



Evidence Summary

Evaluation of Self-Ratings for Health Information Behaviour Skills Requires More Heterogeneous Sample, but Finds that Public Library Print Collections and Health Information Literacy of Librarians Needs Improvement

A Review of:

Yi, Y. J. (2015). Consumer health information behavior in public libraries: A qualitative study. *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, 85(1), 45-63. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/679025>

Reviewed by:

Carol Perryman
Assistant Professor
Texas Woman's University
Denton, Texas, United States of America
Email: cp1757@gmail.com

Received: 4 Dec. 2015

Accepted: 3 Feb. 2016

© 2016 Perryman. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons-Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike License 4.0 International (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly attributed, not used for commercial purposes, and, if transformed, the resulting work is redistributed under the same or similar license to this one.

Abstract

Objective – To understand public library users' perceptions of ability to locate, evaluate, and use health information; to identify barriers experienced in finding and using health information; and to compare self-ratings of skills to an administered instrument.

Design – Mixed methods.

Setting – Main library and two branches of one public library system in Florida.

Subjects – 20 adult library users purposively selected from 131 voluntary respondents to a previously conducted survey (Yi, 2014) based on age range, ethnicity, gender, and

educational level. Of the 20, 13 were female; 11 White, 8 Black, 1 Native American; most had attained college or graduate school education levels (9 each), with 2 having graduated from high school. 15 respondents were aged 45 or older.

Methods – Intensive interviews conducted between April and May 2011 used critical incident technique to inquire about a recalled health situation. Participants responded to questions about skill self-appraisal, health situation severity, information seeking and assessment behaviour, use of information, barriers, and outcome. Responses were compared to results of the short form of the Test of Functional Health Literacy in Adults (S-TOFHLA) test, administered to participants.

Main Results – On a scale of 100, participants' S-TOFHLA scores measured at high levels of proficiency, with 90% rating 90 points or above. Self-ratings of ability to find health information related to recalled need were "excellent" (12 participants) or "good" (8 participants). Fourteen participants did not seek library assistance; 12 began their search on the Internet, 5 searched the library catalogue, and 3 reported going directly to the collection. Resource preferences were discussed, although no frequency descriptions were provided. 90% of participants self-rated their ability to evaluate the quality of health information as "good" or "excellent." Participants selected authority, accuracy, and currency as the most important criteria of quality evaluation; however, other important criteria such as editorial review of content were not mentioned. Participants rated their ability to use health information as either "excellent" (17) or "good" (3).

Conclusion – Use of health information enabled health behaviour change for participants, although conflicting information tended to increase anxiety. Barriers to success in all areas of inquiry include difficulties with terminology, collection limitations, asking a librarian for assistance, and lack of awareness of resources. Librarians should improve their health literacy skills in order to advise on all aspects of health information seeking, evaluation, and use. Collaborative efforts are suggested, such as special libraries and public library efforts, and health professional workshops or seminars offered to public library patrons.

Commentary

Health information behaviour including seeking, appraisal, and use by consumers has long been a topic of study. The author places the current work within this body of knowledge, identifying gaps with regard to public library patrons, their own self-appraisal of skills and reported experience.

Two instruments aided critique of the work (Glynn, 2006; Perryman, 2009).

Use of the S-TOFHLA test and critical incident technique were appropriate as methods to examine the phenomena in question. Reporting of more affective responses to the search, appraisal, and use process helped to illustrate and refine findings.

While the author provides research context, no mention is made of the dissertation from which this work is derived. Pertinent research not mentioned includes Vakkari, Savolainen, and Dervin (1997), whose findings on trust, source preference, and individual context informed the dissertation. As well, Huber, Boorkman, and Blackwell (2008) mention health information seeker preference for information from peers with similar conditions, echoing Yi's finding.

In several instances readers are not informed sufficiently to completely evaluate the method in use or the analysis of results. Interview questions are missing, and no time frame for participants' recalled situation is provided. Recall discrepancies could limit the precision of detail, a concern recognized by the author.

Participants self-rated their abilities to find, evaluate, and use health information. With regard to finding information, none rated their skills as poor or even average, and all considered themselves good or excellent. No definition of these terms was provided. Descriptive statistics about source preferences and frustrations or limitations would have also aided understanding and lent strength to recommendations.

Participants felt librarians lacked health information skills, and felt their information needs were more specific than those public librarians were prepared to support. Yet the author concludes with a suggestion that support groups and workshops would help. These may be of limited value to the respondents in this sample.

The author recognized the limitations of the research due to uniformly high performance on the S-TOFHLA test, the self-selected, relatively homogeneous group, and issues of

limits in recall. The study would have benefitted from inclusion of more extensive interview responses, particularly to illustrate findings about barriers and perceptions about the usefulness of librarians. With regard to the organization of the work, the author introduced new findings about participants' reliance on information obtained from others with similar health conditions in the conclusion rather than earlier in the results section.

Overall, the study offers a good example to follow in expanding future inquiries to larger samples and to participants whose skills are self-assessed or tested at lower levels. Suggestions for improved health information literacy skills and awareness will be of interest to public librarians and those in other settings where the provision of health information to consumers is a primary focus.

References

- Glynn, L. (2006). A critical appraisal tool for library and information research. *Library Hi Tech*, 24(3), 387-399. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/07378830610692154>
- Huber, J., Boorkman, J., & Blackwell, J. (Eds.). (2008). *Introduction to reference sources in the health sciences*. New York: Neal-Schuman.
- Perryman, C. (2009). Critical appraisal tool for bibliometric studies. Retrieved from <https://www.dropbox.com/s/8wwl8waj7mqv6n2/Critical%20appraisal%20tool%20-%20Bibliometric%20study-1.doc?dl=0>
- Vakkari, R., Savolainen, R., & Dervin, B. (Eds.). (1997). *Information seeking in context: proceedings of an International Conference on Research in Information Needs, Seeking and Use in Different Contexts, 14-16 August, 1996, Tampere, Finland*. London: Taylor Graham.
- Yi, Y. J. (2014). Health literacy and health information behavior of Florida public library users: A mixed methods study. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 47(1) 17-29. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0961000614531159>