


Prevalence and Psychosocial Predictors of Cyberchondria in Nigeria During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Gboyega Emmanuel Abikoye, University of Uyo, Nigeria*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9354-9382>

Abiodun Musibau Lawal, Federal University, Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The uncertainties surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and frequently changing information about the virus heighten the potentials cyberchondria. This study investigated the prevalence and predictors of cyberchondria among Nigerians during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants ($n=406$, 268 males, $M_{age} = 37.68$ years, $SD = 10.78$) completed an online survey consisting of validated measures of cyberchondria, health anxiety, neuroticism, quality of life, medical history, and socio-demographic information. Participants ($M_{score} = 27.44 \pm 7.31$) reported moderate to high levels of cyberchondria. Results of hierarchical regression showed that although all predictor variables collectively predicted cyberchondria with 22% of explained variance, the strongest predictors of cyberchondria were health anxiety and the number of prior hospital visits. Reducing the level of cyberchondria during the COVID-19 pandemic requires the ability to deal with health-related fear and effectively managing the uncertainties surrounding online health information.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 Pandemic, Cyberchondria, Health Anxiety, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The Internet revolution has so many positive characteristics that make human life more comfortable and very easy to obtain information on virtually any subject or issue. Understandably, searching for information about health online is now a common phenomenon. The use of the Internet is relatively cheaper than conventional modes of obtaining information. The Internet also affords easy access to information easily and quickly without administrative bottlenecks to navigate. Even more importantly for many users, the Internet provides anonymity since they can make any form of investigation without shame and stigma that are often associated with presenting at a facility to make health-related inquiries. It has been estimated that as many as 75% of people in countries such as India, China, Russia, Brazil,

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*Corresponding Author

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Mexico, United States, Germany, Australia, and Italy use the Internet for health-related inquiries (McDaid & Park, 2010). According to the Harris Poll, about 90% of internet use in the United States was for health-related information (Harris, 2010), indicating that the internet is fast becoming the most popular and important source of information about health (Howell, 2013).

These initial positive impacts have varied influence on different people with respect to several domains of their lives such as body image, psychological health, adjustment and social connectedness. With time, the user may enter into a specific response, then into a habitual response, and finally into a compulsive response. One of these adverse effects is cyberchondria – excessive use of the Internet to search for health-related information. In some extreme conceptualizations, cyberchondria has been viewed as the current form of hypochondriasis (Koehler, 2005), with Valley (2001) contending that it is a mental disorder. Conversely, it has occasionally been regarded as merely looking for health information online (Taylor, 2002). A more balanced definition is the one which considers the major ingredients of cyberchondria - health anxiety and searching for health information online. It has been suggested that individuals with cyberchondria are prone to experiencing intense health anxiety, which motivates the affected individuals to continually search for pertinent information on Internet but which, interestingly, simply aggravates their nervousness (White & Horvitz, 2009a; Starcevic & Berle, 2013; McElroy & Shevlin, 2014). Additional definitions suggest that a preoccupation with searching for information about health online can predispose individuals to elevated levels of anxiety (Aiken & Kirwan, 2014), and that individuals without pre-morbid health anxiety might result to having greater levels of health anxiety due to excessive search for health-related information online. McElroy and Shevlin (2014) defined cyberchondria as a rise in anxiety about an individual's own health status, due to excessive online checks for health-related information.

It has been demonstrated in various studies across countries (e.g. Brooks et al., 2020; Khazaal et al., 2020; Lawal et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020) that COVID-19 pandemic had some significant psychological implications on people. The pandemic has caused high levels of distress, financial worry, anxiety, depression, poor self-esteem, loneliness, confusion, poor coping and aggression (Brooks et al., 2020; Lawal et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). The high level of unpredictability surrounding the COVID-19 and the associated negative emotionality may predispose people to excessively seeking health information online. Thus, neuroticism which has been argued to mirror the propensity to have negative reactions, thoughts with maladaptive behavior (Bajcar & Babiak, 2020), may be strongly associated with cyberchondria in the era of COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have shown that people who are high in neuroticism might show increased negative effects in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic (Aschwanden et al., 2020; Kroencke et al., 2020). In a recent study, a positive association was found between cyberchondria and neuroticism (Maftel & Holman, 2020), implying that individuals who worry a lot during this pandemic are more likely to excessively search for health-related information online in order to reduce their concerns.

It is logical to assume that a strong relationship exists between cyberchondria and health anxiety with results from several studies indicating that higher health anxiety was associated with cyberchondria (Aiken & Kirwan, 2014; Baumgartner & Hartmann, 2011; Eastin & Guinsler, 2006; White & Horvitz, 2009b). The two constructs are, however, not synonymous. Also, not much has been done to empirically explore the relationship or substantiate the path of connectedness, including the primacy in the association between online health search and elevated health anxiety. It should be expected, however, that individuals with high level of cyberchondria would experience high levels of health anxiety. Generally, moderate to strong relationships between health anxiety and cyberchondria have been reported in different populations (Bajcar & Babiak, 2019, Fergus, 2014). Specifically during COVID-19 pandemic, Jungmann and Witthoft (2020) reported significant positive relationships among health anxiety, cyberchondria and coronavirus anxiety.

The association between meaning in life and cyberchondria has not been explored. A line of thinking is that meaning in life should inhibit the psychological distress associated with uncertainties, such as those associated with anxiety about one's health during a pandemic (Hirsh et al., 2012).

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