

Cyberchondria and Health Anxiety Among College Students of Selected College in Bareilly, U.P.

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ABSTRACT

Background: Cyberchondria refers to excessive or repeated searching for health-related information on the internet that may be associated with increased health anxiety or distress. Excessive online health-information seeking has been described in relation to health anxiety and cyberchondria in previous literature.[1–3] College students frequently use digital devices and online sources for health information, making this an important area for nursing and health education research. **Objectives:** To assess the level of cyberchondria among college students. To assess the level of health anxiety. To determine the correlation between cyberchondria and health anxiety. To determine the association of cyberchondria and health anxiety with selected socio-demographic variables. **Materials and Methods:** : A quantitative approach with a descriptive correlational research design was used. The study was conducted at Mascot College of Education, Rithora, Bareilly. A total of 100 undergraduate college students were selected using non-probability convenience sampling. Data were collected using socio-demographic variables, a 33-item Cyberchondria Severity Scale and an 18-item Short Health Anxiety Inventory. Descriptive statistics, Karl Pearson's correlation coefficient and chi-square test were used for analysis. A p-value <0.05 was considered statistically significant. **Results:** : Among 100 students, 34% had low, 27% had moderate and 39% had high cyberchondria. For health anxiety, 29% had low, 31% had moderate and 40% had high levels. The mean cyberchondria score was 102.50 ± 37.66 and the mean health anxiety score was 29.67 ± 16.60 . A positive correlation was reported between cyberchondria and health anxiety ($r=0.70$, $p=0.01$). Cyberchondria was significantly associated with gender ($\chi^2=10.205$), course ($\chi^2=18.344$) and marital status ($\chi^2=6.389$), while no significant association was reported with age, residence or type of family. Health anxiety was significantly associated with gender ($\chi^2=8.049$) and course ($\chi^2=11.876$), while the remaining reported variables were not significant. **Conclusion:** : The study identified low, moderate and high levels of both cyberchondria and health anxiety among college students, with the largest proportion classified in the high category. A statistically significant positive correlation was reported between cyberchondria and health anxiety. College-based health education regarding reliable online health information and appropriate help-seeking may be useful.

Keywords: Cyberchondria, Health anxiety, College students, Online health information, Nursing research

INTRODUCTION

The internet has become an important source of health-related information. People can rapidly search for symptoms, diseases, treatment options and preventive information. Although online health information can support health awareness, repeated or excessive searching may be associated with worry, distress and health anxiety. Cyberchondria has been described as excessive or repeated online searching for health information that is associated with increased distress or anxiety.[1]

Research has demonstrated an association between health anxiety, online health-information seeking and cyberchondria. A systematic review and meta-analysis found a positive relationship between health anxiety and cyberchondria.[2] A systematic review of cyberchondria research also highlighted the developing nature of the construct and the need for further research using validated measures.[3] Indian research has also begun to examine cyberchondria and its severity in adults, indicating the relevance of the topic in the Indian context.[4]

Relevant conflicts of interest/financial disclosures: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The Cyberchondria Severity Scale (CSS) was developed to assess several dimensions of cyberchondria, including compulsion, distress, excessiveness, reassurance seeking and mistrust of medical professionals.[5] The Health Anxiety Inventory was developed as a measure of health anxiety and hypochondriasis and includes short forms suitable for brief assessment.[6]

College students are an important population because of their frequent use of smartphones, search engines and social media. The present study was therefore undertaken to assess cyberchondria and health anxiety among college students of a selected college in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, and to examine the relationship between these two variables.

OBJECTIVES

1. To assess the level of cyberchondria among college students.
2. To assess the level of health anxiety among college students.
3. To find the correlation between cyberchondria and health anxiety among college students.
4. To determine the association between cyberchondria, health anxiety and selected socio-demographic variables.

HYPOTHESES

H1: There is a significant relationship between cyberchondria and health anxiety among college students.

H2: There is a significant association between the level of cyberchondria and selected socio-demographic variables.

H3: There is a significant association between the level of health anxiety and selected socio-demographic variables.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research approach and design: A quantitative research approach and descriptive correlational research design were used.

Setting: The study was conducted at Mascot College of Education, Rithora, Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Participants and sampling: The study included 100 undergraduate college students aged 17–25 years. Participants were selected by non-probability convenience sampling.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria: Students aged 17–25 years who had access to the internet/social media and were willing to participate were included. Students reported in the dissertation as having a history of psychiatric illness or chronic illness were excluded.

Data collection tools: Section A collected socio-demographic information including age, gender, course, residence, type of family and marital status. Section B consisted of a 33-item Cyberchondria Severity Scale, scored from 1 to 5, with a total possible score of 33–165. Section C consisted of an 18-item Short Health Anxiety Inventory, with each item scored from 0 to 3 and a total possible score of 0–54. The instruments are grounded in published work on cyberchondria and health anxiety.[5,6]

Validity and reliability: Content validity was established through expert review. The dissertation reports Spearman–Brown split-half reliability of $r=0.86$ after pilot testing.

Data collection and analysis: Permission and informed written consent were obtained. Data were organized in a master sheet and analysed using frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, Karl Pearson's correlation coefficient and chi-square test. A p -value <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=100)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	17–18 years	24	24
	19–20 years	37	37
	21–22 years	19	19
	23–25 years	20	20
Gender	Male	47	47
	Female	53	53

Variable	Category	n	%
Course	1st year	36	36
	2nd year	41	41
	3rd year	23	23
Residence	Rural	60	60
	Urban	40	40
Type of family	Nuclear	61	61
	Joint	39	39
Marital status	Unmarried	82	82
	Married	18	18

Table 2: Level of Cyberchondria and Health Anxiety Among Participants (N=100)

Level	Cyberchondria n (%)	Health anxiety n (%)
Low	34 (34%)	29 (29%)
Moderate	27 (27%)	31 (31%)
High	39 (39%)	40 (40%)

Table 3: Mean, Standard Deviation and Correlation Between Cyberchondria and Health Anxiety

Variable	Mean	SD	Correlation / p-value
Cyberchondria	102.50	37.66	r=0.70; p=0.01
Health anxiety	29.67	16.60	—

The findings showed a positive correlation between cyberchondria and health anxiety ($r=0.70$, $p=0.01$).

Based on the reported p-value, the relationship was statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 4: Association of Cyberchondria with Selected Socio-Demographic Variables

Variable	χ^2	Interpretation
Age	8.982	Not significant
Gender	10.205	Significant
Course	18.344	Significant
Residence	0.377	Not significant
Type of family	1.410	Not significant
Marital status	6.389	Significant

Table 5: Association of Health Anxiety with Selected Socio-Demographic Variables

Variable	χ^2	Interpretation
Age	11.268	Not significant
Gender	8.049	Significant
Course	11.876	Significant
Residence	0.177	Not significant
Type of family	1.015	Not significant
Marital status	4.454	Not significant

DISCUSSION

The present study assessed cyberchondria and health anxiety among 100 college students. High cyberchondria was reported in 39% of participants, while 40% had high health anxiety. The findings indicate that all three reported levels—low, moderate and high—were represented in the study population.

A positive correlation was reported between cyberchondria and health anxiety ($r=0.70$, $p=0.01$). This direction is consistent with previous literature describing a positive relationship between health anxiety and cyberchondria.[2,3] The present result should, however, be interpreted within the selected college, sample size and convenience-sampling context.

Cyberchondria showed statistically significant associations with gender, course and marital status, whereas age, residence and type of family were not statistically significant according to the reported analysis. Health anxiety showed statistically significant associations with gender and course, while age, residence, type of family and marital status were reported as not significant.

The findings support the importance of responsible online health-information use and health education among college students. However, the cross-sectional and single-setting design does not establish a causal relationship between cyberchondria and health anxiety.

CONCLUSION

The study found that cyberchondria and health anxiety were present at low, moderate and high levels among the 100 participating college students. The largest proportion of participants had high cyberchondria (39%) and high health anxiety (40%). A statistically significant positive correlation was reported between cyberchondria and health anxiety ($r=0.70$, $p=0.01$). Significant associations were reported for selected socio-demographic variables. These findings highlight the relevance of health education concerning reliable online health information and appropriate health-care consultation among college students.

IMPLICATIONS

Nursing education and college health programmes may include guidance on evaluating online health information, avoiding repeated symptom searching, recognising health-related worry and seeking appropriate professional advice when required. Further studies with larger samples and multiple college settings may provide broader evidence.

LIMITATIONS

The study was conducted in one selected college in Bareilly with 100 participants and used convenience

sampling. Therefore, the findings should not be generalized beyond similar populations without further research. The descriptive correlational design identifies association but does not establish causation.

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