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Cultural differences in web-based health information seeking of Finnish and Japanese students

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Introduction

This paper presents the findings from a study on identifying cultural differences on the information environment and information practices, namely active seeking and encountering, of web-based health information between Finnish and Japanese university students. The study was coducted as a quantitative study using mainly distributions, dependency analysis using cross-tables and Chi-Square tests. This paper is based on a study to be presented at ISIC-2010 conference (Askola, Toshimori & Huotari, in press), which is a part of the author's doctoral thesis project.

There is a considerable lack of empirical research on web-based health information environments, as well as related information practices and cultural differences. Earlier research indicates that cultural issues affect web-based health information seeking (e.g. Kakai, Maskarinec, Shumay, Tatsumura & Tasaki 2003), and Japanese culture has various features that differ from Western societies (Heine, Kitayama & Lehman 2001), also regarding the use of the Internet (Kimura 2008).

In this study the Internet is comprehended as an information channel to various types of information sources, of which the information user may choose suitable sources according his or her information need and preference. The study does not pursue to get a hold of individual information source horizons (see Sonnenwald 1999, Savolainen & Kari 2004), and thus the study focused on the general and web-based *health information environments*.

The viewpoint to the concept of information practices derives from the framework of McKenzie (2003), and two information seeking practices were applied for examination, namely, *active seeking* and *encountering* (non-direct monitoring) of web-based health information. Active seeking refers to situations in which a person is looking for information with a particular question in mind, on the Internet. Encountering refers to the situation in which a person comes across health information on the Internet by chance.

The Findings

The findings showed that the general health information environment for the Japanese respondents consisted more of intrapersonal sources and electronic media, and for the Finnish respondents health care professionals and printed media. The cultural differences occurred also within the web-based health information environment. The Finnish respondents used more types of information sources and were more aware of web-based health information services. The different findings could indicate that the use of web-based health information and services are treated differently in Japanese culture, or that there is a difference in Finnish and Japanese health information content on the Web.

The information practices examined in this study did not differ statistically significantly between the samples. Web-based health information was encountered more often in both samples, and the relatively high rates in information encountering in both samples indicate that health information is well provided and easily accessed on the Web. Most notable finding in the practices was the high rate of Japanese respondents who did not seek health information actively at all.

The Finnish respondents not only sought actively, but also encountered web-based health information more often. Possible explanations for these findings are that the Finnish and Japanese university students use the Internet differently or there is different kind of information available depending on the language. Also the used practices in relation to the health information topics varied according to the nationality of the respondent.

The next phase of the study is more thorough examination of cultural differences in weight management. The weight management issues from this data are presented at Informaatiotutkimuksen päivät 2010. This is followed by threefold study: First, weight management information is studied in the context of web-based weight management communities by applying knowledge typology of Blackler (1995). Second, the communities' users' perceptions and use of the provided weight management information is studied qualitatively. Third, a cross-cultural survey on weight management information behaviour will be conducted in Finland, Japan, and Namibia.

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