Author's response to reviews

Title: The effect of Breast Cancer Awareness Month on Internet search activity - a comparison with awareness campaigns for lung and prostate cancer

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Author’s response to reviews: see over
Re: Breast Cancer Awareness - The effect of the October campaign on Internet search activity  
(Now entitled “The effect of Breast Cancer Awareness Month on Internet search activity – a comparison with awareness campaigns for lung and prostate cancer”).

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for your comments and invitation to submit a revised manuscript. We were heartened to see that one of the reviewers (Parisa Tehranifar) reported that we had sufficiently addressed the issues which she had raised in her initial assessment of the paper. We have endeavoured to respond to the other reviewers’ questions and concerns comprehensively, and hope that they too have now been sufficiently addressed.

We have noted that the reviewers specifically focused on the discussion within the paper; and we have concentrated on expanding this in order to take account of the concerns and points raised. Indeed, the discussion has tripled in size from the original submission. That said, we reiterate once more, that whilst raising the issues and highlighting them as requested by the reviewers, we do not believe that a more in-depth discussion than that now provided is warranted. In particular, we aimed to provide a snapshot of the influence or otherwise of cancer awareness campaigns, and specifically BCAM, on internet activity. We believe that we have achieved this, whilst in addition now discussing many of the issues surrounding BCAM itself; our intention has always been that our results would provide a stimulus for those with specific interests to comment further on our findings. We hope that the paper as it now stands will facilitate the expansion of the debate surrounding the pertinent issues.

Our responses to the Reviewers’ comments are detailed below.

Reviewer 1
Feels that the study asks and answers a basic question, but that certain discussion points have not been sufficiently elaborated upon. Specifically:
1. The ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of awareness initiatives is not defined or operationalised.

Response:
We agree with the reviewer that this required clarification; hence we have now included a full discussion regarding the caveat that success in raising online activity levels does not necessarily correlate with subsequent offline behaviour or awareness, and we now suggest that further research is required in order to better characterise the relationship between online and offline activity – we agree with the reviewer that until this is done, it is not possible to categorically conclude that the increased online levels seen with BCAM translate to beneficial (and therefore successful) behaviour and attitudes offline. In particular, we highlight the dearth of information in relation to the influence or otherwise of the internet in raising awareness or changing behaviour of people prior to receiving a cancer diagnosis.

We have now expanded on our previous comment regarding the inability of our work to identify exactly who is involved in the online activity seen. We agree with the reviewer that the culture and commercialisation of breast cancer raises questions regarding the nature of the online activity being undertaken, and we therefore suggest that until this is better investigated it is not possible to surmise that BCAM is achieving its stated aim of “educating and empowering women to take charge of their own breast health by practicing regular self-breast exams to identify any changes, scheduling regular visits and annual mammograms with their healthcare provider, adhering to prescribed treatment, and knowing the facts about recurrence”.

2) Need to elaborate on the relationship between internet/online activity and offline health activity.
See comments to reviewer 2

3) The authors could speculate on what the other campaign could learn from the BCAM.
As stated in the previous draft, we believe that the success of BCAM is largely attributable to its ability to harness the media’s support for the cause, and this is obviously something which other campaigns would do well to learn from. As clinicians, we do not feel qualified to speculate unduly on specific aspects of how campaigns could be improved, although we do now highlight some of the concerns raised in relation to BCAM which other initiatives might seek to avoid. Once more, however, we feel that the simple results of this paper should provide the basis for commentary surrounding BCAM, and we do not feel that further unqualified speculation by ourselves will add either to the value of this work, or indeed to the wider debate surrounding BCAM and other awareness initiatives.

4) A discussion of the efficacy or otherwise of screening mammography and BSE is not out-with the scope of this paper – the authors should discuss concerns surrounding the awareness campaign. It is important to recognise the commercialisation of the campaign.
We had previously stated that there are some dissenting voices regarding the amount of attention which breast cancer receives as a result of BCAM, Pink, and other breast awareness initiatives. In addition, we now outline in more detail the principal concerns surrounding these issues in our discussion.

We had previously discussed in depth the extent to which BCAM has been commercialised; we have now reiterated the concerns surrounding these developments in our discussion. Once more, we feel that we are at most qualified to highlight these issues; it would be our hope that our discussion leads others, who have special knowledge of, and interest in, the associated issues to comment on the issues raised.

5) It could be that the increased activity seen is related to the commercialisation of breast cancer.
This has now been addressed. See response to comment 1 above.

6) Recent studies have reported that 56-58% of patients with prostate cancer, and 68% of those with known or suspected lung cancer access health information on the Internet; this compares with some 48-50% of those with breast cancer; does this suggest that heightened traffic for breast cancer is not being done by patients?
As now discussed in-depth within the paper, we do not know who is searching online. The statistics above cannot be used to conclude that searching is not being done by breast cancer patients, however – they were separate studies with different levels of disease prevalence in each population; 50% of breast cancer patients in one population might well account for far higher levels of online activity than 68% of lung cancer patients in another population.

7) Discuss patient demographics in a new paragraph
This has been done

Reviewer 2
1. Need to elaborate on the relationship between internet/online activity and offline health activity.
The points raised have now been dealt with in detail. We have stated that a caveat to this work is that whilst we have shown that BCAM has proved successful in stimulating online activity, we have not shown that this increased activity is necessarily associated with either subsequent increased cancer awareness or health seeking activity offline. We have then expanded on this theme and have referenced the caveats to Ybarra’s findings whilst also highlighting other work which has demonstrated that physician information and advice still supercedes that found on the internet. Finally, we have also alluded to the dearth of information regarding information seeking activity online and its influence on offline activity in patients prior to an actual cancer diagnosis. (In addition, Ybarra et al have now also been referenced in the conclusion as requested by the reviewer).
2. Introduction lacks a clear rationale for examining the association between BCAM and internet search activity

We have endeavoured to address this issue by further outlining the a) the use of internet by cancer patients specifically, and 2) by acknowledging the efforts by advocate groups to have an online presence. As noted, the reviewers concerns regarding the complexity of the relationship between offline and online activity is now dealt with in detail in the discussion.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch should you have any further queries or concerns,

Kind Regards,

Yours faithfully,

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