

Medical blogs on the Web:

Examining the implications of blogs genre on the perceived credibility of its content

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Abstract

This study intended to observe the perceived credibility of blogs and the information they contain as regarded by information users of the web.

Since reliability is a wide and general term, we focused on aspects of perceived credibility of the web in general, blog credibility, the credibility of the blog author and the blog post itself. The contents of the blog posts relate to the domain of medicine – conventional and alternative.

Six separate blogs were set up, belonging to three genders: Two personal blogs authored by a women and a man, two expert blogs authored by a women and a man, a blog of non-profit organizations (NPO) and a blog belonging to a corporation. Each blog published two posts on coping with diabetes, one in domain of conventional medicine, the other in the domain of alternative medicine. All the 361 participants had been recruited by means of blogs and social networks. Every participants had to read an alternative medicine post and conventional medicine post to different genres. Than all the participants were requested to fill in a series of forms that had been validated, for each of the posts they read. In addition, every participant was requested to answer an open question on his general impressions concerning each one of the posts.

The research procedure revealed that medical information, and more than it – medicinal information are domains which make users suspicious, a phenomenon which tends to reduce the perceived credibility of the contents. Despite this fact, this is one of the most popular areas of interest on the Internet, particularly in blogs. We also noticed that the perceived credibility of information often depends upon the design rather than the contents. We learned that it is easier for users to recommend information on alternative medicine which is obviously less official, rather than information related to conventional medicine.

The results of this study reveal a suspicious of criticizing towards several aspects of information, acquired from blogs. It seems that this suspicious attitude towards several aspects of information, acquired from blogs. At the same time there is constant growth in the use of blogs. It seems that suspicious attitude is utilized as a means of tackling uncertainty about information reliability, that stems from the eagerness to use blog information.

The survey results lead to the possibility that Israeli users are apparently more skeptical than non-Israeli users. Since our study does not deal with cultural differences, this issue should be further examined in a follow-up study to understand cultural differences between Israeli and non-Israeli populations in the domain.

We assume that the "advanced" age of our study participants (average age 39) could be the main reasons to the multitude of statements defined as "suspicions" towards various aspects of the involved posts. We assume that the relatively "old" age of our participants having rich life experience, led to an attitude which was both more skeptical and more suspicious than observed in other studies. Possibly our participants were

less familiar with the Internet than younger people in other studies, and this generated initial "hostility".

We hope that the conclusions from our research will prove helpful to medical blogs – from the genre of personal blogs all the way to genre of blogs of corporations and NGOs – to compile the information published in the blogs in a more suitable method, in order to raise perceived credibility, while assuring that the code of ethics of the medical blogs are fully respected.

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