



Dissertation Defense

Doctor of Philosophy in Library and Information Science

“Health Consumers’ Knowledge Learning in Online Health Information Seeking”

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Abstract:

Online Health Information Seeking (OHIS) has become pervasive with critical impacts on consumers' health. OHIS is, by nature, a learning-oriented behavior, and knowledge learning is a critical component and outcome of consumers' OHIS. On the other hand, studies in the area of Search as Learning (SAL) have demonstrated that learning is a common phenomenon in the information-seeking process. Therefore, this dissertation links the related models and prior studies from OHIS and SAL to propose a conceptual framework called Health Information Search As Learning (HearSAL), and conducts a systematic study to understand what, how, and how well health consumers can search and learn in online health information seeking, particularly for three increasing levels of learning objectives: Understand, Analyze and Evaluate. Two representative health consumer groups: laypeople and cancer patients, are chosen in this dissertation study. Following the conceptual framework, four sub-studies are conducted with emphasis on different dimensions of health consumers' search as learning in OHIS, including: 1) a user study with laypeople that examines the method dimension (e.g., search behaviors and source selection), 2) an analysis of ovarian cancer online health community that reveals the information dimension (e.g., types and amount of information), 3) interviews with laypeople, and 4) interviews with ovarian cancer patients and caregivers. The two complement interviews highlight the outcomes of OHIS. Major results demonstrate that 1) health consumers' search as learning behaviors and sources vary by learning objectives, and the variation is affected by the severity of health conditions; 2) Analyze is the most prevalent learning objective in the online health community, while the amount of informational support is the largest in the Evaluate level; 3) Though consumers' prior knowledge of the Understand level is the highest, compared to higher levels, consumers still tend to achieve the most knowledge gain in the learning of the Understand level; and 4) Receiving more informational support drives consumers to increase the level of learning objectives. This dissertation makes theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions.