

Chapter 15

Health Literacy and Cyberchondria

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ABSTRACT

Although newly developing technologies contribute positively to human life, many studies have shown that it has some health risks. The widespread use of computers and mobile devices, in particular, have allowed the internet to be accessible by almost everyone and thus exposes them to health problems resulting from internet use. The aims of this study are to investigate negative health problems associated with internet use, the impact of new media tools on the health of individuals, to understand cyberchondria and to present solutions to reduce its effects. Furthermore, it was aimed to assess the status of cyberchondria and related factors as well health literacy in individuals using the internet to determine the necessary treatment options for cyberchondria, to clarify the conceptual status of cyberchondria for future research, and to develop evidence-based approaches. Findings indicate that when considering the relationship between health literacy and cyberchondria, the effect of health literacy in reducing cyberchondria was found to be effective.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, information and communication technologies have created ‘the global village’ where people can communicate with others as if they were sitting next to them (McLuhan & Powers, 1992). Scientific and technological developments in industry brought about revolutionary innovations in the last quarter of the 20th century. Among these innovations, the developing and newly emerging

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technological products have created changes in all areas. Information Technologies (IT), internet technologies and communication technologies are some of them. Especially communication technologies and the internet have changed the lives of human societies greatly.

The internet is one of the most important technological platforms in wider digital development. Today, the internet occupies a place as an environment where people from all over the world easily connect, exchange information, communicate and shop (Başlar, 2013). Thanks to the internet, the opportunity to access information has increased and thus, almost all services that people need from digital media have started to be provided. In the digital age we are in, people use digital products every day and consume these products quickly.

In the ‘Digital in 2019’ report published by We Are Social and Hootsuite; it is stated that there are 4.38 billion active internet users in the world and this constitutes approximately 57% of the world population (Dijilopedi, 2019).

According to the Turkey’s internet usage habits of research, which was conducted by TurkStat, the results of ‘Information Technologies Usage in Households’ showed that the rate of having internet access from home was 83.3% in 2018, while this rate increased by 5% to 88.3% in 2019 (TUIK, 2019; 2020).

On the other hand, there has been a great increase in health information searches on the internet. Studies show that the Internet is a valuable source of medical information. A 2019 study of TurkStat investigated the personal means of individuals using the internet and it is seen that 65.9% of men and 73.2% of women search for information about health (TUIK, 2019). Studies have found that women use the internet more frequently than men to do research on health, for purposes of internet use (Durak-Batıgün et al., 2018). However, it was revealed that a total of 69.3% of health-related information searches were made.

The benefits of the technological tools used today are undeniable. However, while technologies contribute to our lifestyles with their benefits, they may also contain risks for our health. The internet has increased the amount and convenience of accessing medical information but has not improved the quality of available information at the desired level. Non-evidence-based information on the internet can also lead to a loss of confidence in modern medicine (Tüter, 2019). Studies report that those searching for health information online are more likely to have health problems. In the study of Muse et al. (2012), it was stated that searching for online health information increased health anxiety.

It is very important to reach healthy and reliable information in today’s internet environment. Lack of information about health problems can lead to feelings of discomfort, fear, and uncertainty. When individuals with low medical knowledge in the society cannot use health information on the internet consciously, their anxiety may increase (Aiken & Kirwan, 2013; Metin, Pehlivan & Tarhan, 2017; Starcevic & Berle, 2013; Starcevic & Aboujaoude, 2015; Tarhan, 2014; Tarhan & Tutgun-Ünal, 2021; Tutgun-Ünal, 2020; Uzun & Zencir, 2018; White & Horvitz, 2009). As a result of the increase in internet use in this direction, some internet disorders have started to appear (Blog Exposure, Cheesepodding, CrackBerry, Egosurfing, Infornography, Facebook Depression, Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, FOMO, FOMO, Googling, Hikikomori Phenomenon, Internet Nerve, JOMO, Myspace Counterfeiting, Netlessphobia, Nintendinitis, Nomophobia, Photolurking, RSI, Selfitis, Cyberchondria, Stalking, Wikipedializm, Youtube Narcissism etc.). Among these disorders, cyberchondria draws attention as ‘the internet disorder’ of recent years.

Cyberchondria is the state of trying to diagnose or treat an individual by searching information, documents and treatment methods on the internet about the diseases he/she thinks are present. When the literature is examined, this disorder is defined as an anxiety disorder that develops in the user who researches conditions or diseases for days or even weeks with wondering if there is any information/document that may have been missed (Aiken & Kirwan, 2013; Barke et al., 2016; Batı et al., 2018;

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