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PRESCRIPTIONS FOR HEALTH ADVICE ONLINE

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01HRS WEDNESDAY 7TH MARCH 2007

When searching for health advice online, consumers often reject websites with high quality medical information in favour of those with a human touch, according to new research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Faced with a minefield of information of variable quality, health consumers subject websites to an initial weeding-out process that will eliminate most NHS and drug company websites from the search within a matter of seconds.

The study, carried out by Professor Pamela Briggs at Northumbria University, together with colleagues at both Northumbria and Sheffield Universities, explored how health consumers decide whether or not to trust the information and advice they find online.

The researchers observed the search strategies of people who wanted to find specific health information and advice (about hypertension, menopause and HRT, the MMR vaccine, or generally improving their health and fitness) and found that many websites were dismissed at quite amazing speeds.

“One thing that really put people off was advertising, so people clicked off drug company websites straight away”, explains Professor Briggs. “Generally, the medical information on drug company sites is very accurate but people question the authors’ motivation and agenda. The issue of impartiality is quite crucial in building trust.”

The NHS websites fared little better. Often these were rejected because the first page participants were directed to was a portal or had too much background or generic content. “People don’t have the patience to scroll through pages in order to find something useful. Ease of access is so important”, says Professor Briggs.



Even if a site makes a favourable first impression, it is unlikely to keep our attention if there are no personal stories that we can relate to. People are looking for advice from like-minded people and are drawn to sites such as the charity based DIPEX and ProjectAWARE where they can read about the experiences of other people who have the same problems and concerns.

Despite rejecting many of the more 'reputable' sites, participants in this study did manage to find information of reasonable quality. But Professor Briggs warns that our searching strategy has the potential to let us down:

The tendency to particularly trust sites that contain contributions from like-minded peers could have dangerous effects on some groups of consumers, such as those with anorexia, by reinforcing unhealthy behaviour patterns, she explains.

The researchers have developed a set of guidelines for designing engaging and trustworthy sites and have shown that trustworthy sites have more influence on consumer behaviour.

They found that moderate to heavy drinkers who viewed trustworthy websites describing the health risks involved with alcohol consumption reduced their alcohol intake more than those who viewed the same information on a site with untrustworthy features such as adverts or links to pharmaceutical companies.

But the most important advice for those trying to promote health information on-line is to use engaging stories about people with similar experiences. Professor Briggs concludes:

"The great strength of the internet is that you can find people who have had the same problem that you have and see how they have coped with it – to forget about that, or to act as if it's not happening, is missing the point."



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NOTES FOR EDITORS:

1. The research project '[Bodies Online – Information and Advice Seeking in the Health and Fitness Domain](#)' was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The researchers, Professor Pamela Briggs, Dr Lesley Fishwick, and Dr Elizabeth Sillence, are at the School of Psychology and Sport Sciences, Northumbria University. Dr Peter Harris is at the Department of Psychology, Sheffield University.
2. Methodology. The first phase of this study involved observing the search strategies of people interested in finding health information on the menopause, hypertension, or improving general health. Participants attended four sessions at an internet café and also kept diaries of their experience with online health information searches for 6 months. In the second phase, almost two thousand health consumers completed an online questionnaire about their impressions of health websites. Finally, the researchers used their findings to design trustworthy and untrustworthy sites containing information about the health risks associated with alcohol. The sites were tested on 80 participants who had expressed concern about their alcohol intake.
3. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the UK's largest funding agency for research and postgraduate training relating to social and economic issues. It provides independent, high quality, relevant research to business, the public sector and Government. The ESRC's planned total expenditure in 2006-07 is £169 million. At any one time the ESRC supports over 4,000 researchers and postgraduate students in academic institutions and research policy institutes. More at <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk>
4. ESRC Society Today offers free access to a broad range of social science research and presents it in a way that makes it easy to navigate and saves users valuable time. As well as bringing together all ESRC-funded research and key online resources such as the Social Science Information Gateway and the UK Data Archive, non-ESRC resources are included, for example the Office for National Statistics. The portal provides access to early findings and research summaries, as well as full texts and original datasets through integrated search facilities. More at <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk>



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5. The ESRC confirms the quality of its funded research by evaluating research projects through a process of peer review. This research has been graded as 'outstanding'.