Consumer Demographics and Internet Based Health Information Search in the United States: The Intersectionality of Gender, Race, and Class

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ABSTRACT

Prescriptions for the successful provision of e-health information must integrate the varying needs of individuals for maintaining their personal health. Research emanating from both individual differences and health information searching literature suggests that a person’s characteristics influence the pursuit of online health information. This paper addresses the factors influencing variation in health information searching strategies based on demographic differences among healthcare information consumers in the United States of America. Specifically, the authors evaluate variation in health information searching about diabetes within a population that varies by race, gender, age, socio-economic status, and education. The theory utilized in this research was the Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT. Findings from this interpretive, qualitative study showed that differences such as race, gender, age, socio economic class, and geographic location all have an influence on searching behavior. However, it was found that these factors work together to influence behavior, rather than independently.

Keywords: Demographics, Diabetes, e-Health, Health information, Individual differences, Information behavior, Information search

INTRODUCTION

It has been stated that “health care is not just about health anymore, it has become an issue of comprehensive well-being covering mental, physical and social dimensions” (Lahtiranta, 2009). Among the factors that are contributing to this increase in demand are the aging population, high levels of obesity, and poor diets and nutrition. This increased demand for health care exists alongside limited access to doctors and other health care providers. In addition, the increasing cost of health care and less than
optimal health outcomes in the United States are encouraging the creation of innovative approaches to health management (Baur and Kanaan, 2006). It has also been reported that the benefits of timely access to health information include lower costs and shortened hospital stays (Klein et al., 1994). Access to health information yields not only economic benefits; it can also facilitate individuals’ proactive involvement in both their treatment and health maintenance. The Affordable Health Care for America Act, enacted in 2009, is presently encouraging health insurance companies to emphasize proactive health practices, preventative care, and wellness as measures to decrease health care costs. According to Lahtiranta (2009), individuals have become motivated “to take more control over their own health and in some cases over the health of their relatives. At the same time, individuals have become more knowledgeable about their personal health and health care in general, and they yearn to know more” (p. 230).

Consequently, in American society today, there is a growing demand for access to health care resources and health information. According to the Pew Internet Research Group (Fox, 2011), 80% of online users have searched for some health-related topic. Of those users, 66% start that search at a search engine, with only 27% of users starting at a health website (Fox, 2006). As it stands, the Internet - though an amazing possibility to provide access to health resources- has not replaced the doctor. Thus, it is important to understand where the Internet actually fits in the life of a consumer searching for health information online in order to inform adequate health oriented website content development. Income, gender and an individual’s exposure level to the Internet have been shown to influence health seeking behavior (Fox, 2006). Human diversity of users has been investigated in order to understand not only who might be using IT for health-related purposes, but also how. In addition, since health is a phenomenon that is experienced at the individual level, the differences in behavior, perception, and adherence of different people is an important area of study. Hence, understanding the human variation of people searching for health information is key to the creation of useful health resources, technology and programs. Thus, the desire to understand this human variation in the realm of health information searching provided the motivation for this study.

There are many health related services on the Internet that serve a variety of types of inquiry. These include information websites (e.g. WebMD, WebHealth), virtual communities (e.g. iVillage, TauMed), and institutional-based content (e.g. Mayo Clinic, National Institutes of Health, American Medical Association). In 2013, 35% of health related searches conducted were related to information about a specific disease or medical problem, as reported by the Pew Internet Study (Fox, 2013). According to Morahan-Martin (2004), some of the benefits of online health searching include: access to a large body of physical and mental health information, access to expert information that would otherwise be difficult to obtain, and anonymity and privacy. However, some of the drawbacks of online health searching are: receiving misleading information, viewing risk-promoting messages, experiencing information overload, and lack of peer review to insure information quality (Cline and Haynes, 2001).

Since health is multi-dimensional, it is reasonable to expect health information needs to be grounded in the background, experiences, and personal resources of people. Hence, prescriptions for the successful provision of e-health information must also take into account the varying needs of diverse individuals for maintaining their personal health. Research emanating from both individual differences and health information searching literature suggests that a person’s characteristics, perceptions, and behaviors influence and motivate the pursuit of online health information. Thus, research that integrates both streams could potentially benefit systems developers, web designers, and content providers by enabling them to better serve their clients in the domain of health. It would also inform health care providers about methods to assist patients in gaining access to information about healthy living, nutrition, medication, and best practices.
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