

FACTORS INFLUENCING INFORMATION SEARCH AND SATISFACTION ON AN INTERNATIONAL E-HEALTH WEBSITE. A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY.

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has become an utmost important source of information, including health-related information. The Internet is also a global medium and eHealth websites often target a multi-national audience. Despite the diversity of their audience, information providers aim to create a website that leaves users satisfied and encourages them to return. Content, structure and design of a website are potential factors that can contribute towards this goal.

This study examines, by means of a traditional information search model, information search processes on the Internet, analyzing data of respondents with different cultural backgrounds. We look at how satisfied users are with their search results and which factors affect user satisfaction. The model combines three traditional information search frameworks: the cost-benefit analysis framework, risk reduction strategies, and the expectation-confirmation paradigm.

We consider the user's cultural background as one possible determinant of the search process. Data from the GLOBE project is used to conceptualize culture. This study focuses on Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) and Performance Orientation (PO), whose values are attributed to each respondent based on the country of origin.

As for method issues, our study is based on data from multiple sources, mainly retrieved from a real online-setting. Data was collected by means of a questionnaire posted on a widely frequented multilingual e-Health website and by using the corresponding logfiles. The final sample consisted of 107 participants from 27 countries/regions.

Results regarding information search behavior online correspond partially to results from previous research regarding "offline" information search behavior, but emphasize the role of culture. In line with previous results (Gemünden 1985), data suggest that the perceived risk regarding a specific health question determines the amount of search. While controlling for other factors (quality of health care system), perceived risk is mainly affected by the user's cultural background: The degree of UA is negatively related to the degree of perceived risk. This finding emphasizes the strong role of stable cultural values as opposed to socio-economic variables.

Results also indicate that the amount of search is not a determinant of user satisfaction. User satisfaction is determined by a user's expected benefits of search which in turn is affected by another cultural dimension: performance orientation. Expected benefits are negatively related with satisfaction of search results as predicted by the expectation-confirmation paradigm. Thus, users from low PO countries are more likely to be satisfied due to their lower expectancies. The integration of control variables also indicated that those effects hold even after controlling for the impact of website experience and language skills. However, such expectations do not influence search behavior.

Furthermore, search efforts do not influence satisfaction which is similar to the results presented by Punj and Staelin (1983) and supports the idea that search activities are not an end in itself but rather a means for obtaining helpful information. Perceptual measures such as information quality and search efficiency turn out to be the main determinants for satisfaction with search results. Taken together, the results indicate the impact of perceptions rather than actual behavior (i.e., number of clicks) as main determinant of satisfaction with online search. The findings further reveal that user satisfaction increases with perceived information quality and search process efficiency.

Culture-related findings confirm first of all that website adaptations by country are justified. For information providers, insight into these issues is helpful in order to improve their websites which in turn ensures high usage numbers, high user satisfaction and commercial benefits. If low UA countries are targeted, risk-reducing actions should be considered, e.g. regarding the amount of information offered on the website. With regard to PO, results suggest that targeting a website on low PO-countries is more likely to create a successful website as users are more likely to be satisfied and to return for future use. An interpretation from the opposite point of view leads to the conclusion that websites targeted at high PO countries need to be created with more care as users are more demanding and more difficult to satisfy.

References Available Upon Request.