HEALTH WORRIES: Analysis of Mass Media Influence

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During the last years, mass media have centred on health and illness information more than ever before and stories about health risks fill up newspapers, magazines, TV programmes and internet sites. Recently, much of these information are focused on emergent health risks (generally modified food, radiation...). In western countries, mass media appear as one of the main sources of health risks information for many people with a potential effect to shape individuals’ health perceptions and worries.

Although there is a growing interest in studying the media coverage of health topics in Spain, it may be necessary to go beyond and to understand the social and psychological processes (interpersonal communication, dependence on mass and media exposure) through which mass communication impact on individual beliefs about personal health.

The present study is part of a project aimed to examine:

(i) the relationship of new health worries to health complaints and perceptions of health,

(ii) the influence of exposure to information about these topics on health worries and the role of interpersonal communication and dependence on mass media.

In this study we present a preliminary exploratory work from the first phase of this larger project.

OBJECTIVES

- To determine the most salient modern health worries for a Spanish students sample.
- To compare these emergent health worries with the traditional health concerns like tobacco or traffic accidents.
- To analyse the relationship of health worries to subjective health perception.
- To compare the media consumption, media exposure, media helpfulness and interpersonal communication by type of worry (traditional or emergent).

METHOD

Data were collected from 233 Spanish undergraduates students (193 females and 40 males) between age 18 and 47 (M=22,02 years, SD=5,14) enrolled in different academic programs (Social Work, Optics, Nutrition, Advertising & Public Relations and Education)

Measures

Participants completed a survey questionnaire containing the following measures:

- **Modern Health Worries Scale (MHS):** 23-item scale adapted from Petit et al., (2001) including new risk items as “Smoke Acute Respiratory Syndrome”, “Ocean Influenza” or “Hantivus Salmine”. To assess the underlying structure of the Spanish version of the MHS a Principal Components Analysis was conducted. It was found a final six-factor solution which account for 67,99% of the variance (see Table 1).
- **Traditional Health Worries Scale (THWS):** 23-item scale translated from Erikson, Bliech & Unin (1999). Respondents rated the severity of several semantic and psychological concerns during the last month on a 4-point scale. A principal composite analysis on Spanish items yielded seven factors (the, back pain, head pain, pseudocancer, gastric, intestinal and breast pain) accounted for 58,80% of the variance.

Negative Affectivity Subscale: 10-item subscale from Spanish Version of PANAS (Sandin et al., 1999).

- **Media Consumption:** Six 5-point items to assess how often participants used several media sources (TV, newspapers, internet...).

- **Open-ending question:** To identify students’ three most salient health worries. After analyzing the content of this question we found 12 types of worries.

- **Media Exposure:** Six 5-point items adapted from Morton & Duck (2001). Respondents estimated how often they had seen, read or heard about their three most salient health worries from each of six different media sources (TV news and documentaries, TV entertainment programs, newspapers, magazines, internet and radio).

- **Interpersonal communication:** Four 5-points items adapted from Morton & Duck (2001). Participants indicated how much they had discussed their three most salient health worries with peers, family, partners and health professionals.

- **Media Helpfulness:** Students indicated on eight 5-points items the helpfulness of six media sources for understanding health issues.

RESULTS

- **Means scores on Modern and Traditional Health Worries**

- **DISCUSSION**

  Since this work presents the preliminary results from a larger project in progress the conclusions should be treated with caution.

  To assess modern health worries in our sample an specific instrument were needed and the present work has found that the Spanish MHS is a reliable and valid instrument that may allow for its application for comparative international scales.

  As a previous study (Petit et al., 2001) we found that environmental pollution was the modern issue that caused most concern for participants, however, traditional worries “traffic” and “accidents transmitted disease” were little scored in the Spanish students sample. As expected, results show significant correlations between modern health concerns and subjective health complaints.

  Related to media variables, we didn’t find significative differences by type of worry (modern/traditional) except for the frequency of exposure to traditional media sources and the role of interpersonal communication and dependence on mass media.

  Future research on larger samples is necessary to answer several questions that our exploratory work has arised.

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