

The Factors Behind Seeking Online Health Information

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Abstract: The search for online health information is experiencing a notable increase. The study endeavors to investigate the underlying determinants of seeking online health information through a qualitative approach and fieldwork in Azimpur and Bangsal Thana of Dhaka South City Corporation. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with 35 respondents from the specified area who had prior experience in seeking health information online. In addition to respondent interviews, online observation was conducted to explore individuals' encounters with online health information, diagnosis, or treatment. Furthermore, secondary sources including pertinent articles, journals and books were reviewed to enhance comprehension of the prevailing knowledge on the research question, as well as the boundaries and opportunities within the field. The findings of the study reveal that the factors driving the quest for online health information are linked to technological advancements, the proliferation of online healthcare platforms, concerns regarding privacy and trust in online health information, demographics of the online health information seekers, economic advantages and the linguistic obscurity of the biomedical system. The study offers valuable insights into the primary determinants of seeking online health information within the context of Bangladesh.

Keywords: Online, health, information, Bangladesh

Introduction

Traditionally, health information (both online and from healthcare professionals) has been based on the scientific facts and figures concerning the illness or condition. However, people may desire more than facts. They may want to know about how others have experienced what they are going through or wish to share their own experiences with others (Sillence et al, 2013). In recent years, the quest for online health information has surged, driven by rapid advancements in technology and the growing availability of digital healthcare resources. This phenomenon is particularly evident in urban areas such as Dhaka, where access to information is increasingly facilitated by the internet. The present study aims to delve into the multifaceted motivations behind individuals seeking health information online,

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specifically focusing on the communities of Azimpur and Bangsal Thana within Dhaka South City Corporation.

The results of this study illuminate a variety of factors influencing the pursuit of online health information, including technological accessibility, the rise of digital health services and varying degrees of trust and privacy concerns. Furthermore, demographic trends, economic considerations, and the complexities of the biomedical language all play critical roles in shaping individuals' experiences. By focusing on the specific context of Bangladesh, this research contributes valuable insights into the determinants of online health information-seeking behavior, offering a deeper understanding of both challenges and opportunities within the field.

Methodology

Utilizing a qualitative research approach, the investigation draws on in-depth interviews with 35 respondents who have firsthand experience in navigating online health resources. Complementing these interviews, online observations were conducted to capture the nuanced interactions individuals have with digital health platforms. Additionally, a comprehensive review of secondary literature—including relevant articles, journals and books was undertaken to contextualize the findings within the broader landscape of health information-seeking behavior.

Findings and Discussion

Technological advancement

The widespread availability of health information online is largely due to advancements in technology. The majority of individuals now turn to the internet for health-related information. Recent technological advancements and the widespread use of smartphones have significantly contributed to this trend. In the past, health information was limited to specific networks, often relying on familial, social and local healthcare resources. This process was time-consuming and labor-intensive. However, the current reliance on personal technological devices such as smartphones, computers and the internet has transformed this landscape. The Internet- the largest network for communication, has made a chance to access a variety of health information while staying at home using the Internet through smartphones and computer devices (Murray E et al, 2003). A respondent said:

"Smartphones and the Internet have transformed every aspect of our lives. Information is now freely available, and it can be used or misused."

In addition to primary healthcare, people can access necessary health information more quickly and make healthcare decisions in emergencies. A case study related to this matter is discussed below:

Case Study-1: Alo Akter (pseudonym), a 30-year-old housewife residing in Bangsal, Dhaka with her husband Jubaer Islam and their one-year-old son, believes in the positive effects of smartphones, especially for learning and awareness. Although her husband, who works as an Imam in a local mosque and is studying in the final year of Alia Madrasa, strictly adheres to religious rules and avoids using the Internet or watching television, they both have smartphones. Alo worked as a healthcare provider for a year in a Brac project before her marriage. Her work involved providing essential information to pregnant mothers from labor and lower middle-class families in Kamrangirchar, who faced obstacles in visiting health facilities due to physical limitations, family reluctance, religious constraints, and superstitions. The project aimed to benefit the community by sharing health information, which was particularly challenging in urban areas where families valued privacy. However, it proved to be more successful in rural communities where social bonds are stronger. With the widespread use of smartphones and internet access, almost every family now has a smartphone and the majority of internet users have Facebook accounts and use YouTube. Alo believes that online health information spread through social media is a significant blessing for pregnant women and mothers, as it helps them care for themselves and their children, especially in making quick decisions regarding primary care and emergencies. She often discusses these benefits with her husband.

Proliferation of online healthcare platforms

The online healthcare platforms have provided individuals with access to a wide array of resources for discussing and seeking solutions to specific health issues while maintaining their privacy. This trend has resulted in a notable increase in the number of internet users seeking health-related information online. Among a total of 35 respondents, more than 50% have reported utilizing Bangladeshi online healthcare information sources like *Doctorola*³, *Maya*⁴, *Aponjon*⁵, *Doktorkoi*⁶ to address their health concerns. Particularly, the *Doctorola* has been highlighted as an effective tool for facilitating the process of finding and scheduling appointments with doctors. Furthermore, nearly all respondents are familiar with, and some are active members of, healthcare-related pages and sites on social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube. Some individuals have expressed bewilderment regarding their inclusion in these groups and pages, attributing this to unintentional

³ *Doctorola*. (n.d.). <http://www.doctorola.com>

⁴ *Maya in partnership with BRAC*. (n.d.). <https://www.maya.com.bd/>

⁵ *Aponjon*. (n.d.). <http://www.aponjon.com.bd/>

⁶ *Doktor Koi*. (n.d.). <http://www.doctorkoi.com>

engagement with posts and subsequent membership without their explicit consent.

Case Study-2: Sumaiya Akhi (pseudonym), a 23-year-old housewife living in Azimpur, Dhaka with her husband. Having lost her mother at a young age, she found it challenging to discuss her health concerns with others. Living in Dhaka with few neighbors to talk to, she often felt uncomfortable sharing her physical problems, even with her husband. However, her life took a positive turn when she came to know about *Maya web platform* from Facebook. This discovery opened up a world of possibilities for Sumaiya. This website allowed her to seek advice on any health issue anonymously, providing her with a sense of relief and comfort. She began writing her health-related queries and found it to be a valuable source of information. Sumaiya has been using the source frequently and considers it a blessing. She appreciates the convenience of being able to seek health-related information without having to burden others or incur unnecessary medical expenses. The *Maya* has also guided her on when to seek medical help, leading her to specialists when necessary. Sumaiya is grateful for the anonymity and support provided by the website, as it has helped her better understand her health issues and how to address them. She believes that such health information sources are a lifeline for individuals like her who find it difficult to openly discuss their health concerns with others.

Privacy concern

Disease and illness are culturally constructed (Helman, 2007). It is significant how a society or culture perceives a disease or illness. Certain diseases, particularly those of a sexual or infectious nature, are subject to social stigma and often become topics of gossip. Research indicates that individuals experience difficulty in openly discussing their sexual health concerns or inquiries with family, friends and even healthcare professionals, often grappling with the appropriate terminology to articulate their conditions. For instance, some women express gratitude for having a confidante, such as a sister-in-law, elder sister, or experienced female, with whom they can discuss their personal (sexual) health matters. Conversely, men perceive a loss of esteem if they are deemed impotent and are disinclined to openly address their sexual health issues, even in the face of jest. A respondent said-

It is a matter of great devaluation for a man if someone thinks of you as impotent. You will mind even if someone jokes with you. You don't ever want to make your sexual health problem public.

About 7 male respondents admitted to feeling reticent about discussing their sexual problems, while others (14 respondents out of total) turned to the internet as a private and secure means of seeking information on sensitive health topics, including sexual health. The study also revealed that some

respondents chose to conceal their illnesses to avoid being ostracized or shunned, as well as to prevent their conditions from becoming fodder for gossip. In this context, the internet emerged as a preferred avenue for seeking privacy and acquiring knowledge about sexual and other sensitive health matters.

Trustworthiness

The study investigated trust in online health information by asking participants, "How much do you trust medical information and tips provided online?" The majority of respondents expressed positive views. They mentioned that they found online health information beneficial in real-life situations, especially when they or their family members were unwell or had health concerns. However, a small number of participants, only 6 out of 35, indicated that they generally do not prefer to read or search for health information online. They cited reasons such as lack of trustworthiness, not knowing how to begin searching, and not feeling the need to seek health information online. A case study reflecting the above analysis is discussed below-

Case Study-3: Rubel (pseudonym), a 28 years old youth, works for a buying house in Dhaka. He is unmarried and lives in Bangsal with his mother and younger sister. He frequently comes across online health information on social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and blogs using his smartphone. He finds this information beneficial for learning about preventive and diagnostic suggestions, vaccination, unhealthy food and food habits, poisonous chemicals used in fruit preservation, exercise techniques, and more. Rubel believes that people will only share information they trust. However, he also acknowledges that some online health information lacks scientific basis and may be misleading, despite being presented as scientifically proven. Those who post such information often use techniques to make it seem valid, such as adding relevant photos, design, mentioning significant medical research centers, and providing examples. Rubel warns that blindly trusting such information without careful observation could be harmful to public health.

Demographic factors influencing online health information seeking

The study examined the preferences and tendencies of individuals in seeking health-related information on the internet. It revealed that demographic factors such as gender, age and educational background significantly influence these behaviors. Gender, minority status, income and education are correlated with health and internet behaviors (Miller, 2012).

The study indicated that men and women exhibit different inclinations when seeking online health information. Men are more likely to search for

information related to sexual tips, workout techniques and meditation, while women generally seek information on diet, nutrition, reproductive health, maternal and child care during and after pregnancy and beauty tips.

Age was also found to be a significant factor in online health-seeking behavior. Younger adults tend to seek information on sexual tips, workout techniques and meditation, while relatively older adults are more interested in information related to various diseases and how to manage and prevent conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer and obesity. Furthermore, the study highlighted that individuals with higher educational attainment exhibit more selectivity and caution in seeking health information online compared to those with lower educational attainment.

The linguistic complexity of the biomedical system

The biomedical system faces a significant issue of using complex medical terminology that patients struggle to understand. Many individuals receive prescriptions for tests and medications without a clear understanding of their conditions, causing confusion and frustration. A respondent stated-

Once I asked a doctor about the given pathological tests. In fact, he suggested 7 tests that I was astonished by. I asked him, why should I do all these things? He counter-questioned me; have you come here to recover from your problem or to learn the medical process? I didn't talk anymore after his response.

The internet has become an essential tool for people to educate themselves about medical terms and procedures, especially when they feel they haven't received adequate information from their healthcare providers.

Case study-4: Sadia (pseudonym), a 32-year-old housewife living in Azimpur, faced difficulties understanding her thyroid gland condition. When she initially visited a doctor, she was given numerous pathological tests without a clear understanding of their purpose. This lack of communication led her to seek information online, where she found detailed resources explaining her condition and treatment options. Despite finding helpful information online, Sadia still continued to consult with her doctor for medical advice and treatment.

The limited time doctors spend with patients and the lack of clear communication regarding medical conditions and treatment options hinder patients' ability to make informed decisions about their healthcare. Patients should have the right to fully understand their health conditions and treatment plans, as well as the freedom to explore alternative treatment options if they feel it is necessary. This would lead to more effective and personalized healthcare for individuals.

Economic advantage

Seeking health information online can be economically beneficial. A third of respondents have mentioned that they opt for online health information due to economic advantages. They find that the cost of visiting public hospitals for outdoor doctors is low, but the long queues and wait times make it inconvenient. Additionally, doctors may not give patients adequate attention. Private doctor visits cost at least Tk. 500, which is a burden for many low-income families. One of the respondents said-

I am unemployed and often have no extra money. How can I afford to spend so much money visiting a doctor? Seeking a remedy from online sources provides an affordable alternative.

According to respondents, nearly 50% of health issues can be addressed through primary treatment information, leading them to rely on online health resources. The internet also plays a significant role in providing information on affordable and quality treatment options. Let's delve into a case study that illustrates these points:

Case Study-5: Md. Shahiduzzaman Shakeeb (pseudonym), a 26 years old graduate residing in Comilla, is currently living with his brother's family in Azimpur, Dhaka, while searching for employment. Despite using the internet for more than four years, primarily for job hunting and entertainment, Shahiduzzaman has extensive experience with various online platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, email, LinkedIn, and blogs, which significantly influence his real-life decisions. Shahiduzzaman highlights the economic benefits of seeking health information online, as it offers insights into affordable diagnosis and treatment options. While he has sought primary healthcare tips online, he prefers consulting a physician directly for major health concerns, despite the subpar services in public hospitals. His perspective emphasizes the importance of not blindly following online health information and considering all available options.

Conclusion

This study explores why people turn to the Internet for health information and examines the factors that influence their decision to do so. The impact of online health resources on health outcomes is intricate. Certain resources can facilitate decision-making, provide valuable support and expose individuals to positive coping experiences, thereby improving their adjustment to the disease and helping them realize that they are not alone in their illness journey. In contrast, some online health information may be misleading and potentially harmful to public health.

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