

Health Information Use During Pregnancy

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Purpose of this paper

The internet is a popular choice for health information seeking (Rowley, Johnson, & Sbaffi, 2017). While some researchers have raised concerns over the quality of information online and the lack of quality standards (Ghasemaghaei & Hassanein, 2015; Metzger, 2007; Savolainen, 2011), health information-seeking is generally viewed as a positive activity (Lambert & Loiselle, 2007). The internet provides convenient, cost-effective and private access to a fast body of medical information and patient support (Quinn, Bond, & Nugent, 2017; Sbaffi & Zhao, 2019). Researchers have argued that this availability has helped to encourage the move "*from physician-as-expert to patient-as-consumer in healthcare encounters*" (Gage & Panagakis, 2012, p.444).

Despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of understanding how individuals process and use the information that they find, this is an area which has received less attention in the literature than other aspects of human information behaviour (Case & O'Connor, 2016; Pluye et al., 2019). It remains an area that is frequently referenced but is rarely explicated; instead, it is left as an ambiguous appendix to information seeking (Savolainen, 2009). One of the difficulties for researchers lies in the inconsistent and interchangeable use of terminology, examples of terms used in the literature include: information use, information processing, knowledge utilisation, information utilisation, information use behaviour and information use outcome (Choo, Bergeron, Detlor, & Heaton, 2008; Kari, 2010; Spink & Currier, 2006; Todd, 1999).

The focus of this research is on the outcomes of information seeking; how individuals use the information that they find and the effect of this use (Kari, 2010). As such, this study adopts the term, information use outcome to describe the result of information seeking. This exploratory research aims to provide more insight into this process by examining the information use outcomes of women during pregnancy.

Design/methodology/approach

Data was collected using episodic interviews conducted with twelve women who reported on their information-behaviour during pregnancy. The sample included a mixture of first-time mothers and women who had children already. The women were recruited in their second trimester. Interviews lasted on average 45 minutes. We choose episodic interviews because individuals store and recall experiences *"in the form of narrative-episodic and semantic knowledge"* (Flick, Fischer, Neuber, Schwartz, & Walter, 2003, p.545). Context is essential for narrative-episodic knowledge as it is linked to actual experiences, whereas semantic knowledge is more abstract and based on assumptions and generalisations (Flick et al., 2003; Uwe, 2010).

Participants in the study were asked to recall examples of information-seeking episodes. Information-seeking episodes are periods of time where individuals seek information to achieve a goal or solve a problem. Participants were asked to share all examples of information seeking related to their pregnancy; the information source types were not restricted. Information seeking episodes are bounded by the tasks that the information-seeker is trying to solve (Belkin, 1993). Participants were asked to describe the needs which drove their searches, the information sources used and to detail the outcome of these episodes.

Findings

The information use outcomes described during the interviews were coded and then categorised based on two criteria, internal versus external use and positive versus negative impact, Figure 1. Internal use are outcomes which occur in the mind of the user, such as cognitive or affective changes. Internal use has been described as a 'black box' because it is not directly observable; therefore, researchers rely on information-seekers to explicitly state any cognitive or affective changes they experience. (Spink & Cole, 2006). External use involves observable physical actions, such as taking medication. The variety of internal and external outcomes described by participants was similar in this study, this may speak to the effectiveness of episodic interviews for this type of research.

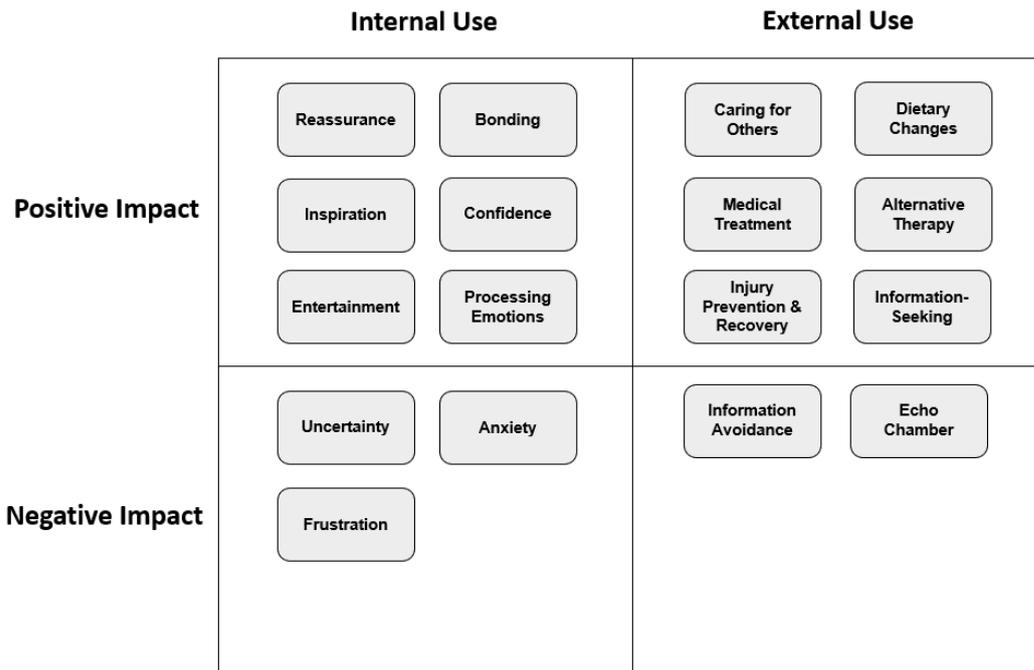


Figure 1 Positive and Negative Information Use Outcomes

As evident in Figure 1, the participants described a greater variety of positive information use outcomes compared to negative information use outcomes. However, anxiety and uncertainty were the second and third most mentioned outcomes. This highlights the significance of negative outcomes and the fact that they cannot be ignored.

Research limitations/implications

Many of the information-seeking episodes had multiple rounds of searches which resulted in more than one information use outcome. In some cases, there was a cascade of outcomes with one leading to another. For example, negative internal use outcomes were associated with renewed information seeking. These connections are not currently visible in Figure 1, and this is something which requires further research.

Practical implications

We contend that an improved understanding of the impact of information resources could aid designers and health providers to create more useful resources that would better meet the needs of information-seekers.

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