Online Trust and Health Information Websites

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ABSTRACT

Health care websites are important to people managing their health. But the quality of the information on health care websites varies, so it's hard for users to decide whether to trust their information. This study develops and tests a model of the factors influencing users' initial trust of a health care website. The factors are perceived credibility, risk, and ease of use. A survey instrument was developed to test the model with 176 participants who interacted with a health care website. It had strong statistical reliability and validity, and the model showed a statistically strong fit to the data. Users' website trust was significantly explained by users' perceptions of website credibility, ease of use, and risk. Ease of use directly predicted trust, and affected trust indirectly through credibility. Credibility was a direct predictor of trust and an indirect predictor of trust through risk. Variance explained by the model was high, 0.73.

Keywords: Online Health Care, Online Trust, Perception of Trust, Trust, Trust and Health, Well Health, Well Health Information

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important elements of health care success, whether in the context of health wellness or illness, is trust between the health care provider and the health care user. But what happens to trust when health information goes online? The use of the Internet for obtaining health information has grown in the United States from about 40% of adult Internet users in 2001 (Baker, Wagner, Singer, & Bundorf, 2003) to over 61% of all U.S. adults in 2009 (Cohen & Adams, 2011). This is over 187 million people. Fifty-six percent of these people report that the information obtained has impacted how they take care of themselves or another (Cohen & Adams, 2011). In addition, while it is not surprising that the Internet is a source of health information about specific diseases and treatments, 59% of American adults consult the Internet for health wellness information such as descriptions of healthy diets, exercise, and stress management (Fox & Jones, 2009). The Internet is obviously becoming an important tool for well health information dissemination, and as such has the potential to improve health

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and engagement in one’s own health care. But what about trust? As the Internet more and more supplements and even supplants health care providers as primary sources of health information for users, an open question is “what will the role of trust be in this new liaison?” It is clear that, in order for online health information to be effective, it will be important that users have trust in informational health websites. Users of health information websites have indicated that online trust is important. The American Accreditation Healthcare Commission found that while users have a high interest in getting health information online, they have a low level of trust (D’Andrea, 2002). Yet little empirical study has been done to date on trust related to online health informational websites. Given that significant numbers of people are today actively seeking and acting on online health information, understanding users’ experiences of trust as they interact with health information websites is critical. Preliminary findings indicate that people who trust health information websites take their advice (Sillence, Briggs, Fishwick, & Harris, 2007b), but more study is needed.

In this study, we seek to identify factors that affect users’ trust in health information websites as well as a way to measure these factors. The implication of extending our understanding of online trust to informational health information websites is simple but significant. This knowledge can be used to build health information websites that facilitate user trust so that online health information will be an effective tool in promoting health. Online trust of health information websites can also help to create empowered people who are knowledgeable about their health and health care. This is an arena which can have significant implications for enormous numbers of individuals.

This study examines online trust and three antecedents in the context of health information websites. While there are two distinct categories of health information online, i.e., those with a focus on health wellness and those focused on disease; in this study we constrain our focus to the first. In addition, many types of trust have been identified in the trust literature, ranging from initial, early, or swift trust to stages of trust developed over time. In this study, we again focus on the first, initial trust. The purpose, then, of this study is to develop better measures for predicting and explaining online trust of health information websites, through the study of applicability of a model of online trust in the context of a health information website. The organization of the paper is as follows. First, a review is presented of relevant patient-caregiver trust research, health-oriented website trust, and factors that impact trust as defined by the proposed model. The investigation focuses on three antecedents to online trust: credibility, ease of use, and risk. A description of the experiment and experimental methods and tools follows. Results of an analysis that refines the measurement items are given, which are extended to include an analysis of the fit of the online trust model to the health information dataset. Finally, a discussion is presented followed by conclusions and future directions.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Trust has a rich research history. The majority of it examined trust in the non-online, or offline, world. These offline trust researchers attempted to develop a common theory of trust. However, to date this goal remains elusive. What researchers did establish were multiple definitions of trust, a variety of antecedents of trust, and a broad spectrum of insights into the nature of trust (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995). As early trust researchers came to discover, trust is a very complex, multi-faceted, and context-dependent concept that likely cannot be described by a single definition or set of antecedents. It is the antecedents that are of interest in this study.

**Offline trust.** One of the most common themes in offline trust research is the study of factors that affect the assignation of trust by an individual. Consistently, researchers identified risk as an important trust construct (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Luhmann, 1988; Deutsch, 1962). In fact, Giddens (1990) referred to the perception of risk as the constant companion
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