

HONOURS BACHELOR OF SCIENCE (2008)
MCMASTER UNIVERSITY
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Health Anxiety and the Effects of the Internet

AUTHOR: Neha Khorana

SUPERVISORS: Dr. Randi McCabe and Dr. Karen Rowa

NUMBER OF PAGES: vii, 21

Abstract

In this study we observed the effects of online health information-seeking on health anxiety and negative affect and whether it exacerbates or alleviates these emotions. Furthermore, we are trying to determine whether different types of health-relevant information can elicit varying levels of anxiety and negative affect in high-anxious people relative to those with low levels of health anxiety. We hope to better understand if these health-anxious individuals spend a greater duration of time on the Internet when reading health information than those who report lower anxiety. It was hypothesized that high health-anxious participants who read the high-threat scenario should report highest levels, whereas low health-anxious participants presented with the low-threat scenario should report the lowest. Lastly, high health-anxious individuals will also spend a greater amount of time reading about health information on the Internet.

Sixty undergraduate students from McMaster University were recruited to participate. In this four-phase study, participants supplied us with multiple self-reports of their current anxiety and mood throughout the study that was compared with their baseline levels. The study has a 2x2 design consisting of a total of four conditions within the two categories of health anxiety level and threat group. Within the health anxiety level category, an individual can be high or low anxiety and under the threat group category, a participant can receive a high health or low health threat scenario.

Participants were asked to complete a Positive and Negative Affect Scale along with a 100-point anxiety rating throughout three phases of the study: baseline, after reading the high/low threat scenario, and lastly after reading health-related information on the Mayo Clinic website.

Results suggest that all participants had an increase in anxiety after reading the scenario, but no change in anxiety after spending time on the Internet. Furthermore, there was no main effect of threat group or health anxiety level on anxiety levels over time. In terms of negative affect, all participants showed a significant increase from phase one to two, particularly those who read the low-threat scenario as they showed the greatest increase in negative feelings. Furthermore, those in the low threat-high health anxiety condition showed the greatest increase, whereas individuals in the high threat-high health anxiety condition showed no increase. Surprisingly, all participants across all conditions showed a decrease in negative affect after spending time on the Internet. Lastly, all participants spent the same duration of time on the Internet with no effect of threat group or health anxiety on the results.

The results observed in this study are helpful to physicians and therapists alike, as it suggests that negative affect can be decreased for individuals seeking health information over the Internet. Moreover, our data indicates that low-threat health information can elicit a greater increase in negative affect than high-threat health information, which is important when attempting to understand triggers of high health-anxiety.