Chapter XVII
The Internet, Health Information, and Managing Health:
An Examination of Boomers and Seniors

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ABSTRACT

This article 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 behaviors from the information they found online. Essentially, has online health information helped them to 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 toward 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 article 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 primary objectives of this ar-

ticle are to examine the differences in behavior between boomers and seniors and to test for the presence of a variety of associations among 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 in order 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, will individuals who are in a lower sociodemographic status rely less on online health information because of lack of resources to access this information? Finally, will 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?

The American health care system is different from many Western countries, since it is administered primarily by the private marketplace. The majority of the United States population contracts with a private provider for his or her health insurance coverage. Medicare is a federal health insurance program for people age 65 and older. In addition, Medicaid, a program sponsored by the federal government and administered by states, is intended to provide health care and health-related services to low-income individuals. However, there are millions of Americans who do not fit into either the Medicare or Medicaid plans and, essentially, remain uninsured. 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 health care needs. They potentially can 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 health care 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 health care long has been a goal for seniors, who face a greater number of health conditions and use prescription drugs and health care services at a higher rate than younger adults (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005). However, the online behavior of seniors has not been studied as closely as that of health information searches of adolescents (Gray, Klein, Noyce, Sesselberg, & Cantrill, 2005), women (Pandey, Hart, & Tiwary, 2003), cancer patients (Eysenbach, 2003; Ziebland, 2004), those affected by the digital divide (Skinner, Biscope, & Poland, 2003), and those that compare online and off-line behavior (Cotton & Gupta, 2004). There is little empirical research that examines whether online health searches affect the management of health (Lueg, Moore, & Warkentin, 2003; Nicholas, Huntington, Williams, & Blackburn, 2001), one of the two objectives of this study. This study measures whether Internet health information changed the self-reporting behavior of boomers and seniors and does not specifically address change in health outcomes.

There are two reasons why this study does a comparison of both boomers and seniors. First, baby boomers represent future seniors, and by examining this age group, this study can provide some indication about what the future holds for the Internet and health information. Second, both boomers and seniors are in the greatest need of health information, since they are more prone to have health problems than other age groups.

This study is different from existing works of Nicholas et al. (2001), Lueg et al. (2003), and Huntington et al. (2004), since it focuses on the use of online health information in the management of health. This study focuses especially on

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