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Gender Differences in Online Messages Among Cancer Patients

Trine Andersen, Annette Jeneson, Cornelia M. Ruland

Center for Shared Decisionmaking and Nursing Research, Rikshospitalet-Radiumhospitalet Medical Center, Oslo, Norway

Abstract

While previous research on online patient discussion groups has provided insights into patients' information and communication needs, we still know relatively little about whether women and men use online discussion groups differently and, if so, in what ways they differ. In this study we explored gender differences in messages submitted to online support groups in WebChoice, an internet support system for breast- and prostate cancer patients. Both men and women often shared personal illness experiences and they were equally supportive to each other, but women made use of online discussion groups considerably more frequently than men. Men were more information seeking and less information giving than women, and they were more thankful in their responses.

Keywords:

Online discussion groups, gender differences, cancer

Introduction

There is a widespread use of discussion groups for patients with different diseases on the Internet, and a few studies have analyzed information needs and message types posted in online support groups. However, little is still known about gender differences in the use of online discussion groups. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore gender differences in messages submitted to online support groups that are part of the WebChoice application, an online support system for breast- and prostate cancer patients [1]. WebChoice allows patients to monitor symptoms over time, and provides access to evidence-based self-management options tailored to their reported symptoms. It also provides a communication area where patients can ask questions to a clinical nurse specialist and exchange experiences with other cancer patients in anonymous discussion groups. This study is part of a larger ongoing randomized clinical trial that evaluates effects of WebChoice access on patient outcomes. Each participant is followed up for one year. The experimental group in the trial has unlimited access to a disease specific support group as well as a mixed support group for both breast- and prostate cancer patients.

Methods

We examined all forum postings from 43 women and 31 men undergoing treatment for breast- or prostate cancer who logged on to WebChoice at least once between March - October 2006 (constituting 71% of study participants in the experimental group with access to WebChoice). There were 355 forum postings that were coded according to response categories in Klemm et al's coding scheme [2] as listed in Table 2. Each posting was coded under one to three response categories, dependent on the number of category types within the same posting (e.g. the participant was sharing personal experiences as well as seeking information). All postings were coded independently by two of the authors (AJ and TA) with an inter-rater agreement of 98%. Uncertainties were resolved through discussion.

Results

Participation in the online support groups

As seen in Table 1 below, more women made use of the internet support system compared to men. Women also participated considerably more in the online support groups than men, and they submitted more postings.

Table 1: Gender differences in number of forum postings

	Male	Female
Subjects logged on to *WebChoice*	31 (42%)	43 (58%)
Total and average # of postings	66	289
# of subjects submitting posting(s)	9 (29%)	25 (58%)
Average # of postings pr subject who submitted postings	7,44	11,52

Type of messages in the forum postings

Table 2 shows that personal experiences, such as telling about their illness and treatment history, was the most frequently used message type for both men and women, which is consistent with other studies [2]. Contrary to findings reported by Klemm et. al [2], women in our study were more information giving (e.g. sharing personal knowledge with others and giving advice) than men, while men were more information seeking (e.g. asking others

about their experiences). Both gender groups were equally supportive of each other, but men were more often thankful in their responses than women.

Table 2 - Gender Differences in Response categories

	Male	Female
Personal experiences	46 (70%)	220 (76%)
Information giving	8 (12%)	64 (22%)
Information seeking	19 (29%)	53 (18%)
Support	12 (18%)	49 (17%)
Thanks	14 (21%)	16 (6%)

Discussion and conclusion

This study revealed interesting gender differences in messages submitted by breast cancer patients compared to prostate cancer patients. Considering that breast cancer treatment is more standardized than treatment for prostate cancer, however, the finding that men were more information seeking and less information giving than women might be related to the diagnosis as well as potential gender differences in communication style. More research on online communication among patients with less gender specific diagnoses is needed to explore this further.

Further research is also needed to explore the extent to which men and women passively participate in the online support groups by 'lurking' i.e. reading the postings but not actively participating themselves.

Another important issue to address in future research is to look at which topics patients bring up for discussion in different types of communication arenas, for example online support groups versus traditional support groups. Since online discussion groups allow anonymity, participants might address concerns that are important to them but too embarrassing to discuss face to face with others. Not only can participation in an online discussion group provide opportunities for discussion of more sensitive issues, it can also allow participants to distance themselves more to certain participants or topics than what is "socially acceptable" in traditional, face to face support group discussions, where it is expected that all participants share and listen to other participants' experiences and fears.

While certain barriers to participate in discussion networks might be fewer and the availability provided by the Internet better compared to traditional support groups, many patients no doubt prefer talking to someone face to face. One reason for our interest in exploring gender differences in messages submitted in the WebChoice system is to increase our knowledge about and awareness of who participates in these discussion groups, who don't, and for what reasons. If our goal is to provide systems for communication about health related problems that are useful for everyone, we should be attentive to differences in preferences and aim to offer a wide enough variety of options for communication in order that it can be tailored to the needs of each patient. It is obvious that these types of research goals require a broader investigation than the current exploration, and some logical next steps in this research area would be to ask why fewer men participate in online discussion groups compared to women and whether the differences observed here are true also of communication/ participation in traditional support groups.

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Address for correspondence

Cornelia M. Ruland,
Center for Shared Decision Making and Nursing Research,
Rikshospitalet-Radiumhospitalet HF,
N-0027 Oslo
Norway
cornelia.ruland@rr-research.no