Medical Xpress

Researchers present findings on role of Google search early in COVID-19 pandemic

October 26 2020

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Non-generic queries in the online tool Google Trends may yield better insight into health information-seeking behavior, according to a new study by researchers from the George Washington University (GW).

Google Trends analyzes the popularity of top Google queries geographically and longitudinally. More recently it has been used as a surveillance and retrospective epidemiological tool to study the impact of COVID-19 around the world. However, studies focusing on the pandemic's impact in the United States have been lacking, according to the researchers.

"What's interesting about Google Trends is that it is a free platform that allows researchers like me to assess information-seeking behavior from a big data perspective," said King John Pascual, a third-year MD student at the GW School of Medicine and Health Sciences (SMHS) and first author on the study. "Just like with any big-data platform, if you have the right research questions, it can be a powerful epidemiological tool."

The study, conducted by Pascual and his mentor Ali Pourmand, MD, MPH, professor of emergency medicine at SMHS, utilized Google Trends to assess the extent of the public's perceived exposure to COVID-19 as it relates to disease prevalence during the early phase of the pandemic in the U.S. The team collected four weeks of search volume index (SVI) data from March 2020.

Out of the five queries analyzed, two that signal perceived exposure to the virus, "How do I get tested for coronavirus?" or "Do I have coronavirus?" had statistically significant differences in mean SVI between states with the highest and lowest numbers of COVID-19 cases. Generic queries such as "What is coronavirus?" or "How is coronavirus spread?" that do not necessarily reflected perceived exposure to the virus were not associated with the number of COVID-19 cases. The study findings imply how analyzing specific phrases, in lieu of those borne out by general interest, may yield more meaningful data about perceived exposure to a communicable disease on a population level.

"Early access to population health data is crucial and potentially

lifesaving," said Pascual. "Digital tools such as Google Trends may help bridge the gap in knowledge and transparency."

The findings will be available 24/7 on demand during the Research Forum at the American College of Emergency Physicians annual conference, the world's largest emergency medicine conference, Oct. 26–29. The abstract is also published in the supplement to the November 2020 issue of the *Annals of Emergency Medicine*.

More information: els-jbs-prod-cdn.jbs.elsevierh … pb/assets/raw/Health %20Advance/journals/ymem/YMEM764Sfinalv2.pdf

Provided by George Washington University

Citation: Researchers present findings on role of Google search early in COVID-19 pandemic (2020, October 26) retrieved 10 May 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-10-role-google-early-covid-pandemic.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.