

‘Am I normal?’ Teenagers, sexual health and the internet

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Abstract

The development of new communication technologies has created a wide variety of new fields in which human beings can construct identities. The past decade has seen a proliferation of opportunities to use the internet for health related advice and information and many new sites have been created where participants can construct identities, formulate problems and seek solutions concerning health related issues. This paper will report on a study of emails written in to a UK-based website concerned with health issues for young people. Our analysis was driven by corpus linguistics, a computational methodology for interrogating extensive datasets, and we have combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches to the study of language. We interrogated a 400,000 word dataset of messages and were able to identify terms whose usage was elevated compared to the English language as a whole. As well as personal pronouns, these included many terms related to sexual health and bodily development, as well as terms such as ‘normal’ and ‘worried’ which were identified for further exploration. Whereas previous research on sexual health has discovered the use of vague terms and euphemisms, here, young people described themselves, their anatomy and their identities in meticulous detail. This study enables us to define the role of health topics raised, the presentation of health concerns, and contributes towards the discovery of a distinctive ‘genre’ of health messages concerning sexual health which differs from that found by other researchers concentrating on face to face encounters. In conclusion we suggest that for researchers and practitioners working in health with young people in the medium of English there could be valuable lessons in communication to be learned from examination of corpora of the health care language concerned.

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Introduction

The rise of the internet has led to a substantial increase in the number of websites dedicated to providing health advice and information. Many new fora have been created whereby internet users can formulate problems and seek solutions concerning

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health related issues. Although many commentators have reported that the electronic landscape is populated by many unreliable, misleading and unscrupulous sites purporting to provide accurate medical information (e.g. Barkham, 2000; Henk, 2002; Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004), the internet nevertheless remains a popular source of medical advice and information with the potential to contribute to positive health care outcomes and intervention (Car & Sheikh, 2004; Gray, Klein & Noyce, 2005).

With the rise of internet health resources over the last decade there has been an increased demand for health provision tailored to the needs of young people (Aynsley-Green et al., 2000; Jones, Finlay, Simpson, & Kreitman, 1997), resulting in a growth of internet-based resources tailored to delivering reliable and accurate health information for young people. These sites typically provide interactive advice in accessible, non-technical language through which young people can freely express their health questions to professionals, as well as sharing their concerns with fellow teenagers. Consequently the internet has become a popular source of health advice and information for adolescents, with the electronic gateway offering confidential advice and information that might be otherwise hard or compromising to obtain (Borzekowski & Rickert, 2001; Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). For example, the UK based Samaritans charity, an organization that provides confidential emotional support in response to enquiries by distressed individuals, report that since their email service was introduced in 1995, 'it has been used by many young people as their preferred way of discussing difficult feelings', noting that this service had increased by almost 80% between 2002 and 2004 (Samaritans, 2004).

The issues raised by researchers on internet health in different countries are intriguingly similar, especially given the differentiation in face to face health care cross-nationally. Nations with substantial public provision yield similar concerns to those with largely insurance-funded systems. On both sides of the Atlantic, and even as far afield as China, the anonymity afforded by the internet is valued (Lou, Zhao, Gao, & Shah, 2006; Rice, 2006; Rogers & Mead, 2004) and this is particularly important for young people, since they are often reluctant to disclose potentially embarrassing and sensitive problems and request personal health advice from their doctors (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2001; Biddle, Gunnell, Sharp, & Donovan, 2004; Klein &

Wilson, 2002). They make fewer visits to office-based doctors than other age groups (Monson, Jackson & Livingston, 1996). This is of concern given that adolescence is a time of physical, emotional and social change with profound needs to address numerous delicate questions concerning health, sexuality, and relationships (Klein & Wilson, 2002; Suzuki & Calzo, 2004).

While eager to broach sensitive concerns about their health with other people, adolescents often find it difficult to articulate their concerns to adults (Boekeloo, Schamus, Cheng, & Simmens, 1996). Many adolescents want to discuss health concerns with their GPs but are very particular about whom they consult, being only likely to see a practitioner with whom they feel comfortable (Kapphahn, Wilson, & Klein, 1999). According to Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe and Thomson (1996), teenagers are often reluctant to talk to parents about sex and sexual health because of potential embarrassment and in case their parents think they are sexually active.

With such an apparent generational gap, it is important to advance understandings of how adolescents request advice on sensitive matters such as sexual health so as to better inform the strategies of engagement with this population by health practitioners. In this context we would argue that corpus linguistics is a valuable methodology for studying adolescent health communication, providing not only an original and valid means for identifying the issues and troubles young people face in their everyday lives (Michaud, Suris, McPherson, & Macfarlane, 2004) but also as a means of describing a distinctive 'genre' of health messages concerning sexual health which differs from that of much other research which has focussed on face to face encounters.

Corpus linguistics as a means for interrogating health communication

Widely used in other areas of linguistic analysis, corpus linguistics is a relatively new application in relation to health care communication. However, its benefits are quickly coming to be recognised by medical researchers and professionals and recently there has been a variety of insightful corpus studies into the domain of health care discourse (e.g. Adolphs, Brown, Carter, Crawford, & Sahota, 2004; Brown, Crawford, & Carter, 2006; Skelton & Hobbs, 1999; Skelton, Wearn, & Hobbs, 2002;

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