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A literature review of the information needs and behaviours of Black adults and the predominance of studies on health information

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Abstract

Introduction. This is a review of the existing literature on the information needs and seeking behaviours of Black adults as part of a larger dissertation study that discusses the need for information behaviour research of Black adults within the context of traditional knowledge centres.

Results. The results are in progress as this review represents a portion of the overarching information behaviour dissertation study.

Conclusion. While the literature reflects an abundance of information behaviour studies within the health information field, it also reveals gaps in the literature that show an absence of studies that examine other types of information needs of Black adults.

Introduction

Very little literature exists about the information needs and behaviours of Black people within the context of information seeking in cultural heritage institutions. As part of a broader dissertation study, this literature review will examine the existing information behaviour research on Black adults, most of which centres on health information seeking, and discuss the subsequent gaps in the literature and lack of studies outside of the health information realm. An analysis of the existing literature is taken from an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991) that highlights the intersecting oppressions of age, gender, and class alongside race. Cultural heritage institutions have ‘an acknowledged mission to engage in the conservation, interpretation and dissemination of cultural, scientific, and environmental knowledge, and promote activities meant to inform and educate citizens on associated aspects of culture, history, science and the environment’ (RICHS Resources, 2014, para. 1). For the purpose of this study, cultural heritage institutions are used interchangeably with ‘traditional knowledge centres’ or ‘libraries, archives, and museums’. The study centers on adults who racially identify as Black and are either descendants of enslaved persons in America and/or have cultural backgrounds rooted in Africa or the Caribbean.

Black people and health information needs

The primary area of research regarding the information needs of Black people, and arguably the largest area, lies within health information. Gollop (1997) explored the health information needs of Black women over the age of 65 living in urban areas to determine which socio-economic factors contributed to their health information seeking behaviour. She found that lack of access to health information was not a factor, with many respondents referring to all forms of media, particularly television and magazines, as sources of information. Particularly telling were the results regarding the role of the library in the acquisition of health information. While 98% of participants indicated that the public library was ‘likely’ or ‘highly likely’ to provide health information, over 75% of them also indicated that they ‘hardly ever’ visit the library, and only 13% revealed that they visit the library more than once a year. The study’s specific focus on women aged 65 and over must be taken into account as that demographic is only a small proportion of the diverse Black population that this study will address.

Black female college students were the subject of a study by Payton, Kvasny, and Kiwanuka-Tondo (2014) which sought to reveal their information sources and information seeking behaviours in terms of online HIV information. The study indicated that there were several barriers to health information seeking, specifically HIV information and sex education, including denial, misconceptions, and fear of the unknown. Other barriers that hindered their ability to find information included mistrust of health information as well as religious beliefs. The most typical source of information was online searching, but the women also used print media and television for supplemental health information, in addition to traditional sources such as high school, church, family members, female peers, and physicians. A fear of being judged was another contributing factor to what information sources were sought and had a direct impact on whether or not women sought out active resources versus passive resources.

In order to explore stroke education needs for Black women, the Beal (2015) study sought to examine their health information seeking practices. Women ranging in age from 38 to 88 were first surveyed and then participated in focus groups. The study revealed that the women knew very little about stroke and its symptoms, and the general lack of awareness was attributed to various factors such as minimal stroke education provided by health providers, although they did find that television programs were a popular source for health information.

In the Morey (2007) study on the health information seeking behaviour of a particular African American community in Buffalo, New York, residents were surveyed to explore how they seek and obtain consumer health information and to determine what social networks the participants

interacted with to find the health information. In assessing those social networks, the researcher placed emphasis on whether participants had strong or weak ties to the people in their social network who they regularly exchanged health information with. The study found that health service professionals play a major role in providing consumer health information to African Americans and that the Internet, despite its heavy use, has not displaced traditional sources of health information including family and friends.

Assessing the information needs about cancer care for African Americans and Hispanics was one of the objectives of the research study by Muñoz-Antonia et al. (2015) who determined that participants preferred receiving health care and cancer care information from various forms of media including television, the radio, billboards, the Internet, and print media. Moreover, participants indicated that they wanted to receive cancer care information pertaining to education about cancer, treatment options and process, and statistics and general information of specific institutions.

Race and socioeconomic status or class

Spink et al. (1997) investigated the information behaviour of African American low-income households from the Parks at Wynnewood residential housing in Dallas, Texas. As part of a larger urban revitalization and community development project, this study was a needs assessment conducted for the purpose of gathering information about the types of information these households 'need and seek in everyday life to resolve personal or family problems or to reduce the barriers of social isolation' (Spink & Cole, 2001, p. 46). With a particular emphasis on the intersection of class, the study found that the information needs of low-income households were primarily dominated by problems, in other words, residents sought information to aid in the mitigation of day-to-day challenges such as finding money to pay for food or rent, or maintaining the safety and security of their households. Spink and Cole's (p. 57) findings confirm that the 'poor may process information differently than middle-class people due to the environment in which they were raised as children', and therefore, are not always able to perceive information channels or access and process the information that is derived from those channels, resulting in information isolation. The Spink study is conceivably a precursor to this dissertation study in that it is a needs assessment with an intersectional emphasis on everyday life information behaviour. Warren et al. (2010a) make a connection between class and ethnicity in a study of African Americans and online information seeking that found 'class-based and ethnic identities are important predictors of information seeking and web self-efficacy' (p. 692), and that class-based identity seems to take precedence ahead of ethnic identity as a predictor of online information behaviour. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of class-based identity as a factor in using the web for information seeking and finding. Each of these studies discovers different findings in regard to class, but one underlying aspect that connects them is the idea that class cannot be disregarded when studying information behaviour because it has a significant impact on the perception, access, seeking, and finding of information.

Race and gender

Research at the intersection of race and gender is predominant in the literature with most of the articles highlighting some aspect of health information behaviour that primarily affect African American women. Jones et al. (2018a) conducted a study on cell phone information seeking and blood pressure which found that African American women are actively using mobile technology for the purpose of managing blood pressure. A subsequent study by Jones et al. (2018b) studying the predictors of information use for the purpose of managing blood pressure in hypertensive African American women discovered that information sharing is a significant predictor of information use, and that women who reported sharing were more likely to also use the information being shared. In a successive article on the aforementioned Payton et al. study on online HIV prevention information seeking in Black female college students, authors Kvasny and

Payton (2018) further discuss the hypervisibility of Black women that was a significant barrier to women looking for safe information sources when searching for private or sensitive information. Both articles point to findings, echoed throughout many of these studies, which indicate that the women often mistrusted health information, traditional and religious values shaped their information behaviour, and fear, denial, and misconceptions acted as barriers to information seeking. They deemed the most promising finding to be Black women's need and desire to find information for themselves. Warren et al. (2010b) reveal in their study of barriers to health information seeking that Black women find some health information to be untrustworthy and that they believe information is often withheld from them by health care providers, creating a seemingly insurmountable barrier to health information seeking. Many of the same issues in the aforementioned studies were voiced in the Sanders Thompson et al. (2009) study of health information seeking of African American men where participants also dealt with mistrust, untrustworthy medical sources, values and cultural norms, and other similar barriers to information. The study ultimately confirmed that the participants were highly concerned with access to health information and expressed a need for accessibility issues to be addressed. Issues at the intersection of gender appear to expose the many vulnerabilities of both Black women and men that come with health information seeking.

Race and age

In Gollop's (1997) study about older African American women, age is identified as a significant factor influencing health information behaviour. More specifically, Gollop states that health information and its availability is very important to this population, and like any heterogeneous group, they seek information in a variety of ways and from different sources. The rationale for this study reveals that older African American women represent another neglected population which could benefit from further research around health information. Conversely, the information seeking practices of African American young men who have sex with men (AAYMSM) was explored in a study by Rose et al. (2016). This population is often seeking health information about sensitive topics like HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, and receives much of their information from peers as well as others in their social networks and the Internet. While their peers play a vital role in their health information seeking behaviours and are their most frequent health information resource, Rose et al. (2016) discovered that African American young men who have sex with men would rather discuss health issues with their parents because of the general belief that parents are responsible for educating their children about their personal health. The study shows 'that parents are still the most preferred source of health information among AAYMSM' (p. 359) and are still vital in the lives of youth, including LGBT youth. While it also features aspects of intersectional oppressions pertaining to gender and sexuality, the findings did not reveal much that illuminated these issues. What we can take away from these studies is that age very much affects the kind of information that is sought and the channels from which it is obtained, and while older adults seem to be confident in finding sources of information through various channels, young adults still have a strong desire to seek information from their parents.

Conclusion

As is evident from this review, the studies do not further identify other information needs that Black people possess. In fact, they succeed in highlighting small segments of the population catering to a niche area instead of providing a broader overview of the needs and behaviours of Black adults. It is clear that obtaining health information has become important for Black people, but these studies do not explore other information needs that this population might have.

While these studies do posit various ways in which Black people seek out information, only one of the studies referred to libraries and their ability to meet information needs. None of the studies addressed other institutions such as archives and museums. Additionally, many of the studies solely examined factors such as low-income or the desire to seek and obtain health information,

but no study examined the information needs of Black people from a broader scope. Many of the studies were successful at identifying information needs and behaviours of Black people, yet they narrowly defined those needs as confined to those with low incomes and socioeconomic backgrounds. This proposed study will address the gaps in research about the broad information needs of Black people beyond health information, making connections between those needs and the ability of cultural heritage institutions to meet them. It will differ from previous studies by broadly assessing the needs of Black people with various intersecting identities. By doing so, the study will possibly allow for a broader discovery and deeper analysis of the information needs and behaviours of Black adult populations through an intersectional lens.

About the author

Jamillah R. Gabriel is Critical Pedagogy Research Librarian in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University and a PhD candidate in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Her research includes the interrogation of issues that lie at the nexus of race and information and their impact on Black people, and the examination of criticality in library and information science research, teaching, and practice.

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