

CYBERCHONDRIA, REASSURANCE SEEKING BEHAVIOR AND PROBLEMATIC INTERNET USE AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated the relationship between cyberchondria, reassurance seeking and problematic internet use among young adults. It was hypothesized that there is a significant positive relationship among Cyberchondria Reassurance Seeking Behaviour and Problematic Internet Use. The data was collected from 300 participants (n1= 150 Men, n2= 150 Women). For the purpose of data collection Cyberchondria Severity Scale, Reassurance Seeking Questionnaire and Problematic Internet Use Scale (Demetrovics et al; 2008) were used. Data was analyzed on SPSS and the analysis included Demographic information of participants, Psychometric properties of the scales, correlation analysis, linear regression analysis and independent t-test analysis. Results showed that Cyberchondria scale, Reassurance Seeking Behaviour scale and Problematic Internet use scale showed good reliabilities, Pearson product moment correlation showed that there is a significant positive relationship among cyberchondria, reassurance seeking behaviour and problematic internet use. Linear regression revealed that Cyberchondria is a significant positive predictor of reassurance seeking behaviour and problematic internet use. The Independent t- test showed no significant gender differences between cyberchondria, reassurance seeking behaviour and problematic internet use among young adults. Therefore, the overall findings indicate that study is beneficial for health care professionals for creating awareness among youth to overcome their health-related anxiety by relying on authentic medical advice than constantly seeking reassurance through internet.

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have greatly changed the way people access health related information. The internet provides a great source of health information for many young adults, and offers instant access to the information on symptoms, illnesses and treatments. Internet use can be a helpful tool in improving health resources, excessive internet use can lead to maladaptive psychological result. One such consequence is Problematic Internet Use which is uncontrollable and excessive use of the internet that affects the individual daily functioning and psychological health. Higher levels of Problematic Internet use are found to be associated with excessive internet health searches, increasing their interaction with frightening and vague medical information (Demetrovics et al., 2008). Recent studies indicate that excessive online health searching can result in cyberchondria a term for the behavior of repeated and compulsive searching for health-related information as it can increase health anxiety rather than alleviate it. Those who suffer from cyberchondria tend to misinterpret normal body sensations as symptoms of more serious diseases, which then leads to higher levels of distress and uncertainty. To reduce these

concerns, they often engage in Reassurance Seeking Behavior, seeking confirmation again and again from healthcare providers, family, friends or online sources (Aboujaoude, 2010). Whereas Reassurance seeking Behavior may give temporary relief, as literature suggest that the feelings of anxiety can return and keep a in a cycle of worry and additional health related searching.

In Cyberchondria, when people keep searching online about their health, consult numerous health websites or visits doctors repeatedly after reading about health online (Aslan et al., 2023). Paying too much attention to negative health information can increase health anxiety and can lead to unhealthy lifestyle habits. For example, those who focus on negative health news may start worrying too much about their health, keep checking their symptoms too often, refrain from doing normal activities they believe are risky, or even stop doing healthy habits due to fear (McMullan et al., 2019). These behaviors can make Cyberchondria worst. The person ends up in a vicious cycle of anxious feeling a search for reassurance on the internet, find more negative information, and then become even more worried. This indicates that thoughts and behaviors are closely linked in how health anxiety and Cyberchondria start and continue. Researchers who study this link can understand what causes and continues Cyberchondria, which will help develop better ways of dealing with or preventing it (Starcevic et al., 2019). Social support (like help from friends and family) significantly influences how people think and live. It aids in decision making about health and thinking clearly. When someone has good support, they receive emotional support, good advice, and positive encouragement which prevents negative or wrong thinking (Abu-Aisheh, 2020). Friends and family can also help people understand frightening health information better, ease their worries, and to have a more realistic understanding of health risks (Thoits, 2011). Social support can also contribute to the healthy living of individuals by encouraging a healthy lifestyle and by reducing stress from negative news or thoughts (Zhou & Cheng, 2022).

A major reason for Cyberchondria is that online health information is often confusing, inaccurate, or incomplete. Those who search online for reassurance about their health invest a lot of time in determining whether the information is accurate. This creates a cycle where the more they search, the more they worry and feel anxious (McMullan et al., 2019). People with high anxiety feel better for a limited amount of time after obtaining reassurance from a doctor after searching about their symptoms online. This temporary relief makes them keep searching online again, but people who search the internet to deal with their negative feelings often feel worse. Online information is not always accurate, so they may feel disappointed numerous times, this increases their stress and can make their cyberchondria stronger. For this reason, some people eventually give up on searching online because it becomes too stressful for them (Starcevic et al., 2019). People who get more worried about their health after searching for medical information online were found to have higher levels of problematic internet use (Fergus & Dolan, 2014). Cyberchondria is a growing issue because so many people use the internet and smartphones every day. University students are at higher risk since they are online often for both school and personal use, which can lead to cyberchondria or even internet addiction (Bati et al., 2018). Some students may lose control of their internet use and spend too much time online, which can negatively affect other important parts of their lives (Boysan et al., 2017). Problematic internet use is influenced by beliefs people have about their own thoughts as these beliefs can lead them to cope in unhealthy ways and keep their negative feelings going (Spada et al; 2008).

In the same way, Cyberchondria may also come from these unhelpful thinking beliefs as it can be a way people try to avoid their worries. Some earlier studies have suggested that Cyberchondria may be a compulsive type of problematic internet use (Ivanova, 2013). The literature shows that researches have been conducted to investigate the relationship of Cyberchondria with Reassurance seeking behavior and separately with Problematic Internet Use but no study has been conducted in our Pakistani culture, which explores the combined relationship of Cyberchondria with Reassurance, seeking Behavior and Problematic Internet Use among Young adults. So, the current study is beneficial in terms of awareness related to Cyberchondria as healthcare Professionals can motivate individuals to depend on authentic medical advice as early detection of Cyberchondria related behaviors can potentially stop worsening it and unhealthy Internet usage patterns from getting more severe among young adults.

Objectives

1. To investigate the relationship between cyberchondria and reassurance seeking behavior.
2. To explore the relationship between cyberchondria and problematic Internet Use.
3. To study whether cyberchondria predicts reassurance seeking behavior and problematic internet use among young adults.
4. To examine gender differences in cyberchondria, reassurance seeking behavior and problematic internet use among young adults.

Hypotheses

- H1: There is likely to be a significant positive relationship between cyberchondria and reassurance seeking behavior.
- H2: There is likely to be a significant positive relationship between cyberchondria and problematic Internet use.
- H3: There are likely to be gender differences among cyberchondria, reassurance seeking behavior and problematic internet use among young adults.
- H4: Cyberchondria is likely to be a significant positive predictor of reassurance seeking behavior and problematic internet use among young adults.

II. METHOD

Participants

A quantitative, cross-sectional approach was adopted for the present analysis. Standardized psychological measures were administered to participants at a single point in time. The article specifically examines differences between male and female participants in the three principal study variables. Correlational Research Design was applied in the current research to examine the relationship among Cyberchondria, reassurance seeking behavior and problematic internet use. Convenient sampling strategy was used to collect data and the sample of the study comprised of N=300 (n1=150 men and n2=150 women), only those young adults who are in age range of 18 to 25 years were included. Participants were screened out initially to ensure that those who own at least one personal electronic device with active internet connectivity were included and it was also made sure that those who were willing to take part in the research were included with their consent.

Table I: Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variables	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age			21.21	2.13
Gender				
Men	150	50		
Women	150	50		
Education				
Undergraduate	228	76.0%		
Graduate	50	16.7%		
Postgraduate	22	7.3%		
Field of Study				
Basic Sciences	107	35.7%		
Social Sciences	102	34.0%		
Computer Science	77	25.7%		
Languages	14	4.7%		
Nature of Work	120	40.0%		
Unemployed	180	60.0%		
Socio Economic Status				
Lower Class	27	9.0%		
Middle Class	234	78.0%		
Upper Class	39	13.0%		
Average Daily Internet Use				
Less than 2 hours	22	7.3%		

2–4 hours	89	29.7%
5–7 hours	103	34.3%
More than 7 hours	86	28.7%
Primary Device Used For		
Internet		
Smartphone	191	63.7%
Laptop	31	10.3%
Tablet	3	1.0%
Multiple devices	73	24.3%

Measures

[I] A Short Cyberchondria Severity Scale (CSS) developed by McElroy and Shevlin was used to assess the severity of Cyberchondria. The 12-item scale measured the level of frequency in Cyberchondria-related activities and thoughts. Responses to each item are made from 1–5 (Never to Always), indicating how often they experience each behavior. Cronbach alpha of this scale is .90 (Sansakorn et al., 2024). **[II]** The Reassurance Seeking behavior developed by Paul Salkovskis and Neil Rector, applied to measure the extent of reassurance seeking behavior. The Scale consists of 30 items that measure the frequency of individual's habit to seek reassurance. Participants responded to each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1(Not at all) to 5(Extremely). The Cronbach alpha of this scale is .86 -.90 (Gencoz 2005). **[III]** The Problematic Internet Use developed by (Demetrovics et al., 2008) were used to measure the frequency of problematic Internet Use. The Scale consist of 18 items that measure the maladaptive patterns of internet use. Participants responded to each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1(Never) to 5(Always), the Cronbach alpha of this scale is from .87.

Procedure

The data was collected by selecting appropriate scales according to the variables and as per research requirement. The informed consent and their willingness to take part in the study was also ensured and permissions were taken from the authors of scales. The demographic questions were added by the researcher in the questionnaire to collect data about sociodemographic characteristics of the participants and three scales i.e. Cyberchondria, Reassurance Seeking Behavior and Problematic Internet Use were applied for the purpose of data collection. Data was collected from the young adults and they were selected according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Researcher explained the nature and procedure of the research to the participants and the data was collected through questionnaires from 300 participants. Confidentiality and Anonymity was ensured to the participants and they were also informed that they are right to withdraw from the research at any time.

III. RESULTS

Table II: Psychometric Properties of Cyberchondria, Reassurance Seeking Behavior and Problematic Internet Use

Scale	M	SD	Actual Range	Potential Range	Cronbach's Alpha
1. Cyberchondria	33.61	8.56	15-55	12-60	.845
2. Reassurance Seeking Behavior	91.42	18.95	38-136	30-150	.916
3. Problematic Internet Use	53.19	12.21	21-86	18-90	.884

Results show that cyberchondria shown good reliability and reassurance seeking behavior very high internal consistency as well. Likewise, the problematic internet use scale also shown strong reliabilities

Table III: Pearson Product moment correlation for Cyberchondria, Reassurance Seeking Behavior and Problematic Internet Use in Young Adults

Variables	1	2	3
1. Cyberchondria	--		
2. Reassurance Seeking Behavior	.59**	--	
3. Problematic Internet Use	.61*	.64*	--

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Results show that there is a significant positive correlation between cyberchondria and reassurance seeking behavior ($r=.588$, $p<.01$). This indicates that individuals with higher levels of cyberchondria are more likely to engage in reassurance seeking behavior. There is also a significant positive correlation between cyberchondria and problematic internet use ($r=.608$, $p<.05$). This suggests that increased cyberchondria is associated with higher problematic internet use.

Table III: Linear Regression for Cyberchondria as predictor of Reassurance Seeking Behavior among and Problematic Internet Use among Young Adults

Variables	Reassurance Seeking Behavior			Problematic Internet Use		
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>
(Constant)	47.66	-	3.60	24.02	-	2.27
Cyberchondria	1.30	.59**	.10	.87	.61*	.07
R	.59			.61		
R ²	.35			.37		

Results of Table 4.3 shows that cyberchondria positively significantly predicted both reassurances seeking behavior and problematic internet use among young adults. Cyberchondria was identified as a strong positive predictor of reassurance seeking behavior. Furthermore, Cyberchondria also positively significantly predicted problematic internet Use.

Table IV: Gender Differences in Cyberchondria, Reassurance Seeking Behavior and Problematic Internet Use among Young Adults

Variables	Men		Women		<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	Cohen's d
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Cyberchondria	34.45	8.03	32.76	9.01	1.72	.087	-
Reassurance Seeking Behavior	92.64	17.74	90.20	20.07	1.12	.265	-
Problematic Internet Use	53.49	11.21	52.89	13.16	0.43	.668	-

The results show that there were no significant gender differences in cyberchondria in Men ($M= 34.45$, $STD= 8.03$) and Women ($M= 32.76$, $STD= 9.01$) did not differ significantly, $t=1.72$, $p=.087$. Likewise, no significant gender differences were found in reassurance seeking behavior in Men ($M= 92.64$, $STD= 17.74$) and Women ($M= 90.20$, $STD= 20.07$), $t= 1.12$, $p= .265$. Furthermore, Problematic internet use also reveals no significant gender differences in Men ($M= 53.49$, $STD= 11.21$) and Women ($M= 52.89$, $STD= 13.16$), $t= 0.43$, $p= .668$.

IV. DISCUSSION

Present results show that there is a significant positive correlation between cyberchondria and reassurance seeking behavior ($r=.588$, $p<.01$). This indicates that individuals with higher levels of cyberchondria are more likely to engage in reassurance seeking behavior. Previous studies show that people who had greater cyberchondria scores had a regular and desperate need for reassurance from others. The study indicates that excessive use of health-related information online is linked directly to need for continued reassuring through anxiety (Starcevic & Aboujaoude, 2015). According to a previous study, people with cyberchondria get multiple opinions, ask for unnecessary tests, constantly visits doctors and some people trust more on the information that they have read online than their doctors, and this causes a clash with the doctors. Studies have revealed that people who look for health information online have feelings of fear, concern, uncertainty, hope and curiosity and negative feelings particularly fear and uncertainty, drive people to keep using internet, in order to feel reassured. While reassurance can temporarily relieve anxiety, people often keep looking repeatedly, constantly maintaining cyberchondria (Starcevic & Aboujaoude, 2015). Results show that there is a significant positive correlation between cyberchondria and problematic internet use ($r=.608$, $p<.05$). This suggests that increased cyberchondria is associated with higher problematic internet use. Individuals with cyberchondria reported having difficulties controlling their internet use, being focused on health-related internet searches and using the internet to relieve stress in 2021 research (Selvi et al., 2018). The Present results show that there were no significant gender

differences in cyberchondria in men ($M = 34.45$, $STD = 8.03$) and women ($M = 32.76$, $STD = 9.01$) did not differ significantly, $t = 1.72$, $p = .087$. Likewise, no significant gender differences were found in reassurance seeking behavior in men ($M = 92.64$, $STD = 17.74$) and women ($M = 90.20$, $STD = 20.07$), $t = 1.12$, $p = .265$. Furthermore, Problematic internet use also reveals no significant gender differences in men ($M = 53.49$, $STD = 11.21$) and women ($M = 52.89$, $STD = 13.16$), $t = 0.43$, $p = .668$. Previous studies show that women have slightly higher cyberchondria than men, the difference was so minimal so there was no statistically significant gender difference (Nadeem et al., 2022).

Clinical and Practical Implications, and Limitations of Future Research

Healthcare Professionals can motivate individuals to depend on authentic medical advice than constantly seeking reassurance through online searching. Digital literacy programs can assist people in distinguishing between accurate and incorrect health information on the internet and help them avoid anxiety and searching too much. Early Detection of cyberchondria related behaviors can potentially stop worsening cyberchondria, psychological distress and Internet usage patterns from becoming more severe among young adults. Mental health professionals can create various awareness programs about the negative psychological effects of excessive online health searching. The Sample comprised of only of young adults 18-25 years of age which may reduce the applicability of the results to adolescents, older adults and other Populations. The study relied on self-report questionnaires, which may increase the possibility of socially desirable responses and response bias. Future research can create and validate interventions to decrease cyberchondria and problematic internet use. As the previous literature has conceptualized reassurance seeking behavior in different ways, future research should explore whether reassurance seeking behavior is a separate variable or as part of cyberchondria. Future studies can look at how social media platforms, smartphones and online health related content affect the tendency to reassure oneself and cyberchondria in young adults.

V. CONCLUSION

All hypothesis were supported in the present research. The Psychometric properties analysis among cyberchondria, reassurance seeking behavior, and problematic internet use indicates a high level of internal consistency, showing excellent reliability of the scales. Results of pearson product moment correlation revealed a positive significant relationship between cyberchondria, reassurance seeking behavior and problematic internet use among young adults. Results of linear regression shows that cyberchondria significantly positively predicts both reassurances seeking behavior and problematic internet use among young adults. The results show that there were no significant gender differences among all three study variables. Future studies can be designed as per results, limitations, suggestions and practical/clinical implications of the current study.

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