


Chapter 11

A Systematic Analysis of Current Studies (2021) in the Field of Cyberchondria

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ABSTRACT

This study, which is based on a systematic review, focuses on the literature published in the field of cyberchondria in 2021 (January-September) and aims to offer suggestions for further research. In the study, the data obtained by scanning the word 'cyberchondria' in Science Direct, Sprink Link, PubMed, Sage Journal, and Google Scholar databases were used. When accessing data, two inclusion criteria were set: First, the study's title included 'cyberchondria.' Second, the release year was 2021. Doing this was important in three ways: The first was the existence of systematic analyzes in previous years. Therefore, the inclusion of 2020 and earlier in the study could have included the risk of duplication of existing literature. The second was to answer the question of what extent the cyberchondria is being discussed today. The third was to reveal the distinctiveness of the findings/inferences to be uttered in this book.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is characterized as the century in which significant progress has been made in medicine in terms of treating diseases and finding new treatment methods and activities to prevent diseases. In addition, the widespread use of mass media, the fact that information is accessible through the media and the Internet regardless of location, and the increase in consciousness and awareness arguably encourage individuals to seek health information. Now, individuals can apply to a health care provider with some symptomatic information about themselves.

The change in the lifestyle of individuals as a result of digitalization brings the inevitable existence of the Internet. Instead of relying on medical books and encyclopedias and consulting medical professionals, most people now prefer using the Internet to ask questions about health, conditions or diseases.

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Although several factors seem to have contributed to this change, it is likely due to the ease of accessing information about health over the Internet (Starcevic et al., 2020, p. 149). Searching for health information on the Internet has many advantages, such as anonymity, amount of information available, time to access information, and ease of accessing information (Starcevic & Berle, 2013; Rains, 2007). Despite these advantages, Internet users can also face disadvantages such as inconsistent, confusing, unreliable, inaccurate, or outdated information (Muse et al., 2012; Powell et al., 2003). One of the most important disadvantages is increasing people's health anxiety (Muse et al., 2012; Baumgartner & Hartmann, 2011; White & Horvitz, 2009; Rains, 2007). In some people who experience excessive distress and anxiety about their health, repeated health information-seeking behaviors can lead to fear and anxiety (Newby & McElroy, 2020, p. 3; Torstrick et al., 2016, p. 397; Aydemir et al., 2013, p. 329; Welch et al., 2009, p. 1006). The behavior of searching for conditions or diseases on the Internet in order to relieve people's already existing excessive distress and anxiety is called cyberchondria (McMullan, 2019, p. 271; Starcevic & Berle, 2013, p. 206).

Although the term's origin is uncertain, it was first mentioned in an article by Ann Carrns in 1999 (Walley, 2001). The term cyberchondria was derived from the words cyber and hypochondriasis. Cyberchondria appears as a digital version of hypochondria which is characterized as the behavior of going to the doctor more often by feeling sick all the time, although there is no defect in the body (Hart & Björgvinsson, 2010; Taylor & Asmundson, 2004). It refers to excessive and repeated online health-related searches associated with increased health anxiety (Khazaal et al., 2020). The increase in health anxiety caused by online, repetitive health information search is called cyberchondria. People who perform obsessive online health information research about specific symptoms are defined as cyberchondriacs (Hart & Björgvinsson, 2010). Many studies put forward the conclusion that cyberchondria has increased significantly over time (Starcevic and Berle, 2013; Leykin et al., 2012; Muse et al., 2012; Baumgartner and Hartman, 2011)

On the other hand, two main approaches stand out to define cyberchondria: The first approach emphasizes the link with health anxiety and conceptualizes cyberchondria as an excessive and repetitive online health pattern associated with an increase in health anxiety or distress. The second approach is broader and assumes that the cyberchondria is a syndrome-like structure in that it contains both anxiety and obsessive-compulsive components. In studies on cyberchondria, it is reported that this behavioral pattern is associated with obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety disorders, anxiety sensitivity, and intolerance of uncertainty (Starcevic et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2020, p. 270-278; Khazaal et al., 2020; Vismara et al., 2020; McMullan et al., 2019, pp. 270-278; Selvi et al., 2018; Fergus & Russell, 2016; Singh & Brown, 2016; Aiken & Kirwan, 2013; Fergus, 2013).

When the studies on cyberchondria are examined from a general perspective, it is seen that the studies have developed since 2014, and these publications stand out in three categories as research publications, systematic and descriptive analyses. This study, which is based on a systematic review, focuses on the literature published in the field of cyberchondria in 2021 (January-September) and aims to offer suggestions for further research. In this study, which aims to reveal the effect size of this problem, which affects society in general in terms of the digitalization process, in the current year 2021, the data was obtained by scanning the word 'cyberchondria' in Science Direct, Sprink Link, PubMed, Sage Journal and Google Scholar databases were used. When accessing data, two inclusion criteria were set: First, the study's title included the term 'cyberchondria.' Second, the publication year was 2021.

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