WHIST: A web-based survey on health information seeking on Internet in France, 2007

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Abstract
Since the widespread use of the Internet, few studies have examined health information seeking in France. A web-based survey was conducted to understand how and why French people use the Internet for health information seeking. SES and psychosocial characteristics, health status, illness perception, and characteristics of web-based searches were assessed and studied using the ehealth literacy concept. We do not demonstrate that Internet is used instead of general practitioner or the healthcare system.

Introduction
In France, as in other industrialized countries, the digital divide is decreasing as Internet penetration is increasing¹. However, social inequalities in Internet use and online skills may persist when seeking health information². The question is whether or not online health information is used (and useful) by and for people who already benefit from extensive healthcare³.

This study was performed in order to (1) better understand social factors related to health information seeking and (2) to describe different uses by French people living in a “welfare state”.

Method
A web-based questionnaire was developed recording responses directly onto a database. It was performed between December 2006 and February 2007 and advertised by different media: websites (institutional, mass media, health-related or not), daily newspapers and magazines, and a multimedia press agency.

Results
More than 4200 people responded to the questionnaire online. Classical characteristics of “health seekers” were as follows: most of them were women, middle aged and had a high educational level.
People searched for information on a variety of topics ranging from illness, medicines or medical news. More precisely, searches were more frequent on specific topics like nutrition, mental health, and children’ or elders’ health. On average, health-related searches occurred once a month when Internet use was daily.

Health seekers had a high experience of the Internet and searched health information for themselves, their loved ones, or just to be informed. They typically used search engines and 1/3 had ever used a health related online community, where they read information rather than actively participated. Health perceptions were quite positive, as was a high concern about health. People went online to better understand GPs information and it sometimes changed the way to take care of their own health. However Internet did not seem to be used instead of general practitioner or the healthcare system.

Conclusion
Even if there is a strong gender bias (fare more female respondents than male), our sample confirms the known SES and demographic characteristics of health seekers.

In upper social classes, patients’ perception of their own ability and aptitude to care of themselves seems to change, voluntarily taking an active part in their own health. On the other hand, our results show that, beyond the usual digital divide, other psychosocial characteristics play a role as significant barriers to use Internet for health information seeking. More longitudinal investigations are needed, while developing a comprehensive approach to the temporal evolution of user practices and experiences.

References