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GRATIFICATION OF DIGITAL HEALTH INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOR: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF DEMOGRAPHICS, SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS, AND TRUST IN REMEDIES

Dr. Vineet Kumar[1], Dr. Abhishek Lachyan[2]*, Prof. Bandana Pandey[3] and Dr. Vaishali Billa[4]

[1]Department of Mass Communication and Media studies, Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh 201312, India.

[2]Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology, VMMC & Safdarjung Hospital, New Delhi-110029.

[3]Department of Mass communication and Media studies, Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh 201312, India.

[4]Department of Mass Communication, Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies, Pitampura, New Delhi, Delhi, 110034, India.

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***Corresponding Author: Dr. Abhishek Lachyan**
Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology, VMMC & Safdarjung Hospital, New Delhi-110029.
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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The internet has revolutionized access to health information, empowering individuals to make informed health decisions independently. However, the vastness of online content raises concerns about its reliability, accuracy, and credibility. Understanding patterns of health information seeking and trust in online remedies is essential to guide public health strategies and improve digital health literacy. **Method:** This cross-sectional, questionnaire-based study was conducted over three months to explore digital health information-seeking behaviors. An online survey, distributed via email and social media, collected responses from 123 participants. The survey included questions on demographics, internet usage, trust in online health information, and behavioral outcomes. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including chi-square tests, t-tests, and logistic regression. **Results:** The majority of participants were young, with 111 participants (90.3%) aged 18–25 years, and 67 participants (54.5%) identifying as female. Most respondents, 121 (98.4%), reported accessing social media, and 103 (83.7%) had previously searched for health information online. A substantial 57 participants (46.3%) followed online remedies, with 73 (59.7%) rating them as useful and 22 (17.7%) as very useful. Trust in remedies provided by health professionals online was moderate, with 62 participants (50.4%) expressing trust in such advice. Despite this, 76 participants (61.8%) prioritized consulting a doctor for health decisions over relying on online sources. **Conclusion:** While online health information is widely accessed, individuals still rely on healthcare professionals for decision-making. The study highlights the need for targeted digital health literacy initiatives and accurate health information dissemination, especially for younger audiences. Further research is needed to explore the factors influencing trust in online health content and its implications for healthcare delivery.

KEYWORDS: Demographic factors, Digital age, Digital engagement, Digital communication, Health decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the transformative influence of the internet on everyday life has been profound, particularly in the realm of health information access and dissemination. As a readily accessible and expansive platform, the internet has emerged as a primary source of health-related information for millions worldwide. This digital evolution has empowered individuals to take a more proactive role in managing their health, enabling them to seek knowledge and make informed decisions independently. However, the vastness of online content raises critical concerns regarding the reliability, accuracy, and credibility of such information.[1,2]

The digital landscape, enriched with health blogs, forums, social media content, and dedicated health websites, has not only changed how people obtain health information but also how they perceive and trust it. The democratization of information has shifted the traditional authority of healthcare providers, allowing the public to access medical guidance without direct consultation. While this shift has increased accessibility and autonomy, it also brings challenges associated with misinformation, varying quality of content, and differing levels of health literacy among users.[2,3]

Understanding how individuals engage with online health information is crucial in this context. Patterns of internet use, preferences for certain platforms, and the perceived credibility of sources vary significantly across demographic lines, including age, gender, education level, and occupation. These variations influence not only the type of information sought but also the likelihood of acting upon it, particularly when it comes to self-diagnosis or self-treatment based on online content. Furthermore, trust in health professionals providing information online plays a pivotal role in shaping user behavior, especially in an era where social media influencers often share space with qualified medical experts.[4,5,6]

As such, a nuanced examination of user behavior, preferences, and trust in digital health information is essential for informing public health strategies, improving digital health literacy, and guiding the ethical dissemination of online medical content.The aim of this study is to explore the complex dynamics of internet health information seeking. Specifically, it seeks to identify demographic trends in usage, evaluate the prevalence and patterns of seeking online remedies, and assess the level of trust in health professionals as sources of online information. Through this comprehensive analysis, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how diverse populations interact with digital health content and the implications this has for public health communication.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Setting

This was a cross-sectional, questionnaire-based study designed to explore patterns, preferences, and trust associated with digital health information-seeking behavior. The study was conducted over a period of three months, utilizing an online data collection strategy to maximize outreach and participant diversity. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board prior to data collection.

Development of Survey Tool

A structured, self-administered questionnaire was developed after reviewing existing literature on digital health literacy, online behavior, and patient trust in internet-based health information sources. It included both closed- and multiple-choice questions, organized into five main sections: demographics (age, gender, education level, and occupation), digital health engagement (frequency and purpose of internet use for health-related information), social media behavior (platforms used, types of content consumed, and its influence on health decisions), trust and credibility

(perceptions of the trustworthiness of health information from healthcare professionals versus non-professionals), and behavioral outcomes (actions taken based on online health information, such as self-medication or consulting healthcare providers). The questionnaire was pre-tested on a small group of 20 individuals to assess clarity, face validity, and ease of understanding. Modifications were made based on their feedback before the final version was deployed**. (Appendices A)**

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for the study were individuals aged 18 years and above, who were willing to participate voluntarily and provide informed consent, and who had the ability to read and comprehend English. Exclusion criteria included respondents with incomplete surveys, specifically those who answered fewer than 70% of the questions, as well as healthcare professionals or medical students, to avoid bias from prior medical knowledge. Additionally, individuals below the age of 18 were excluded from the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through an online survey platform (e.g., Google Forms), with the link disseminated via email and social media channels. A snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants from diverse backgrounds across different regions. Participation was anonymous, and confidentiality was assured. The survey remained open for responses over a period of eight weeks.

Sample Size

The sample size of 123 participants provided valuable insights into preliminary patterns and trends in digital health information-seeking behavior. This sample enabled a deeper understanding of how demographic factors such as age, gender, education, and occupation influence individuals' preferences and trust in online health remedies. Despite being a smaller sample, it served as a solid foundation for identifying key trends and forming hypotheses that can be explored further in future research.

The sample size formula used is: $n = (Z^2 * p * (1 - p)) / E^2$[7]

Where:

- n = sample size (123 participants)
- Z = Z-value for 95% confidence (1.96)
- p = estimated prevalence (which we solve for)
- E = margin of error (0.05, or 5%)

To calculate the prevalence (p), we rearrange the formula and solve:

$123 = (3.8416 * p * (1 - p)) / 0.0025$

After solving the quadratic equation, two possible values for p are calculated:

1. $p \approx 0.913$ (91.3%)
2. $p \approx 0.087$ (8.7%)

N=123

Statistical Analysis

The data were exported to Microsoft Excel and analyzed using SPSS version 25.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize demographic and behavioral variables.

RESULTS

Table 1: Distribution of Responses to Questionnaire on Health Information-Seeking Behavior and Online Remedy Preferences Among Participants (N = 123)

S. No	Variable	Response Categories	Frequency N (%) (n=123)
1	**Age Group**	18–25 years	111 (90.3%)
		26–35 years	7 (5.6%)
		36–45 years	5 (4.0%)
2	**Gender**	Male	56 (45.5%)
		Female	67 (54.5%)
3	**Education**	Graduate	57 (46.3%)
		Postgraduate	53 (43.1%)
		Senior Secondary	7 (5.7%)
		High School or Below	3 (2.4%)
		Others	3 (2.4%)
4	**Occupation**	Student	113 (91.9%)
		Service	6 (4.8%)
		Business	1 (0.8%)
		Homemaker	1 (0.8%)
		Others	2 (1.6%)
5	**Have Medical Health Insurance**	Yes	73 (59.7%)
		No	50 (40.3%)
6	**Access Social Media**	Yes	121 (98.4%)
		No	2 (1.6%)
7	**Purpose of Social Media Use**	Entertainment	87 (71.0%)
		Health Information	110 (89.5%)
		General Knowledge	84 (68.3%)
		Connecting with People	23 (18.7%)
		Shopping/Product Search	14 (11.4%)
8	**First Step When Feeling Unwell**	Wait and Observe	15 (12.2%)
		Ask Family/Friends	7 (5.7%)
		Search Online	56 (45.5%)
		Consult Pharmacist	13 (10.6%)
		Visit Doctor	31 (25.2%)
		Others	2 (1.6%)
9	**Ever Surfed Internet for Health Info**	Yes	103 (83.7%)
		No	5 (4.1%)
		Sometimes	15 (12.2%)
10	**Follow Online Remedies**	Yes	46 (37.4%)
		No	20 (16.3%)
		Sometimes	57 (46.3%)
11	**Health Issues Searched Online**	Minor Ailments	77 (62.6%)
		Chronic Conditions	18 (14.6%)
		Psychological/Stress	11 (8.9%)
		Others	17 (13.8%)
12	**Success in Finding Remedies**	Always	77 (62.6%)
		Sometimes	26 (21.1%)
		Rarely	3 (2.4%)
		Never	17 (13.8%)

13	**Usefulness of Online Remedies (1–5)**	1 – Useless	2 (1.6%)
		2 – Slightly Useful	10 (8.1%)
		3 – Moderately Useful	16 (12.9%)
		4 – Useful	73 (59.3%)
		5 – Very Useful	22 (17.9%)
14	**Priority for Health Decisions**	Online First	0 (0.0%)
		Consult Doctor	76 (61.8%)
		Combine Both	46 (37.4%)
		Others	1 (0.8%)
15	**Most Trusted Platform for Health Info**	Blogs	1 (0.8%)
		News Sites	20 (16.3%)
		Forums	10 (8.1%)
		Government/Medical Sites	80 (65.0%)
		Influencers/YouTube	2 (1.6%)
16	**Trust Remedies by Health Professionals Online**	Never	18 (14.6%)
		Rarely	14 (11.4%)
		Sometimes	29 (23.6%)
		Mostly/Always	62 (50.4%)
17	**Search Remedies For**	Self	113 (91.9%)
		Family	66 (53.7%)
		Friends	38 (30.9%)
18	**If Online Remedies Don't Work, Then**	Visit Doctor	112 (91.1%)
		Search Another Remedy	5 (4.1%)
		Ignore the Issue	6 (4.9%)
19	**Recommend Online Remedies to Others**	Never	9 (7.3%)
		Sometimes	85 (69.1%)
		Always	29 (23.6%)
20	**Search While Undergoing Doctor's Treatment**	Yes	26 (21.1%)
		Sometimes	68 (55.3%)
		No	29 (23.6%)

Table 1 showed that the majority of participants, 111 (90.3%), belonged to the 18–25 years age group, with a fairly balanced gender distribution—56 (45.5%) males and 67 (54.5%) females. Most respondents were highly educated, with 57 (46.3%) holding graduate degrees and 53 (43.1%) postgraduates. A significant portion, 113 (91.9%), were students, reflecting a young, academically inclined sample. While 73 (59.7%) reported having medical insurance, nearly all participants, 121 (98.4%), accessed social media platforms.

These platforms were commonly used for various purposes, including health-related information by 110 (89.5%), entertainment by 87 (71.0%), and general knowledge by 84 (68.3%).

When feeling unwell, 56 (45.5%) participants preferred to search online first, followed by 31 (25.2%) who consulted a doctor directly. A large majority, 103 (83.7%), had previously searched the internet for health-related information, and 57 (46.3%) reported sometimes following the remedies found online. Minor ailments were the most frequently searched conditions by 77 (62.6%), followed by chronic issues by 18 (14.6%). Remedies were typically found always by 77 (62.6%) or sometimes by 26 (21.1%), and more than three-fourths rated them as useful or very useful—73 (59.7%) and 22 (17.7%), respectively.

In terms of decision-making, 76 (61.8%) participants prioritized professional consultation for health issues, while 46 (37.4%) relied on a combination of online and offline advice. The most trusted sources for online health information

were government or medical websites, trusted by 80 (65.3%). About half, 62 (50.4%), expressed trust in remedies shared by health professionals online.

Most participants searched for remedies for themselves (113; 91.9%), with many also doing so for family (66; 53.7%) and friends (38; 30.9%). If online remedies failed, 112 (91.1%) preferred consulting a doctor. Furthermore, 85 (69.1%) reported sometimes recommending online remedies to others, and 68 (55.3%) searched for additional remedies even while undergoing doctor-prescribed treatment.

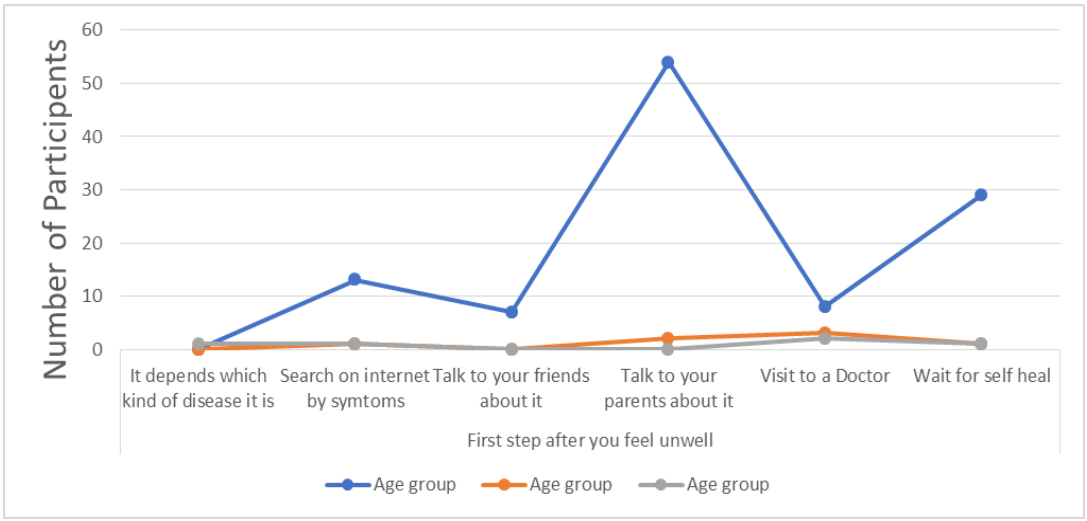

Fig. 1: First step after you feel unwell.

Demographic Distribution

The age distribution reveals a predominant engagement in health information seeking among the 111 participants (90.3%) in the 17–30 age group. Limited representation was observed in age groups below 17 and above 60, suggesting a potential digital divide in health information access. The gender distribution indicates relatively balanced participation, with 56 males (45.5%) and 67 females (54.5%). This balanced representation enhances the validity of the study's findings (Fig. 1).

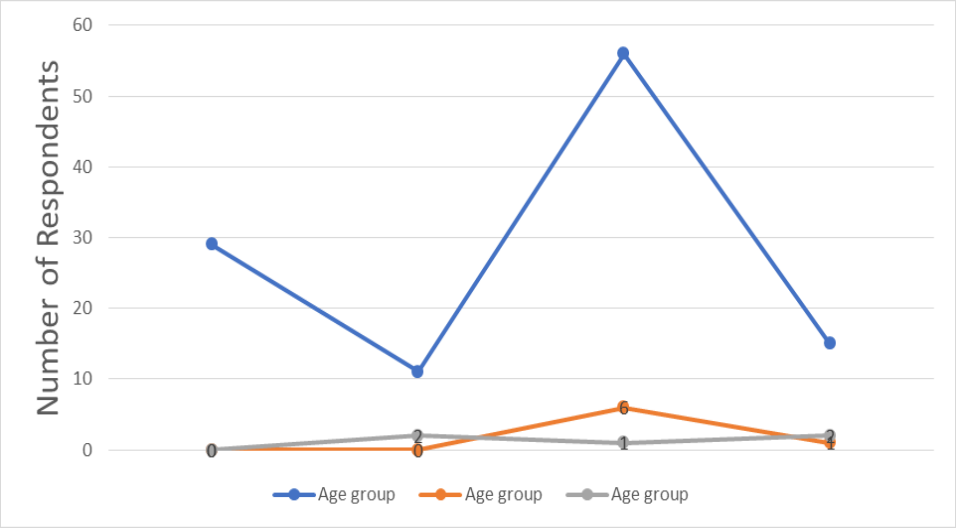

Fig. 2: Do you trust the remedies provided by health professionals on the Internet.

Internet Usage for Health Information

A staggering 121 participants (98.4%) reported accessing social media platforms, highlighting the pervasive influence of online channels in disseminating health-related information. Further analysis based on age and gender elucidated variations in social media usage patterns. Younger age groups exhibited higher engagement, emphasizing the need for targeted health campaigns on platforms preferred by different demographics (Fig. 2).

Health Issues and Remedies

A significant proportion, 103 participants (83.7%), acknowledged having searched the internet for health-related information, indicating a widespread reliance on online sources. Among those who sought remedies online, 57 (46.3%) reported following the advice, showcasing the impact of internet information on health-related decision-making. Common health issues like cold and fever dominated the topics of interest, cited by 77 participants (62.6%). This finding underscores the need for accurate and accessible information on prevalent health issues.

Trust in Digital Remedies

Approximately 77 participants (62.6%) found internet remedies helpful, while 26 (21.1%) considered them useless. This dichotomy in perceptions emphasizes the importance of scrutinizing online health information sources. Further analysis based on demographic factors revealed nuanced trust levels, with younger age groups exhibiting higher reliance on internet remedies compared to older demographics.

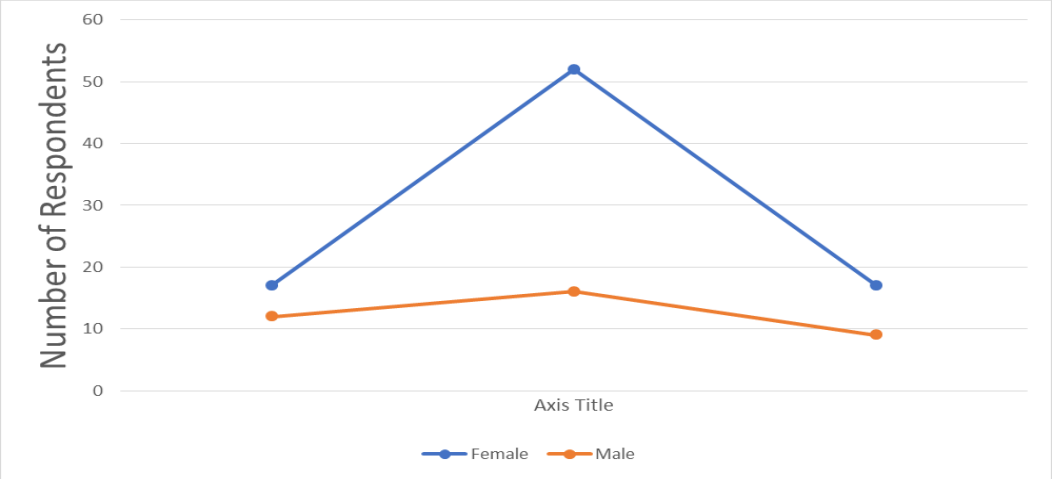

Fig. 3: Search for remedies online while undergoing treatment by a doctor.

Medical Consultation vs. Internet Remedies

Despite the prevalence of internet health information seeking, a substantial 76 participants (61.8%) prioritized visiting a doctor over relying solely on internet remedies. This balanced approach suggests that, while online information is sought, individuals recognize the irreplaceable value of professional medical advice. The study further explores factors influencing the choice between internet remedies and medical consultations, shedding light on user preferences and decision-making processes (Fig. 3).

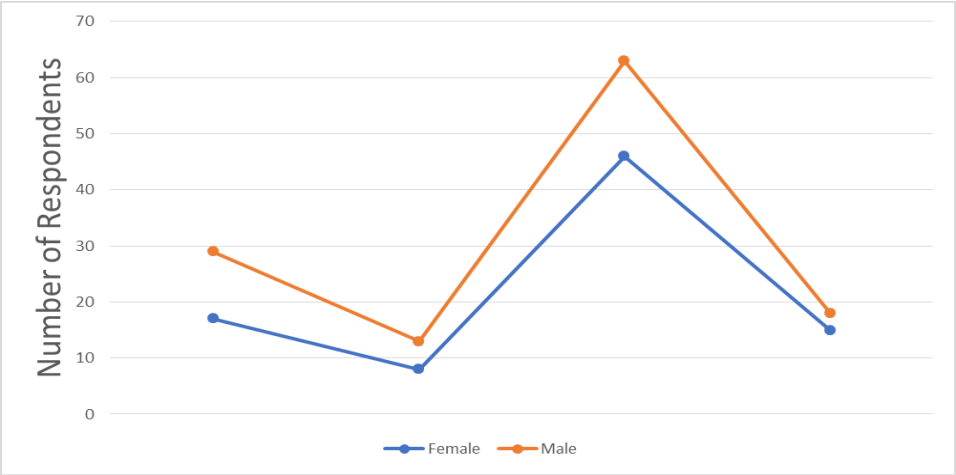

Fig. 4: Trust the remedies provided by health professionals on Internet.

Trust in Health Professionals

Medical health websites emerged as the most trusted platforms, with 80 participants (65.3%) expressing confidence in information from these sources. This finding underscores the importance of authoritative and credible health platforms on the internet. The study also delves into variations in trust levels across different platforms and explores the implications of trust in shaping health-related decisions (Fig. 4).

DISCUSSION

The elucidation of findings in this research serves as a nexus between the discovered patterns and existing literature, presenting an opportunity to distill valuable insights and extrapolate meaningful implications. This section navigates through the alignment with established literature, explores the nuanced aspects of trust levels and medical consultations, and discusses the far-reaching implications for public health interventions.[4]

Alignment with Existing Literature

The findings of this research resonate with the broader body of literature that underscores the widespread prevalence of internet health information seeking.[5] The pervasiveness of this behavior aligns with the evolving nature of digital interactions in contemporary society. The quest for health-related knowledge on the internet has become a common phenomenon, reflecting a paradigm shift in how individuals engage with and access information pertaining to their well-being.[6]

However, what distinguishes this study's contribution lies in the nuanced exploration of trust levels within the online health information landscape. While previous research may have acknowledged the inclination towards internet-based health information, this study delves deeper to unravel the layers of trust or skepticism that users harbor.[8] Moreover, the noteworthy prioritization of medical consultations despite the popularity of online remedies presents a novel angle, challenging assumptions about the primacy of digital platforms in health decision-making.[9]

Implications for Public Health Interventions

The implications derived from the research findings carry profound significance for shaping targeted public health interventions. Recognizing the popularity of social media platforms among younger age groups unveils an avenue for precision in disseminating accurate health information.[10] This demographic, often characterized by a proclivity for

digital interaction, becomes a focal point for educational campaigns, interventions, and awareness initiatives. By strategically leveraging the appeal of social media, public health messages can be tailored to resonate effectively with this segment of the population.[11]

Moreover, the identification of trust as a critical factor in online health information consumption signals the need for collaborative efforts.[12] Health professionals and online platforms must work synergistically to foster a culture of trust. This collaboration could involve health professionals actively engaging in online spaces, ensuring the provision of accurate information, and contributing to the cultivation of a reliable digital health ecosystem. Conversely, online platforms must prioritize the dissemination of credible health information, actively seeking partnerships with healthcare professionals to enhance their content's trustworthiness.[13]

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the valuable insights garnered, this research acknowledges certain limitations inherent in its methodology. The reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for biases, as respondents may provide information based on subjective perceptions rather than objective experiences. Moreover, capturing real-time trends in the ever-evolving digital landscape poses a considerable challenge. Future research endeavors could employ more dynamic methodologies, perhaps incorporating longitudinal studies or real-time monitoring mechanisms, to overcome these limitations.[14]

A promising avenue for future exploration lies in delving deeper into the motivations influencing trust in specific platforms. Understanding why individuals place trust in certain online sources could unravel nuanced insights into user behavior, enabling the tailoring of interventions to address specific trust-related concerns. Additionally, investigating the impact of online information on health outcomes could contribute to a more holistic understanding of the consequences of internet health information seeking.[15,16]

In essence, the discussion segment not only underscores the importance of the research findings but also charts a course for future inquiry and emphasizes the practical implications for public health practitioners, policymakers, and stakeholders invested in enhancing the quality of digital health information dissemination.[17-20]

CONCLUSION

This research sheds light on the intricate interplay of demographics, trends, and trust in internet health information-seeking behavior. The findings provide a robust foundation for understanding user preferences, which is crucial for tailoring effective public health interventions. As digital landscapes continue to evolve, the need for continuous research and adaptation becomes even more essential to ensure the reliable dissemination of health information. Furthermore, understanding the motivations behind health information-seeking behaviors can help healthcare providers and policymakers engage more effectively with diverse populations. Recognizing the role of trust in the credibility of health information will also play a key part in combating misinformation and promoting evidence-based practices. As digital health platforms expand, incorporating these insights will enhance the quality and accessibility of health-related content, leading to more informed and healthier communities.

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Authors' contributions

The research was designed and conceptualized by VK &AL. AL and VK gathered the information. VK AL,BP and VB collaboratively wrote the entire manuscript. AL ,VK,BP and VB reviewed the manuscript. The final manuscript was read and approved by all authors.

Competing Interests

All other authors have declared that they have no competing interests.

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