational Support, Online Health Information, Social Media, Trust

INTRODUCTION

In the past ten years social media has deeply changed people’s life style (Zhan, Sun, Wang and Zhang, 2016). Many individuals not only use social media for social networking, they also use it for seeking health-care information. According to the Health Tracking Survey by the Pew Research Center (Chen, Hou & Zhao, 2016), seeking health information is an activity that has remained consistently popular on social media in the past seven years. Nearly one in three persons has discussed health-related issues on social media (Honigman, 2015). The health-related topics that individuals frequently search on social media include specific diseases or medical problems, certain medical treatments or procedures, weight control, health insurance, food safety or recalls, drug safety or recalls, advertised drugs, medical test results, aging, pregnancy, childbirth, and health-care cost (Fox & Duggan, 2013). More than 40 percent of consumers say that information found via social media affects the way they deal with their health (Honigman, 2015).

Nonetheless, despite the proliferation of health information-seeking activities in social media, several issues remain. One of the biggest issues is that a considerable percentage of individuals still don’t fully trust the health information from social media (Antheunis, Tates, & Nieboer, 2013). Trust
is widely considered as an important pre-condition for the adoption of any electronic services (Belkadi, Jong, Steehouder, 2010). Due to the fact that people are more sensitive to potential risks associated with health-decisions (Li, Wang, Lin & Hajli, 2016), trust plays an even more significant role in the context of online health service. Prior studies have indicated that peoples’ trust of online health information is a major factor that influences their follow-up health information seeking, discussing and sharing activities (Lin, Zhang, Song & Omori, 2016). After all, both health-care professionals and lay users can post health related information on social media, which often makes the health-related information on social media inconsistent, misleading, and not trustworthy (Lin, Zhang, Song & Omori, 2012). Based on a national survey of 3,014 adults living in the U.S., one in five people finds the health information online is different from their clinicians’ opinion (Fox, Duggan, Rainie, & Purcell, 2013). Individuals usually do not have corresponding health expertise to judge the quality of online health information. In such an uncertain situation, individuals need to seek assurance for their beliefs. Therefore, trust beliefs are important because they help individuals overcome perceptions of uncertainty and risk (McKnight et al., 2002). If individuals trust online health information, they probably believe that online health information is of high quality and will probably seek online health information again. Therefore, it is important to understand the role of trust beliefs in supporting individuals’ seeking online health information.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Health-information-seeking behaviors are closely related to the behaviors of information searches. Information search activities satisfy individuals’ cognitive and affective needs during processing tasks such as decision-making, problem solving, and knowledge generation (Wilson, 1999). Therefore, information search activities often precede a decision action (e.g., a decision to use a particular health product or service) (Cox, 1967). The primary rationale for searching for information is to alleviate uncertainty about the decision (Hansen, 1972).

Information seeking in the health context is an important component of coping with illness and health-related uncertainty. This has been the case since long before the Internet era. Before the Internet, physicians held almost exclusive access to health-care information or expert health knowledge. Apart from health-care providers, the external sources for individuals seeking health information were limited to local experts and mass media. In this period, the study of information-seeking behaviors often focused more on the health information seekers’ internal attributes including gender, social status, demographics, attitudes (Kassulke, Stenner-Day, Coory, & Ring, 1993), health-related knowledge, locus of control beliefs, and the value they placed on health (Wallston, Maides, & Wallston, 1976). Research considered health information seeking mainly as a component of the decision-making process, and it focused mostly on uncertainty.

In the late 1990s the Internet quickly became a major source of health information for the public at large (Cline & Haynes, 2001). The Internet enjoys many advantages in providing health information. First, it is immediate, convenient, and comprehensive. It affords health seekers instantaneous access to an incredible amount of health information and a variety of perspectives on the same health topics (Cline & Haynes, 2001). Second, it is anonymous. It allows health seekers to ask awkward, sensitive, or detailed questions without the risk of facing judgment, scrutiny, or stigma (Cotten & Gupta, 2004). Third, it decreases the inequalities associated with health-care provision and decision-making (Silience, Briggs, Harris, & Fishwick, 2007). It serves to disseminate health information to marginalized groups (e.g., uninsured, low-income, less educated, or minority individuals) and to empower health-care consumers. Using the health information obtained on the Internet, patients or health seekers can do a better job in self-care (Antheunis et al., 2013). In fact, prior studies suggest that online health information seekers are healthier than offline groups (Cotten & Gupta, 2004).

Despite its many advantages, seeking health information on the Internet is not without disadvantages. Although the Internet acts as an equalizer of health information, it also creates a digital
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