

Chapter IV

The Internet and Managing Boomers and Seniors' Health

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Abstract

This chapter examines the use of the Internet for gathering health information by boomers and seniors. This study attempts to determine whether online health seekers (individuals that have Internet access and have searched for health information online) have changed their behavior from the information they found online. Essentially, has online health information helped them manage their health more effectively? This research analyzes the Kaiser Family Foundation e-Health and the Elderly public opinion dataset of access by boomers and seniors to online health information. The major results indicate that boomers marginally use online health information more than seniors for the management of their health. The most significant results indicated that boomers and seniors who are more aware and have positive feelings towards online health information would use it more to manage their health.

Introduction and Background

For baby boomers, the Internet has become the most important source of health information other than consultation with their family doctor (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005). The focus of this chapter is on both baby boomers, those in the age range of 50 to 64, and seniors or those 65 and older.¹ This study examines the use of online health information by baby boomers and seniors and how they use the information for managing their health. The Internet can empower citizens in their health management (Alpay et al., 2007). The primary objectives of this article are to examine the differences in behavior between boomers and seniors and to test for the presence of a variety of associations between their characteristics and a number of management of health variables.

This study explores five specific questions. First, are there any differences between boomers and seniors and their access to health information for managing health? Second, will healthier boomers and seniors rely less on online health information to manage their health because they would have less need? Third, will the presence of boomers and seniors that have more experience and familiarity with the Internet lead to greater use of online health information to manage health? Fourth, would individuals who are in a lower sociodemographic status rely less on online health information because of lack of resources to access this information? Finally, would avid Internet users use online health information more often to manage their health because they would have greater access to and familiarity with the Internet?

Eighty percent of American Internet users have searched for information on at least 1 of 17 health topics (Fox, 2006). This places health searches at about the same level of popularity on a typical day as paying bills online, reading blogs, or using the Internet to look up a phone number or address. Certain groups of Internet users in 2006 were the most likely to have sought health information online: women, Internet users younger than 65, college graduates, those with more online experience, and those with broadband Internet access at home.

Online health information is especially important given the millions of uninsured Americans trying to get information on their health situation. Individuals can use this online health information to make informed choices on their healthcare needs. They can potentially use information on the Internet to better manage their health. Essentially, has online health information influenced the behaviors of boomers and seniors with respect to their healthcare needs? This influence could be as extensive as visiting a doctor or simply talking to family or friends about health information that a boomer or senior found online.

Access to timely and reliable information on health and healthcare has long been a goal for seniors, who face a greater number of health conditions and use prescription drugs and healthcare services at a higher rate than younger adults (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005). However, the online behavior of seniors has not been studied

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