

Chapter 3.16

Internet as a Source of Health Information and Its Perceived Influence on Personal Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this study is twofold. First, the authors seek to identify the factors that influence members of the general public to conduct Internet searches for health information. Their second intent is to explore the influence such Internet use has on three types of personal empowerment. In the summer of 2007 the authors conducted a household sample survey of a population of Canadian adults. A total of 261 self-administered questionnaires were returned to the researchers. Our findings indicate that use of the Internet as a

source of health information is directly related to three main factors: sex, age and the individual's perceived ability to understand, interpret and use the medical information available online. Further, their results lend support to the notion that using the Internet to search for information about health issues represents a more consumer-based and participative approach to health care. This study is one of the first to relate Internet use to various forms of personal empowerment. This area appears to have great potential as a means by which consumers can become more empowered in managing personal health issues.

INTRODUCTION

A number of studies have confirmed growing use of the Internet to find information on personal health issues. For example, it has been estimated that of the 15 million Canadians who had Internet access in the home in 2005, 58%, or 8.7 million, used it to search for health information (Underhill & McKeown, 2008). The majority of these users said that they had searched for information about a specific ailment or about lifestyle issues such as nutrition, diet or exercise. More recent data from the United States have shown that in 2007, 71% of adults turned to the Internet for health information. This percentage stood at 61% in 2006 and 53% in 2005 (Harris Interactive, 2007).

Increased use of the Internet by the general public is transforming people's relationships with their health. By providing wide access to information, advice and health services, the Internet is increasingly seen as a powerful lever for personal empowerment (Wilson, 2001). These opportunities therefore deserve a closer examination. In recent years, various studies have shed light on the opportunities provided by the Internet with regard to personal empowerment in health. These studies have been based on different visions of the construct, which is generally defined as the development of the individual's involvement in responsibility to their health care. According to Lemire et al. (2008), studies on this subject have focused on the impact of Internet use on the development of one of three forms of personal empowerment: *professional* empowerment, which is focused on the individual's self-actualization for approaches more consistent with expert knowledge (Fox et al., 2005; Henwood et al., 2003); *consumerist* empowerment, which is focused on choices based on personal judgement and resources (Kalichman et al., 2002); and *community* empowerment, which is focused on better social inclusion in a group or community (Radin, 2006; Hsiung 2000; Burrows et al., 2000).

However, there are two main reasons why only limited generalizations can be made from past studies. First, the data was collected from very specific groups. For example, the samples consisted of people who had serious illnesses (e.g., Kalichman et al., 2002; Radin, 2006), who were using a specific drug (e.g., Henwood et al., 2003) who had similar health concerns (e.g., Fox et al., 2005), or who relied on the same Web site as the main source of their health information (e.g., Fox et al., 2005; Radin, 2006; Hsiung, 2000). Second, the data were often collected without trying to understand the development of personal empowerment in relation to past research on searches for information on the Internet and to the specific nature of how online health information is consulted. To our knowledge, the study by Lemire et al. (2008) is the only one that has examined simultaneous development of the three forms of empowerment mentioned above. Our research is an extension of their study, inasmuch as it tries to extend the reach of its theoretical and practical contributions. More specifically, instead of analyzing the three forms of user empowerment on a single Web site, we shall examine opinions and points of view expressed by a sample of the general public. In other words, in order to sidestep the above-mentioned limitations, the present study sought to identify the factors that influence members of the general public to conduct Internet searches for health information and explore the influence of Internet use on three types of personal empowerment.

RESEARCH MODEL

The research model presented in Figure 1 links previous research on Internet use as a source of health information to its impact on the empowerment or self-empowerment of individuals in how they manage personal health issues.

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