

The Role of the Internet in Health Informatics among Older Adults

An Exploration of Process, Meaning, and Experience



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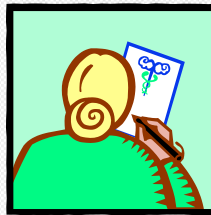
Overview

- Background of study
- Methodology
- Results



Background

Increasing older adult population will need to become savvy consumers of online health information to leverage resources for care



Health Needs to be Met Online (Gunter, 2005)



- Gaining a realistic idea of prognosis
- Making the most of consultations
- Learning about available services and sources of help
- Identifying self-help groups
- Preventing further illness

Social Informatics

The systematic study of the social aspects of computerization...an interdisciplinary study of the design, uses, and consequences of information communications technologies (ICTs such as email, the Internet, etc.) that takes into account their interaction with institutional and cultural contexts” (Kling, Rosenbaum, & Sawyer, 2005, p. 3-4)



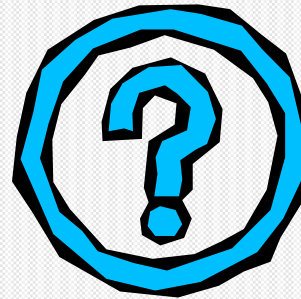
Social Informatics (Continued)

1. Context of ICT use directly affects the ICT's meanings and roles
2. ICTs are not value neutral; their use creates winners and losers
3. ICT use leads to multiple, and often paradoxical, effects
4. ICT use has moral and ethical aspects and these have social consequences
5. ICTs are configurable - they are actually collections of distinct components
6. ICTs follow trajectories and these trajectories often favor the status quo
7. ICT's co-evolve during design/development/use (before and after implementation)

(Kling, Rosenbaum, & Sawyer, 2005, p. 93)

Research Questions

1. What is the experience of older adults who use the Internet to access health information?
2. What, if any, meaning to participants attach to the experience of accessing health information online?
3. What steps do older adults take to find health information online?
4. How do older adults determine the trustworthiness of online health information?



Methodology

- Email-based qualitative interviews
- Thematic analysis



Participants



- Aged 50 or older, set low to ensure enough participants
- 5 total participants
- Offered \$20 for participation
- Received questions from researcher in 3 separate emails
- 3 weeks to collect data

Experiences of Older Adults Who use the Internet for Health Information

- Market forces: There is a bottom line and that line is green
- Informed consumer
- Health care gaps or supplements: 'Dr. Google' is in 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- Internet empowerment: I have to do this myself
- Connecting with others: The human relationship online



Experiences of older Adults Who use the Internet for Health Information (Continued)

“I know that there are many forces, INCLUDING MARKET FORCES, influencing what is put forward”

“Our doctors frequently don't have the time (or skills) to communicate the information we need... Often, I find that I have to bridge gaps between specialists, who treat problems resulting from my disorder from their separate specialties. I end up in the role of carrying information and sometime[s] end up with more pertinent and current information than the docs I am seeing as it relates to my issues. I have email relationships with two of my physicians in order to pass along articles that may be of interest to them.”

Experiences of older Adults Who use the Internet for Health Information (Continued)

“It is hard to be ill and to have to be the one saving yourself from the system that is meant to help. Online information made me able to walk sanely in an insane period of my life.”

“I tend to think in terms of human relationships when searching for information.”

“My personal health information has been of interest on occasion, but I mostly look for information for others...My mother has early dementia, so I learn about that. My son is ADHD and LD, and fights depressions, so I learn about that. My dog is now 14, so I look to the internet for health information and support in her last years.”

The Meaning and Impact of Going Online for Health Information

“It would not be an understatement to say that the Internet has saved my life, and helped me preserve function because I can keep up with emerging research on my disorder... It has allowed me to put together a team of caregivers, and to keep this team informed. Without online, I probably would not be here breathing on the planet. Without online I might have become so disabled that I could not function as a social worker and as a family member.”

Locating Health Information Online

- Process of getting health information online
- Barriers to health information online
- Making online health information easier to find



Locating Health Information Online (Continued)

“When I am looking to get a specific answer, I usually ‘Google’ it and go from there.”

“If my mothers friends are curious about anything I do research for them. Recently, my mother had cataract surgery and was curious about what the surgery entailed so I looked it up on the Internet for her.”

“I have experienced few obstacles, except the need to pay for some journal or scholarly articles.”

Locating Health Information Online (Continued)

“If there were a real live person at the end of the web MD or the other web sight then that would be great to have a back and forth Q and A with a real human being... If there were something where a real live person were answering the questions or giving you directions of where to find the health info that would be great.”

Trustworthiness of Online Health Information

“There is so much advertising by the companies, and there are also many blogs and personal gripe pages, it is important to seek out professional sources. Sometimes they are hard to differentiate from the crap.”

“It is always about ‘sorting’ and looking at several sources.”

“Since this is still America, I guess anyone can post info...let the buyer beware...consider the source.”

“In terms of knowing if the information is good or bad, you have to trust your gut instinct. If it sounds bazaar, chances are it probably is bad information.”

Implications for Practice



- Importance of Google search results and good web design
- “I can do this myself” attitude among participants - are they being forced to go online for health information, are they empowered, or both?
- Participants going online to find services, especially to comfort and aid a loved one
- Interventions targeting health information needs of older adults should cater to their relationships with others

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