

Chapter 7

Cyberchondria in the Age of Online Health Information

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ABSTRACT

Cyberchondria, characterised by escalating anxiety following online health information searches, has become increasingly relevant in the digital age, particularly with the growing reliance on digital platforms for self-diagnosis. Despite its significance, there is a lack of comprehensive literature addressing the psychological and social implications of cyberchondria. This book chapter aims to fill that gap by providing a detailed overview of cyberchondria, including demographic insights into its prevalence, conceptualization, and psychological impact. The chapter explores various factors that influence the development of cyberchondria, such as individual characteristics and the quality of online information. It examines the role of digital media in shaping cyberchondria and discusses coping strategies to mitigate its adverse effects. Emphasizing the importance of health education and digital literacy, the chapter highlights the need to empower individuals to use online health resources safely and effectively, particularly in light of the rise of cyberchondria.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, information and computer technologies (ICT) has become an indispensable tool for accessing health information. While this vast reservoir of resources has empowered individuals to take charge of their health, it has also given rise to a phenomenon known as cyberchondria. Cyberchondria refers to the increasing anxiety that individuals experience after searching for health-related information online (Vismara et al., 2020). This condition has become more prevalent as more people turn to the digital platforms for self-diagnosis and health advice, often resulting in heightened stress and concern about their health (Peng et al., 2021).

Despite the growing recognition of cyberchondria, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding its psychological and social implications. The ease of access to medical information, coupled with the often alarming nature of online health content, can exacerbate fears and lead to a cycle of obsessive health-related searching (Bahadir & Dundar, 2024). This phenomenon not only impacts individuals' mental well-being but also strains healthcare systems as people seek unnecessary medical consultations based on their online findings (Varma & Singh, 2023). Understanding cyberchondria is crucial for developing effective strategies to manage its effects and improve overall health literacy and digital literacy.

In an era defined by the rapid proliferation of digital technologies and the transformation of healthcare paradigms, the convergence of digital literacy and health education emerges as an imperative discourse. As the contours of our knowledge society evolve, so too must our understanding of the competencies required to navigate its intricacies. Within the realm of higher education, the cultivation of digital literacy stands as a cornerstone, indispensable for future professionalisation and critical engagement (Arias López et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2024). For instance, the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed the landscape of online health information, influencing both the accessibility and reliability of medical content and, consequently, the experience of cyberchondria. While these technologies have the potential to enhance healthcare accessibility and reduce uncertainty, they may also contribute to the intensification of cyberchondria. The ability of AI-powered tools to generate highly personalized yet sometimes alarmist health predictions can exacerbate health anxiety, leading users to engage in more frequent and compulsive health-related searches. Furthermore, the widespread use of AI in search engine algorithms influences the ranking and visibility of online health content, potentially exposing individuals to misleading or sensationalized medical information. As AI continues to reshape the digital health environment, it is essential to examine its role in both mitigating and exacerbating cyberchondria, ensuring that technological advancements prioritize accuracy, transparency, and responsible usage to minimize adverse psychological effects.

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