

The Psychological Impact of the Internet as a Source of Health Information

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Abstrak

The internet is a source of health information for people in the digital age. By seeking health information through the internet, information seekers can seek the health information they need quickly and widely. In addition to the positive impact, the internet as a source of health information also has a negative impact on the seeker of information. The purpose of this article is to reveal the negative impact of utilizing the internet as a source of health information in the form of psychological impact. The method used is literature review. The findings of this article are that the internet has a psychological impact in the form of health anxiety. Information seekers who suffer from health anxiety tend to shut themselves off from people, lose concentration at work or study, withdraw from pleasant things, have poor relationships with health experts, drain money, and often feel anxiety symptoms. In response to this problem, information seekers need to equip themselves with digital literacy skills.

Kata Kunci: Digital Literacy; Health Information; Information Seeking; Internet

A. Introduction

Health information can not only be sought through offline media but also online media. The internet is a source of health information that people turn to in the digital era to fulfill their health-related information needs. This is in line with the results of research conducted by Chu et. al, (2017) regarding the perception of seeking health information via the internet. The study found that 97% (47-49) of respondents agreed that the internet is often the first media used to meet health-related information needs.

The positive public perception of the internet as a source of health-related information is not without reason. It cannot be denied that the internet as a source of health-related information provides various benefits that conventional media cannot provide. The internet provides health information in a practical, broad, fast and easy way so it is not surprising that people choose the internet as a source of

health-related information. The internet can educate the seekers of information related to health issues such as the nature, causes, prevention, and treatment of certain health conditions without being limited by space and time (McMullan et al., 2019). Not only about diseases, the internet also provides information that promotes healthy living behaviors, helps make health decisions, and opens opportunities to exchange health information and get social support (Cline & Haynes, 2001). In addition, there are psychological benefits, namely by reducing hopelessness and providing emotional relief related to health issues faced (Moretti et al., 2012). Another benefit that can be felt is in economic terms. Seeking health information through the internet can provide cheap or even free answers to health issues experienced without having to consult health experts. Costs and time spent that should be used to consult with health experts can be cut by utilizing the internet (Alwi et al., 2019).

In addition to the benefits offered, access to health information is also easy. Due to the development of technology, various online media have emerged that can make it easier for people to fulfill health-related information. Health information on the internet can be sought in various online media that specifically discuss health. One of the online media to fulfill health-related information needs is through health sites. The emergence of health-related sites on the internet is the beginning of the availability of health information on the internet. In line with this, Ryan and Wilson (2008) state that the availability of health information is characterized by the existence of various sites that contain health information to health services. There are a large number of health-related sites on the internet. According to Scaffi and Rowley (2017) health sites available on the internet are estimated to reach more than 70,000 sites. Examples of health-related sites are WebMD, World Health Organization, Daily Medical Info, Drugs.com and so on. Examples of health-related sites in Indonesia are guesehat.com, Alodokter, Ministry of Health, and so on.

With the development of technology, health-related applications have also emerged. Through health applications, users can consult with doctors online, offer convenience in ordering drugs and laboratory tests, and provide home care services (Marpaung & Irwansyah, 2021). Various health apps can be found in Indonesia, such as Sehatpedia, Halodoc, SehatQ, and others.

Apart from health websites and apps, health-related information can also be sought on social media. There are various kinds of social media used to seek health information. According to research conducted by Marar et al. (2019) found that among 374 participants, 352 (93.9%) used at least one type of social media. The majority used WhatsApp (78%), followed by Snapchat (67%), YouTube (63%) and Twitter (58%). A total of 81.4% of the participants believe that health information available on social media has increased their health awareness. About 50% found the health information obtained from social media trustworthy, while 73.3% stated that the information obtained had an influence on their health status. Social media is an

informal platform to share health-related information. Through social media, patients around the world with similar health conditions can connect with each other, allowing them to discuss health problems and solutions together. In addition, social media can also influence the health decisions that a person will make. Patients consider strangers' comments when making medical decisions (Grajales et al., 2014; Hawkins et al., 2016; Song et al., 2016).

Despite the various benefits offered, the utilization of health information sought on the internet can backfire on the seeker of the information. Health sites, health apps, and social media accounts that specifically discuss health can continue to multiply so that health information can be more widespread. From this, health experts cannot fully control the content posted or discussions that occur on the internet so that health information on the internet is at high risk of inaccuracy or even tends to have the potential for misuse of information and cannot be medically accounted for. This is in accordance with the statements of Almuammar (2021), Marar et. al, (2019) and Singh and Brown (2016) that most of the health information circulating on the internet is inaccurate, misleading, contradictory, and incomplete. From this, ordinary people who do not have knowledge in the medical field can be negatively affected by the use of the internet as a source of health information in the form of psychological impacts, namely health anxiety.

B. Methods

The method used in writing this article is a literature study, which is a method of collecting data by understanding and studying theories from various literatures related to the research. The literature used in this article is in the form of research articles, survey results, and other articles.

C. Discussion

Whether we realize it or not, health information seeking on the internet has a negative impact on the psychology of the seeker. The seeking of health information can make people afraid of the health information that is found. White and Horvitz (2013) stated that health information on the internet tends to increase the fear of a serious illness. This can then make a person feel anxiety about their health.

Health anxiety is an anxiety disorder characterized by excessive and irrational fear of a health issue even though the health issue being worried about is not necessarily true. The fear or health anxiety felt by an individual is caused by the ability to process the information encountered by the individual. An individual who is unable to process the information encountered can think of various possibilities of the disease he is suffering from. This is in line with the results of research conducted by Peng. In his research, Peng (2022) found that an individual tends to overestimate the possibility of his illness because the amount of information received far exceeds

the capacity of the individual's information processing ability. Peng's research supports the results of previous studies that an excess amount of health information can result in high feelings of vulnerability and increased vigilance regarding perceived bodily sensations (Bala et al., 2021; Starcevic, 2017). Often, this can lead to incorrect self-diagnosis. For example, coughing can lead to COVID-19, stomach pain can lead to stomach cancer, headaches lead to brain tumors, and so on. If the wrong self-diagnosis is followed up with treatment without consultation, it can worsen the condition until it results in death.

Health anxiety is characterized when an individual feels sensations or symptoms in the body which are interpreted as symptoms of a disease that is dangerous to the individual's survival (Asmundson & Ferguson, 2019). Feeling unusual sensations in the body, individuals experiencing health anxiety need definitive answers to the issues at hand so that this encourages the seeking of certainty from health experts. This is in line with Tyrer and Tyrer's (2018) statement that individuals who experience health anxiety generally consult repeatedly with doctors or other health experts with the aim of obtaining certainty regarding the body sensations felt.

Contextualized in information seeking in the digital era, the search for reassurance is carried out by seeking information on the internet which leads to cyberchondria. Cyberchondria is when a person experiences increased anxiety when accessing health information on the internet so that this encourages the search for information to provide reassurance continuously on the internet (Rahme et al., 2021). Despite having the goal of reducing anxiety by seeking reassurance through information seeking on the internet, the health anxiety felt by the information seeker may worsen as the search progresses. This is in line with the statement of Mathes et. al, (2018) that the continuous search for certainty through information on the internet is an attempt to reduce anxiety but in the short term and can perpetuate health anxiety.

Health anxiety does not only haunt people with illnesses, but fit people can also feel health anxiety. This is because the main problem with health anxiety is how an individual responds to and copes with bodily sensations, not the symptoms or medical condition itself. If the decision or response is inappropriate or poor then health anxiety can become a problem for those who feel it. Here are the effects of health anxiety:

1. Relationships with family or friends

Time spent worrying about health or seeking help from health professionals positively impacts the ability to socialize or take care of important family matters. In addition, those closest to the individual experiencing health anxiety are also distressed. Loved ones feel frustrated with the individual experiencing health anxiety

as they continue to feel anxious despite negative test results. The culmination of this negative impact is feeling disappointed and even angry with those closest to them for not understanding what they are feeling or not being helpful in trying to figure out what is wrong.

2. Work or study

Individuals with health anxiety find it difficult to stop worrying and frequently check for symptoms of illness. This can interfere with concentration and focus on the task at hand. Work or study time can also be taken up by consulting health experts or seeking information related to perceived health issues via the internet, so individuals with health anxiety can fall behind in work or study tasks.

3. Enjoyment and life satisfaction

Being overly concerned about the potential outcomes of perceived health issues can lead to individuals with health anxiety being in a bad mood and depressed. Excessive anxiety about health issues can make a person sacrifice and withdraw from enjoyable things because they are preoccupied with seeking certainty about perceived health issues.

4. Relationship with health professionals

Repeated consultations with health professionals without clear results can lead to dissatisfaction in individuals with health anxiety. Individuals with health anxiety feel anger and frustration towards their healthcare providers or even the healthcare system as a whole. The culmination of this effect is that health professionals distrust them and consider them as having "hypochondria".

5. Financial

Health anxiety can make an individual spend a lot of money on repeated medical tests or procedures. In addition, travel expenses to consult with health experts also add up.

6. Unpleasant symptoms of anxiety

Individuals with health anxiety often feel restless, physically tense, or unable to relax. Individuals with health anxiety may also experience sleep disturbances, nausea, heart palpitations, chest pain, sweating, dizziness, or tingling.

Based on the impacts that have been described, health anxiety can be detrimental to the individual experiencing it as well as those around the individual, so there needs to be an effort to prevent and respond to health anxiety. Health anxiety is largely based on an individual's ability to handle health information found on the internet. In this regard, the first effort that can be made is to equip oneself by improving digital literacy. Digital literacy is defined as the ability to understand and use information in various formats with an emphasis on critical thinking rather than information and communication technology skills (Gilster, 1997). By improving digital literacy, ordinary people are expected to understand and utilize health information found on the internet as needed. This is in line with Alwi et. al,'s (2019) opinion that one of the main problems in seeking health information on the internet is the inability of consumers to accurately distinguish the quality of health information on the internet. For this reason, digital literacy skills are needed. According to Ng (2012) digital literacy has three components: technical (having technical and operational skills to learn and use computer technology and communication technology in daily activities), cognitive (the ability to think, evaluate, and digital information processing cycles in digital information research), and socio-emotional (using the Internet to communicate, socialize, and learn). The following are strategies in improving digital literacy skills:

1. Developing technical skills in ICT use

In improving digital literacy, technical proficiency in the use of ICT is one important component. Maximizing technical skills can help an individual to be more effective and efficient in interacting with digital technology and online information sources. From this, it is expected to maximize the use of ICT so as to facilitate daily activities.

2. Developing digital information seek skills

Information in the digital era is so abundant that it is difficult to seek information that is relevant to information needs. By having the ability to search for information, an individual can know a good strategy in searching for digital information sources. It is expected that by having good digital information search skills, an individual can be more skillful in searching and wiser in managing digital information so that the information sought can have a positive impact on daily activities.

3. Developing critical thinking skills

In responding to digital information, an individual needs to criticize the information and digital information sources sought. To do this requires critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills can be developed by always questioning, analyzing and making objective assessments of the information that has been

obtained. By having critical thinking skills, an individual understands the information sought critically so that it is expected to avoid the negative impact of information seeking such as health anxiety.

4. Engage in online communities

The internet opens up opportunities for people to connect and communicate without limited to space, allowing the emergence of online communities. Through online communities, community members can socialize, communicate and discuss. In addition, online communities can also provide emotional support. If there are members who have problems, other members will try to help by providing emotional and technical support in the form of discussing and sharing their experiences in overcoming similar problems.

In addition to digital literacy, other efforts that can be made by oneself are to take sufficient time to seek health advice thoroughly so as to understand the information found and not rush to make health decisions or disease diagnoses. Monitoring an individual's health information consumption, evaluating an individual's psychological state, and taking a break from health information seeking activities on the internet can also help an individual avoid health anxiety. This is done so that the focus of the information seeker is distracted and occupied with pleasant or productive activities from repetitive information seeking to seek reassurance to relieve feelings of anxiety. This is in accordance with Peng's (2022) statement that individuals who feel extreme anxiety can try to manage their symptoms, such as reducing focus on health symptoms and worries, re-evaluating worrying thoughts, and reducing excessive checking and seeking reassurance.

The second effort is content management. Content management is needed to manage health information on the internet. This requires the involvement of the government or official health organizations. The public needs to be directed to reliable and high-quality sources of information (Peng, 2022). The government or official health organizations can build digital platforms that are used to disseminate credible health-related information about symptoms, treatments, or health protocols. The information contained in the platforms of the government or official health organizations should also be easily understood by ordinary people so that the information is processed properly. In addition, the government or official health organizations need to pay attention to the production of health information by managing, checking, filtering, and even discarding or eliminating irrelevant information.

The third effort is to create good communication between doctors and patients. Searching for health information on the internet is not wrong. In fact, it is

a good thing because it indicates that the patient wants to be actively involved in treatment. With the patient taking an active role in their treatment, it can lead to better treatment outcomes (Shay & Lafata, 2015). In health information seeking, health experts need to be involved in health information seeking activities carried out by patients. Health experts and patients can discuss the information that patients find on the internet. Health experts help patients critically assess health information found on the internet so that patients can better evaluate health information.

D. Conclusion

In this digital era, the internet has become a source of health information that people turn to in order to fulfill their health-related information needs. The internet as a source of health-related information provides health information in a practical, broad, fast, and easy way that is very helpful for humans. However, the breadth of health information on the internet not only provides benefits but also problems in the form of the risk of misinformation caused by information that is difficult to control because it is too broad. This will have a negative impact on ordinary people in the form of psychological impacts, namely health anxiety. To overcome this, information finders need to have digital literacy skills so that they can sort out accurate information and avoid health anxiety.

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