



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Online Feedback to Medical Education Resources: Is There a Halo Effect?

K Walsh¹, SS Kapoor²

¹BMJ Learning, BMA House, London, England

²Sassoon General Hospitals & B. J. Medical College, Pune, Maharashtra, India

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Walsh K, Kapoor SS

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Dear Editor,

The halo effect is a bias in thought processes in which one's perceptions are influenced by the previously voiced perceptions of others. It is well known that the halo effect can influence judgements about performance in face-to-face situations within medicine (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Palmer & Loveland, 2008). However there is little or no evidence of the existence of a halo effect when users give evaluation feedback about online medical education programmes. This letter describes our experience of the halo effect in online feedback given by users of the medical education resources provided by BMJ Learning.

BMJ Learning is an educational website aimed at clinicians who want to learn about clinical and non-clinical topics. At the end of each programme module users are encouraged to reflect on their learning and give feedback. They do this by entering text directly into a box. Users can see other learners' feedback and reflections when giving theirs. We analysed these to see if learners copied words or phrases that other learners had used before them.

Of 420 modules on BMJ Learning we randomly chose 5 modules to analyse. These were on acute asthma, erectile dysfunction, diabetic emergencies, vulvovaginal candidiasis and significant event analysis. All feedback was analysed by two independent raters and discussed until consensus was achieved. We received 588 pieces of feedback on the asthma module from 588 individual raters: in 100 cases learners used a word or a phrase that had been used by the previous learner. We received 569 pieces of feedback on erectile dysfunction from 569 individual raters, with 90 instances of previously used words and phrases. There were 513 pieces of



feedback on diabetic emergencies from 513 individual raters, with 72 instances of previously used words and phrases. For 348 pieces of feedback on vulvovaginal candidiasis there were 52 instances of previously used words and phrases. And for 21 pieces of feedback on significant event analysis there was one case instance of a previously used word and phrase. In total we received 2039 pieces of feedback on all 5 modules and in 315 cases (15%) learners used a word or a phrase that had been used by the previous learner. We feel that it is likely that learners were influenced online by other learners by means of the halo effect and that the halo effect exists in online medical education as has been previously found in face to face education. However we cannot say this for certain. Evaluators in this study appeared to borrow wording used by previous evaluators, but this is not proof that their opinions of the educational value of the modules were influenced. Also an apparent borrowing of words from previous raters may actually have been a shared, parallel choice of the same words by two individuals without knowledge of each others' word choices. Further research is needed to find out how often we should expect raters to describe their experiences using the same or similar words even if they could not see one another's ratings.

Dr Kieran Walsh,
BMJ Learning, London, UK
Dr Susheel Suresh Kapoor,
Sassoon General Hospitals & B. J. Medical College, Pune, India

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