Health Searching Behaviour of Citizens From Countries in the Middle East and North African Region

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ABSTRACT

Most research studies in health information searching behaviour are conducted in developed countries. Little is known with strong governmental support in healthcare initiatives it is interesting to take note of the general information searching practices of citizens in the Middle East and North African region. In this article, a questionnaire was distributed in a university setting in the United Arab Emirates. Sixty participants consisting of citizens from MENA countries participated in this study. The results indicate citizens from the Middle East and North African region do perform online health searches. However, an equal number of citizens use books and mass media to obtain health information. When online methods are utilised, working adults who have more years of experience searching for health information tend to use more medical type search engines. Undergraduate students were generally new to the process of online health information searching. Online health searching in the MENA region is more of a social and educational activity rather than a private activity.

KEYWORDS

Health Search, Laypeople, Middle-East Region, Online, Search Behaviour

1. INTRODUCTION

Describing online health information searching of laypeople is a popular genre of study. For over a decade, researchers have described the information search behaviour of laypeople based on different settings. One of the earliest research studies in relation to the usage of technology in healthcare amongst laypeople is the process of interactive health information communication (Robinson et al. 1998). This is a process where medical professionals and non-medical professionals actively engaged in health-based interaction using technology to provide a holistic approach to give, receive, guide and support health related issues. Thereafter, the focus was on the characteristics of the query entered by the user when performing a health search (Spink et al., 2004, Wang, 2002; Zeng et al., 2002). Similarly, other researchers analysed typical search challenges experienced by laypeople (Can and Baykal, 2007, Eysenbach and Kohler, 2002, Yang et al. 2011 and Inthiran et al., 2012). Other research

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studies go beyond general analysis of search behaviour by taking into account specific context of a health search task such as task difficulty (Zhang et al. 2012 and Inthiran et al., 2012). Newer research studies focused on the influence of gender on trustworthiness evaluation (Rowley, Johnson and Shaffi, 2015) and post search sentiments (Inthiran, 2016). Research studies pertaining to the online health information searching amongst particular groups of health searchers (Jamal et al., 2015 and Inthiran and Soyiri, 2015) are also on the rise. Thus, the genre of online health information searching has remained popular and relevant over many years.

Literature in relation to online health information searching from developed countries are well documented. Results of the Pew Research Internet Project survey indicates more than half of American adults have used the Internet to search for medical information (Fox and Duggan, 2013). Most American adults commenced a health search using search engines such as Google, Bing and Yahoo. However, others used specialised medical domains such as WebMD; Wikipedia and social networking sites are also utilised as a source to obtain online health information. A health search was conducted mostly for a personal health condition or on behalf of someone else (Fox and Duggan, 2013). A research study conducted in Australia indicates Australian adults over the age of 50 years actively seek health related information online but only 32% expressed willingness to receive unsolicited health information via the Internet (Lam and Lam, 2012). In a survey conducted in Europe, results indicate the most active health searchers are users between the ages of 30-44 years of age. Majority of health searchers use search engines such as Google or Yahoo and whilst some used specialised medical domains (Higgins et al. 2011).

Research studies in relation to health information searching in the Asian continent is also growing. In Hong Kong, health searchers tend to be highly education young females. Medical related sites are used most often and the type of health search performed ranged from women and men’s health to chronic diseases. Over 60% found health information found online useful and 44% were unsure of the reliability of information found online (Yan, 2010). In Malaysia, general search engines are utilised to perform a health search. Generally, clinical-type searches are performed (Inthiran, et al, 2013). In Singapore, health surfers looked for information on specific disease however frequently located unreliable information or poor quality information (Rao et al, 2012). On the other hand, South East Asian parents primarily use Google to obtain health information for their child (Inthiran and Soyiri, 2015).

However, information of the same nature from the Middle East and North African region (MENA) is limited. One research study conducted in relation to online health is an assessment of online health information for Arabic sites conducted based on collaborative efforts by the Health on The Net Institute and King Saud Bin Abdulaziz University for Health Science (Al Huziah et al., 2009). The assessment process was conducted by health professionals. The next research study conducted in the MENA region describes the use of online health information amongst diabetic patients in Saudi Arabia (Jamal et al. 2015). As such there is a dearth of information on typical online health searching behaviour of laypeople from the MENA region.

Describing health information searching practices in the MENA region is of particular interest for two reasons. The MENA region, particularly, Saudi Arabia is frequently at the centre of attention due to the middle-east respiratory syndrome virus (The Economist Pomegranate, 2014, WHO Media Centre 2014 and WHO Programmes, 2017). The World Health Organisation (WHO) indicates the main cause for the sudden influx of the middle-east respiratory syndrome cases is because of breaches in recommended preventative and control measures instituted amongst health workers advocated by the WHO (World Health Organization, 2013 and The Economist Pomegrante, 2014). As of the 16th of May 2014, there have been 621 cases of MERS-CoV infections and 188 deaths reported globally (Centres of Disease Control and Prevention, d.u). Adequate and accurate general knowledge on healthcare prevention amongst health workers and citizens of the MENA region is crucial in limiting
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