

Review of Research on Factors Influencing Online Health Information Seeking Behavior (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] In the contemporary era, the Internet has become an important channel for users to obtain and share health information. Analyzing online health information seeking behavior can help identify future research trends and provide references for improving the quality of online health information and service satisfaction. [Method/Process] This study reviews domestic and international literature related to online health information seeking. It first critically reviews theoretical models influencing individual information seeking behavior, then classifies research perspectives, and systematically analyzes factors influencing users' online health information seeking behavior from four main aspects: individual demographic characteristics, psychological characteristics, health platforms, and task types. [Results/Conclusion] Building upon the literature review and in light of the current state of research, this paper identifies promising avenues for future research from four perspectives: methodological innovation, media selection, variable exploration, and case integration.

Full Text

Preamble

Title: A Review of Research on Influencing Factors of Online Health Information Seeking Behavior

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Abstract:

[Purpose/Significance] In today's era, the Internet has become an important channel for users to obtain and share health information. Analyzing online health information seeking behavior can help grasp future research trends and

provide references for improving the quality of online health information and service satisfaction. [Method/Process] This paper reviews domestic and international literature related to online health information seeking. First, it evaluates theoretical models that influence individual information seeking behavior, then classifies research perspectives. The paper systematically analyzes factors affecting users' online health information seeking behavior from four aspects: individual demographic characteristics, psychological characteristics, health platforms, and task types. [Result/Conclusion] Based on the literature review and current research status, this paper identifies four promising directions for future research: methodological innovation, media selection, variable exploration, and integration with real-world cases.

Keywords: online health information; seeking behavior; influencing factors

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1 Introduction

Internet-based health service models have become an important way for the public to access health information. With the proliferation of social media platforms, public awareness of actively obtaining and disseminating health information has significantly increased. International survey data indicate that the Internet has become the primary channel for the public to access health-related information [?]. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of December 2019, the number of Internet medical users in China reached 152 million, accounting for 22.1% of all netizens. Among these, online health information queries, appointment registrations, and consultations were the most common activities, with a usage rate of 18.4% [?].

The “14th Five-Year Plan” adopted on October 29, 2020, emphasizes comprehensively promoting the “Healthy China” initiative. Therefore, reviewing the current state of research on online health information seeking behavior can effectively inform technological foresight and judgment in this field, thereby better facilitating the implementation of the Healthy China strategy. This is particularly relevant since the COVID-19 pandemic has led netizens to increasingly rely on the Internet to search for health-related information to acquire more health knowledge [?].

Currently, users' online health information seeking behavior represents an interdisciplinary research topic that has attracted considerable attention from scholars both domestically and internationally across fields such as communication studies, psychology, medicine, and information science, yielding a substantial body of research findings. To analyze and synthesize the influencing factors of online health information seeking behavior, we conducted literature searches in

prominent domestic and international databases (CNKI and Web of Science). For the domestic database, search keywords and topics included “健康信息搜寻” or “健康信息搜索” ; for the international database, we used “health information seeking” or “HIS.” A total of 96 relevant documents were selected, comprising 35 Chinese articles and 61 English articles.

Preliminary analysis reveals that research perspectives and factor analyses of online health information seeking behavior remain relatively fragmented. While international research has established some theoretical foundations, particularly in social cognitive theory, a complete and systematic theoretical framework has yet to form. Domestic scholars have focused more on analyzing individual demographic characteristics and health platform development. Based on this literature review, this paper integrates existing theoretical models of information seeking behavior and systematically examines four dimensions: individual demographic characteristics, individual psychological and cognitive characteristics, health platforms, and health tasks. The aim is to comprehensively understand research trends in this area and provide references for effectively improving the quality of health information and service satisfaction on health websites and social media platforms.

2 Theoretical Analysis of Health Information Seeking Behavior

E. Manaf et al. [?] define health information seeking behavior (HISB) as the behaviors exhibited by users when acquiring, clarifying, and confirming health-related knowledge or information within specific events or contexts, primarily aimed at reducing uncertainty about their health status. S. Poortaghi [?] also notes in reviewing relevant theoretical concepts that health seeking behavior can effectively promote health, predict diseases, and reduce health risks. From a theoretical perspective, health information seeking behavior theories mainly include Social Cognitive Theory, the Health Belief Model, and the Knowledge-Attitude-Practice Model. These theories respectively explain users' health behaviors from the perspectives of cognitive efficacy, health beliefs, and health literacy, all essentially revealing how individual and environmental characteristics influence health behaviors.

2.1 Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

In the late 1970s, A. Bandura [?] proposed Social Cognitive Theory, which was later used to explain social learning processes. G. M. Jessica [?] combined appraisal theory with social cognitive theory to understand and predict the relationship between human-computer interaction and health behavior. The research indicates that post-search emotions affect social cognitive variables (outcome expectations and self-efficacy) and perceived relevance, thereby indirectly influencing post-search attitudes (satisfaction) and behaviors (inspiration, hope,

and fear). Liang Han et al. [?] found that self-efficacy has predictive effects on health behavior, with a significant positive correlation. Self-efficacy also partially mediates the relationship between health values and health behavior [?].

Practical applications of Social Cognitive Theory in user health seeking behavior research have confirmed that health seeking behavior is interactively determined—that is, health information behavior is influenced by both environmental factors and individual characteristics, with behavior resulting from the interaction between environment and individual. For instance, external factors such as place of residence may alter health seeking behavior, while individual psychological factors like self-efficacy also exert influence.

2.2 Health Belief Model (HBM)

In the 1950s, G. Hochbaum [?] proposed the Health Belief Model (HBM), positing that strong health beliefs can lead to changes in individual behavior. This model uses the stimulus-response model from psychology and value-expectancy theory to explain the primary relationships between psychology and related health behaviors. The stimulus-response model explains how behavioral outcomes affect individual behavior, while value-expectancy theory explains that individual behavior is determined by the value of behavioral outcomes and the probability of their realization. As shown in [Figure 1: see original paper], the model identifies two key elements in forming individual health behaviors: (1) perceived threat of disease, and (2) outcome expectations.

J. Sheppard [?] used COVID-19 as a case study, noting that doctors and pharmacists can apply the Health Belief Model to establish effective communication with patients to meet their health information needs. Other scholars have combined the Theory of Planned Behavior with HBM to explore relationships among tourists' health beliefs, attitudes, self-efficacy, preventive behaviors, and satisfaction [?]. However, HBM focuses on how individual psychological characteristics affect health behavior while neglecting external environmental influences. When individuals perceive a disease threat and believe they can prevent it through certain actions, health seeking behavior changes accordingly, with the strength of beliefs also affecting user behavior.

2.3 Knowledge-Attitude-Practice Model (KAP)

The Knowledge-Attitude-Practice (KAP) Model posits that health literacy forms the foundation of health beliefs, health beliefs are the driving force behind health behavior, and health behavior is the product of the combined effects of the former two [?]. Health education and health behavior interventions involve using educational and interventional measures based on health information dissemination to promote attitude changes and belief formation, driving the transformation from unhealthy to healthy behaviors and ultimately achieving population health. The KAP research framework is illustrated in [Figure 2: see original paper].

The KAP model identifies two critical steps in behavior change: establishing beliefs and changing attitudes. The transition from knowledge acquisition to behavior change is influenced by many complex factors. A. A. Subait and M. Alousaimi [?] found significant differences in attitudes toward oral health between boys and girls, demonstrating that school-based oral health knowledge activities can improve students' understanding, leading to attitude changes and ultimately behavioral improvements. This conclusion confirms the important link between knowledge and practice. However, the KAP model also notes that knowledge and practice are not entirely causally related; an individual's behavior is associated not only with their knowledge but also with their concepts and attitudes, and even more so with their long-term living environment [?].

3 Influencing Factors of Online Health Information Seeking Behavior

Through literature review and theoretical analysis, this paper synthesizes influencing factors of online health information seeking behavior based on four aspects: individual demographic characteristics, individual psychological and cognitive characteristics, health platforms, and health task types, as illustrated in [Figure 3: see original paper].

3.1 Individual Demographic Characteristics

3.1.1 Age Effects Users of different age groups exhibit distinct characteristics in online health information seeking and varying degrees of dependence on search platforms. G. Fergie [?] found that age significantly affects users' health information seeking behavior. While adolescents rely on search engines, they prefer obtaining health knowledge from diverse sources and in various formats. L. Chang [?] studied Singaporean women's health information seeking behavior and found significant differences across age groups in mobile phone usage, health seeking behavior, and health information evaluation.

3.1.2 Gender Differences C. H. Basch et al. [?] demonstrated that gender influences attitudes and behaviors toward health information seeking, with women spending more time on social media daily and being more proactive in seeking health information. Other studies found that men with lower education levels and lower internet skills are more likely to seek health information from healthcare professionals [?]. Statistical research also revealed that men tend to search for health information related to alcohol and tobacco, while women focus more on wellness and beauty information [?].

3.1.3 Residence Effects Residence differences essentially represent disparities in culture, income, and economic development, leading to varying levels of attention to health information among users from different locations and

consequently different health seeking behaviors. R. F. Mccloud et al. [?] focused on urban poor users, arguing that the digital divide caused by internet connectivity issues negatively impacts their health information seeking. Other scholars analyzed racial differences in health information access, finding that Black respondents had higher trust in their ability to obtain health information compared to White respondents, while Hispanic respondents showed lower rates of health information seeking [?]. T. H. Laz [?] conducted similar research exploring associations between ethnicity and online health information seeking, noting that behavioral differences among ethnic groups relate to overall health awareness. Additionally, research from urban-rural differences found that urban youth focus more on common physiological diseases, while rural youth prioritize information about major illnesses [?].

3.1.4 Education Level Effects A. Kyriacou and C. Sherratt [?] found that over half of patients engage in online health information seeking, particularly among younger and more educated patients. I. Feinberg and J. Frijters [?] examined relationships between health information seeking behavior and health status among U.S. adults with and without high school diplomas, revealing that diploma holders primarily use text-based health information sources, while those without diplomas obtain health information mainly through oral communication. D. Wu' s empirical study on Chinese older adults' online health information seeking demonstrated that education level positively correlates with health information seeking efficiency [?].

3.2 Individual Psychological and Cognitive Characteristics

3.2.1 Cognitive Efficacy Factors Cognitive style represents one of the most important factors influencing user interaction behavior. H. Samarraie [?] showed that cognitive style affects users' information search behavior. N. Liu et al. [?] drew on concepts from social identity theory and personal self-theory to survey users of online medical communities, demonstrating that social identification with online medical communities and individual users' perception of disease severity positively influence health information seeking intention.

Emotion is also a crucial component of users' health information seeking process. Emotions during searching affect social cognitive variables and perceived relevance, thereby indirectly influencing attitudes and behaviors [?]. Therefore, emotional cognition is likewise an important factor affecting health seeking behavior. H. J. Son and K. E. Lee [?] found that health concern and health anxiety are significantly positively correlated with online health information seeking behavior, with health anxiety being the most significant influencing factor. Other research indicates that online health information seeking can help searchers fill information gaps and enhance coping abilities, suggesting that searching may lead to satisfaction and positive emotions [?]. Further studies revealed that emotions can affect self-efficacy, with positive emotional experiences increasing self-efficacy while negative experiences decrease it, and that outcome expecta-

tions and self-efficacy can influence each other [?]. Additionally, scholars have noted a special phenomenon called “cyberchondria” —an abnormal behavioral pattern where excessive or repetitive online searching for health-related information causes distress or anxiety—with research finding close connections between health anxiety and online health information seeking [?].

In today’s era of explosive information growth, users struggle to verify information authenticity and quality during online health information seeking, which may cause cognitive problems and exacerbate user anxiety [?]. Therefore, improving information quality on health information dissemination platforms, ensuring information authenticity, creating reliable information environments, and consequently changing users’ cognitive patterns and regulating their emotions are worthy of in-depth investigation.

3.2.2 Health Belief Factors According to the Health Belief Model, different personality traits generate health beliefs of varying intensity, subsequently influencing health information seeking behavior [?]. Zheng Ce et al. [?] empirically analyzed personality trait differences in users’ health information seeking behavior across different health information platforms, finding that personality traits significantly affect young people’s health information seeking behavior and that users exhibit different search behaviors on different platforms. Additionally, perceived risk and value expectations also affect health behavior. Deng Shengli [?] applied the Technology Acceptance Model and Information Adoption Model through questionnaire surveys to explore factors influencing users’ health information seeking intention, revealing that perceived usefulness and subjective norms positively correlate with questioning intention, perceived risk negatively correlates with questioning intention, and perceived ease of use positively affects questioning intention.

These findings indicate that stronger health beliefs lead to more positive health seeking behaviors, making the enhancement of health beliefs a key issue. However, current research remains unclear about which variable characteristics influence health beliefs, creating gaps in the influence pathway and making it difficult for information dissemination platforms and policymakers to obtain theoretical support for developing measures to guide positive online health seeking.

3.2.3 Health Literacy Factors Health literacy refers to individuals’ ability to obtain, understand, and use health information to maintain and promote their health [?]. E. Maitz et al. [?] tested health literacy among 12-14-year-old adolescents, finding that students’ self-assessment of their online health literacy was significantly higher than their actual competence. Students with better self-assessments did not necessarily access high-quality websites, and the study also found that online health literacy was significantly correlated with students’ self-efficacy.

Poisson regression analysis revealed that high health literacy scores, poor self-rated health status, chronic disease presence, and high internet usage frequency

are all significant predictors of online health information seeking [?]. M. K. Lam [?] investigated the relationship between Australian older adults' online health information seeking behavior and health literacy, finding significant correlations with education level and health literacy that strengthened with increased search frequency. Notably, some studies found that older adults, as a group with generally poorer health status and greater treatment and wellness needs [?], do not frequently engage in online health information seeking due to their typically lower health literacy levels. This paradox suggests that the relationship between these variables may have primary and secondary effects or deeper underlying causes worth further exploration.

3.3 Health Platforms

3.3.1 Search Engine Effects Users can quickly input desired search terms through search engines to obtain massive amounts of relevant information. The anonymity of search engines effectively protects users' health information and personal privacy, making them a primary channel for health information seeking [?]. However, Wang Ruojia [?] noted that the content presentation methods of search engines also affect users' health information seeking experience. Search engines should optimize their rules based on users' search behavior characteristics to provide high-quality, personalized health information [?].

3.3.2 Health Website Effects Health websites are defined as platforms providing health information and consultation services, typically collaborating with hospitals or medical institutions [?]. Early research on health information seeking behavior primarily focused on health websites. H. S. Lee [?] found that health information perceived as accurate, trustworthy, easily accessible, and regularly updated was used most frequently. D. T. S. Chang et al. [?] compared the quality of internet health information about a specific disease with website sponsorship sources, discovering that most urolithiasis website information lacked authoritative verification and nearly one-third had commercial sponsorship, affecting users' trust in the information. Other questionnaire-based studies on mobile health information behavior found that health websites generally had low recognition and credibility [?].

3.3.3 Social Media Effects The rapid development of social media has transformed information dissemination patterns and consequently influenced users' information seeking behavior. Social media has become an important medium for health information, allowing users to exchange health information, obtain help and advice, and quickly understand their health status through social networks [?]. In recent years, domestic and international scholars have increasingly studied users' health information behavior using social media as the medium. Domestic scholars have investigated health information dissemination characteristics on social media platforms [?], diffusion patterns and features [?], and constructed evaluation indicator systems for health information quality on social

media [?]. I. A. Nikoloudakis et al. [?] used logistic regression analysis to identify social media usage as the most significant factor influencing health seeking among both men and women. Other research found that health misinformation on social media and excessive social media use may pose potential health threats [?].

3.4 Task Types

Information seeking behavior is triggered by information needs, which are stimulated by tasks. Tasks represent the original motivation for users to initiate information searches and constitute a series of activities undertaken to achieve certain goals and outcomes [?]. Some scholars have used tasks as an entry point to study health information seeking behavior. International scholars typically categorize search tasks into factual, interpretive, and exploratory tasks [?], while Y. L. Li [?] used a faceted classification approach to divide task facets into two categories: generic facets (task source, executor, time, etc.) and specific attributes (complexity, independence, and user-perceived characteristics such as importance, urgency, and subjective complexity). Domestic scholars have also examined how these three task types affect college students' online health information seeking behavior, finding that task completion time, number of questions asked, and keywords are significantly correlated with task type [?]. Therefore, task type also influences health seeking behavior, though research in this area remains in its early stages and has not yet established a complete theoretical system.

4 Summary and Outlook

With the proposal of “Healthy China Construction” in the 14th Five-Year Plan and changes in users' information seeking patterns in the self-media era, this paper analyzes influencing factors of users' health information seeking behavior from multiple perspectives: individual characteristics (demographic and psychological), health platforms, and task types. The literature review reveals that research trends have shifted from descriptive studies of demographic characteristics to explanatory studies examining how individual psychological and cognitive internal factors influence health information behavior, with research depth gradually increasing. Future research should focus on the following directions:

(1) Innovative research techniques and methods. Current studies primarily use questionnaire design and data collection to explore influencing factors of online health information seeking behavior. However, questionnaire-based data collection can lead to data distortion, and users' personality differences, platform usage, and emotional cognition all exhibit considerable specificity and contingency. Therefore, future research could break through traditional empirical paradigms by integrating big data analytics, using real-time data streams and multi-dimensional labeled demographic indicators.

(2) Appropriate information dissemination media selection. Early research predominantly focused on health websites as the communication medium, leading to saturation in this area. As a new communication medium, social media platforms have developed rapidly in recent years, fundamentally changing information dissemination patterns and user behavior. Consequently, research on users' health information seeking behavior based on social media platforms has become a focus of scholarly attention [?].

(3) Exploration of deep-level characteristic variables. Although numerous studies have examined influencing factors, many features and variables remain to be uncovered. For instance, in terms of individual psychological characteristics, the deep-level variables that drive health beliefs and subsequently affect health seeking behavior remain unclear and require further investigation. Regarding demographic characteristics, few studies have addressed how regional differences influence health behaviors. Future research could incorporate features such as ethnicity, religion, and culture across different regions to deepen understanding of online health seeking behavior.

(4) Integration with real-world social contexts. Most studies examining health seeking behavior have rarely considered the impact of social context. For example, public emergencies—particularly health-related events—may substantially affect netizens' health information search behavior. The COVID-19 pandemic that began in late 2019 indeed intensified online health seeking behavior, making it an urgent issue to better meet the public's need for health information access [?]. Therefore, studying influencing factors of online health information seeking behavior within specific social contexts can help enhance government emergency management capabilities.

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Author Contributions

Wang Mingyan: Topic planning and analysis of domestic and international research fields.

Zhou Chengyang: Data collection and comparative analysis of international materials.

Lin Guoying: Data collection and compilation of domestic research status.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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