

Are Online Forums a Useful Resource for the Study of Health Needs and Related Information Behaviour? Linguistic Analysis of Two Online Forums for People with Mental Disorders

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Abstract

Knowledge of people's health information needs and information behaviour can be used in planning health interventions in a way that they would meet people's needs as accurately as possible and reflect how health information is acquired and processed.

Aim. The aim of the study presented in this paper was to analyze the usefulness of online forums as a source of scientific knowledge about people's health needs and information behaviour, which could then be actively used in the area of public health.

Method. The content, a total of 1,575 entries, derived from two open forums devoted to depression in the years 2012–2015 was analysed using a set of mixed methods, including: a formal (quantitative) analysis of the material using the tools of computational linguistics (QDAMiner Simsat), inductive theme analysis EMIC, in the so-called hard variety, reinforced by elements of Awdziejew's conversational grammar, and comparative method.

Results. Both health information needs and behaviour can be identified on Internet forums dedicated to health problems. Linguistic analysis of online forums can give very interesting results and clues that cannot be obtained using questionnaires or personal interviews. It seems, however, that it should never be the only method used in investigating this matter. Since there are several intervening factors that may distort reliability of findings, determining whether we are dealing with real or created needs or behaviour requires confirming the results of the linguistic analysis of the forums using other methods.

Key words: health information needs, health information behaviour, Internet, social media, depression, public health

Słowa kluczowe: zdrowotne potrzeby informacyjne, zdrowotne zachowania informacyjne, Internet, media społecznościowe, depresja, zdrowie publiczne



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Introduction

Knowledge of people's health information needs and information behaviour can be used in planning health interventions in a way that they would meet people's needs as accurately as possible and reflect how health information is acquired and processed. It may also be helpful

in creating resources and programs used to improve the level of health awareness, both very important from the public health perspective. Information needs and behaviour (terms explained below) are usually tested by asking questions to the representatives of the category of people that is of interest to the researcher. It is typically a poll conducted using questionnaires or individual or group in-