Investigating Support Seeking from Peers for Pregnancy in Online Health Communities

Xinning Gui, MA[1], Yu Chen, PhD[1], Yubo Kou, PhD[2], Kathleen H. Pine, PhD[3], Yunan Chen[1], PhD
[1]University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA; [2]Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN; [3]Arizona State University, Phoenix, AZ

This research highlight presents our recent publication "Investigating Support Seeking from Peers for Pregnancy in Online Health Communities," which appears in PACM on Human-Computer Interaction (Proc. of CSCW 2018 Online First).

Original Abstract

We report a study of peer support in online health communities for pregnancy care along three gestational stages (trimesters) to investigate how pregnant women seek and receive peer support during different stages of pregnancy. Using Babycenter.com as our research setting, we found that pregnant women mainly sought peer support due to constrained access to healthcare providers, dissatisfaction with healthcare services/medical advice, limited offline social support, and unavailability of information in other venues. Our study revealed that the particular topics of concern typifying each trimester were distinct; but pregnant women consistently sought advice, informal and formal knowledge, reassurance, and emotional support from peers throughout pregnancy. Their BabyCenter peers in turn provided support by leveraging their experiential knowledge and clinical expertise received from their own healthcare. We discuss design implications for health services and IT systems that meet pregnant women's temporal and multi-faceted needs during prenatal care.

Significance of the Work for the WISH Audience

Recently there has been a growing interest in the intersection of health informatics and women's health, paying attention to the unique healthcare needs associated with female bodies such as menstruation, intimate care, and pregnancy. Extensive research on pregnancy has examined multiple facets of pregnancy and childbirth, such as information seeking and weight control. However, prior research often treats pregnancy as a homogeneous period, and insufficient attention has been paid to the multistage nature of pregnancy and the distinct physiological, emotional, and medical issues associated with different gestational stages. This work sets out to examine how pregnant women seek peer support from online health communities during each of the three pregnancy trimesters.

We focus on BabyCenter.com, one of the most popular pregnancy and parenting online community. We choose three "Mommy Mentors" forums specifically designed based on the three trimesters. We use in-depth qualitative content analysis to investigate discussions between pregnant women. We show both similarities and differences in pregnant women's needs, desired support across the three stages. Pregnant women at all the three stages sought online support primarily because of the mismatch between their needs and the dominant paradigm for obstetrical care in the U.S. However, their needs are quite different in each specific trimester, and the online peer support provides pregnant women both experiential knowledge from peers as well as additional access to authoritative biomedical knowledge.

Our major findings are of great relevant to the WISH audience in several ways. First, our work points to the importance of designers of interactive healthcare system to consider the multistage and evolving nature of certain health conditions. Second, we argue that it is important for pregnancy-related research and medical practices to transition from fetus-centered to pregnancy-centered care, paying more attention to the needs and conditions of pregnant women that go through a dramatic life change. Lastly, we also call for more attention into understanding how interactive systems can better integrate experiential and medical knowledge.

Statement of Non-Conflict with Policies

This submission does not conflict with the policies of the PACM on Human-Computer Interaction.