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Persuasive Email Messages for Patient Communication
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Abstract
To improve health and reduce costs, we need to encourage patients to make better health care decisions. Since email is widely available, it may be useful for patient-directed interventions. However, we know little about how the contents of an email message can influence a health-related decision. We propose a model to understand how patients may process persuasive email messages.

Introduction
It is estimated that 63% of adult Americans have access to electronic mail (email), and email is the most popular activity conducted over the internet.[1] As an asynchronous technology, a message can be retrieved and read at the convenience of the recipient. Email also provides a way to document conversations, and can be tracked. Therefore email may be a particularly useful medium for exchange of information between patients and providers. Email marketing professionals have suggested that sender address and the subject line of an email are critical elements for successful email campaigns.[2]

A Model for Persuasive Messages
To date little research exists to explain how patients process email messages. A better understanding of message processing, and the factors that effect acceptance of such requests may help improve patient compliance.

Figure 1 shows the Persuasive Message Processing Model that uses the 7-stages of action as defined by Norman[3] in order to help explain at the individual action level why a message is accepted and acted upon. The processing model provides a useful perspective in helping to explain how modifying the presentation of a message (e.g., sender or subject lines) impacts discrete stages of individual action such as message perception, interpretation and evaluation. We also incorporate the Heuristic-Systematic Processing Model to explain how individuals make decisions.[4] Individuals either use rules of thumb and shortcuts (heuristic approach), or they use more rational, careful or effortful thinking (systematic approach) to make decisions.

Conclusion
In order to develop effective email interventions directed at patients, it is important to understand how email messages are processed. The persuasive message processing model provides a theory to help design messages that can influence and change behavior. In future work we aim to the test model in clinical areas, such as encouraging patients with diabetes to keep clinic appointments.

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