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Consumer Evaluation of Digital Health Information Credibility in Online Consultation Decision-Making

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Abstract. *The rapid development of digital technology has led people to increasingly rely on the internet as an initial source of health information before making medical decisions. However, the varying quality of digital health information requires consumers to evaluate its credibility before using it as a basis for decision-making, including decisions to use online health consultation services. This study aims to understand how consumers evaluate the credibility of digital health information and how this evaluation process influences their decisions to use telemedicine services. This research employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological perspective. Data were collected through in- depth interviews with participants who had searched for health information online and had experience using online medical consultation services. Participants were selected purposively, and the number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of experience and meaning constructed by participants when assessing information credibility. The findings reveal that credibility evaluation is a complex and contextual process influenced by personal experiences and emotional conditions. Consumers assess credibility based on source authority, consistency of information across sources, and prior usage experiences. Emotions such as anxiety also shape how individuals interpret information. Information perceived as credible increases confidence and reduced perceived risk, thereby encouraging the decision to use online consultation services. conversely, information perceived as less credible leads to confusion and delays in decision-making. These findings highlights that the credibility of digital health information serves as a psychological foundation for building trust in telemedicine services.*

Keywords: *Digital Health Information, Health Decision-Making, Information Credibility, Online Health Consultation, Telemedicine.*

1. BACKGROUND

The rapid development of information and communication technology, marked by increasing internet penetration, has changed people's behavior in obtaining health information. The internet is no longer merely a supplement, but has functioned as the primary source of initial reference when individuals experience health complaints (Luo et al., 2023). In Indonesia, approximately 73% of internet users have reportedly searched for health information online, including searches related to disease symptoms, treatment options, healthy lifestyles, and preventive measures before deciding on further medical action (Hernowo, 2023). This figure shows that modern public health decision-making increasingly begins in the digital space, no longer directly at healthcare facilities. This phenomenon is a global trend where more and more individuals rely on digital resources to answer their health questions, even before consulting a medical professional in person.

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Despite the widespread search for digital health information, not all available information is of equal quality or credibility. Research shows that consumers generally have varying levels of trust in health information sources: they tend to trust healthcare professionals the most, while sources like social media are often seen as less credible and prone to misinformation. This (Alhewiti, 2025)distribution of trust is crucial because only about 60% of online health information is considered up to standard and trustworthy by some users, with much content being inaccurate or of unclear provenance (Lim et al., 2025). This situation is further complicated by the individual's ability to access *eHealth. Digital* health *literacy greatly* influences how they assess the credibility of the information and ultimately influences decisions in seeking health services such as online medical consultations.

This issue has become increasingly significant in the era of the development of digital health services such as *telemedicine and* online consultations, where patients increasingly rely on initial information they obtain online before deciding to use these services. Searching for health information through social media, discussion forums, or health apps is the first step before determining whether a complaint needs to be addressed through online medical consultation or whether self-care is sufficient (Harahap et al., 2025). Digital information no longer serves merely as additional knowledge, but has become the initial foundation in the health decision-making process (Stifjell et al., 2025). The gap between the high use of digital health information and the varying quality and credibility of its content presents challenges for patients in making informed and safe health decisions. Therefore, understanding how consumers evaluate digital health information is key to decisions about *telemedicine utilization.*

Various parties have attempted to address the increasingly complex issue of digital health information quality. Government health agencies, medical professional organizations, and even hospitals now provide evidence-based educational content through official websites, health apps, and verified social media channels. (Sufrate-Sorzano et al., 2024)This step aims to provide more credible references while simultaneously curbing the spread of health misinformation, which often circulates through personal blogs, online forums, and viral posts on social media. These efforts demonstrate a collective awareness that the quality of digital health information has a direct impact on public health behaviors and decisions (Zhang & Kim, 2022). However, previous research has been dominated by quantitative approaches and focused on identifying factors that statistically influence credibility assessments. In other words, the dimensions of subjective experience, personal considerations, and the cognitive and emotional dynamics that accompany this process have been relatively rarely explored.

Most previous studies have focused on general factors such as source expertise, website design or features, and other technical indicators in assessing the credibility of digital health information. However, consumers' subjective experiences in interpreting the credibility of that information are crucial. The credibility evaluation process involves understanding the complexity of the information content, its relevance to personal circumstances, and emotional considerations such as anxiety, fear, or hope when choosing digital health services (Medina Aguerrebere et al., 2022). These aspects indicate that credibility evaluation is a contextual and personal process, which has not been widely studied through qualitative approaches in previous international literature (Kim et al., 2023). Based on this gap, this study aims to understand how consumers evaluate the credibility of digital health information and how this evaluation process influences their decisions to use online health consultation services. Through a qualitative approach, this study seeks to uncover the dynamics of consumers' subjective experiences, which have been largely unexplored in previous studies dominated by quantitative approaches.

2. THEORETICAL STUDY

This section outlines the relevant theories underlying the research topic and provides a review of several relevant previous studies, providing a reference and foundation for this research. If there is a hypothesis, it can be stated implicitly and does not have to be phrased as a question.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses an exploratory qualitative approach to deeply understand how consumers evaluate the credibility of digital health information in the online health consultation decision-making process. Specifically, this study adopts a phenomenological perspective, which emphasizes understanding individuals lived experiences in interacting with digital health information (Safitri et al., 2024). This study also obtained ethical approval from participants through *informed consent. Consent was obtained* before the interviews were conducted. Participants were explained the purpose of the study, data confidentiality, and their right to discontinue participation at any time. All data is presented anonymously using codes or pseudonyms.

Research participants were individuals who had searched for health information online and used online health consultation services (*telemedicine*) at least once. The number of participants in this qualitative study was adjusted to the principle of data *saturation*, which means data collection was stopped when no significant new themes were found. In general, the

study involved around 10–15 participants to obtain sufficient experience variation. Data were collected through (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022)*in- depth* interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online or offline, depending on the participant's convenience, with an average duration of 15-30 minutes. All interviews were recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed for analysis. The data were then analyzed using *thematic analysis. analysis.*

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Consumer Strategies in Assessing Digital Health Information Sources

Participants indicated that the credibility of digital health information is initially most often judged based on the source. Official websites of hospitals, doctors, government health institutions, and well-known health platforms are perceived as having higher authority than personal blogs, anonymous forums, or unidentified social media posts. The presence of professional titles, institutional affiliations, health organization logos, and website domains (e.g., those associated with official institutions) are initial cues that help consumers quickly assess the trustworthiness of information. Furthermore, a clean visual appearance, the use of structured medical language, and the presence of scientific references also reinforce the perception that the information comes from a competent source.

However, trust in sources is not absolute. Several participants emphasized that they still compare sources to ensure consistency of information. When they find the same information on several sites deemed credible, their confidence increases. Conversely, if there are differences in content or conflicting explanations, they tend to doubt the accuracy of the information and continue searching. This *cross-checking process* demonstrates that consumers play an active role in validating information and do not simply accept it passively (Karima et al., 2023). This practice reflects the growing critical evaluation within the digital information environment.

In addition to formal indicators such as source identity and content consistency, some participants also based credibility judgments on previous user experiences. Platforms previously used to read health articles, schedule consultations, or interact with medical professionals online tended to elicit higher levels of trust in subsequent searches (Xu et al., 2022). Positive experiences, such as receiving helpful information or a satisfactory consultation, shaped the perception of the platform's reliability (Zhu & Chen, 2015). Conversely, negative experiences, such as perceived misleading information or unresponsive service, could decrease trust in the same source in the future.

These findings suggest that source credibility evaluations are cumulative and experience-based, not simply a fleeting assessment of information presentation. Credibility is built through repeated interactions between consumers and digital platforms, allowing past experiences to serve as a frame of reference for evaluating new information (Zhang et al., 2023). Thus, consumers' strategies for evaluating digital health information sources combine formal authority-based assessments, self-verification through information comparison, and learning from previous usage experiences.

The Role of Personal Experience and Emotion in Credibility Evaluation

In addition to rational considerations such as the source and content of the information, participants revealed that evaluating the credibility of digital health information was heavily influenced by personal experiences and the emotional state at the time of the search. In situations where symptoms caused anxiety or fear, some participants tended to focus more on information directly related to the potential disease they were concerned about. In these situations, information that confirmed their concerns often felt more convincing, even if the source wasn't always clear or objectively credible (Mo et al., 2025). These reactions demonstrate that emotions can narrow the focus of attention and influence how individuals assess the reliability of information.

In contrast, when health complaints were perceived as minor or non-urgent, participants described a calmer and more reflective search process. They were more willing to read from multiple sources, compare information, and consider the context before drawing conclusions. In more emotionally stable states, the credibility evaluation process tended to be more critical and less rushed. This suggests that emotional states act as a lens that influences the depth and direction of information evaluation (Khalifa, 2022). In addition to momentary emotional factors, personal experience also served as an important framework for assessing credibility. Participants tended to trust information that felt relevant to their physical condition, medical history, age, or lifestyle—information that aligned with their personal experiences. Conversely, information that was too general or inconsistent with their personal context was often perceived as less convincing, even if it came from an official source. Thus, personal relevance became an important indicator in the credibility assessment process.

This process demonstrates that credibility evaluations are not solely based on the objectivity of content, but also the result of subjective interpretations shaped by individual life experiences. Credibility in this context is *situated*, that is, influenced by the current health situation and the consumer's background experience (Zhao et al., 2025). This finding reinforces the view that health decision-making is not entirely rational, but rather involves an interaction

between cognitive considerations and emotional responses. Thus, the credibility of digital health information is understood as something perceived. *credibility*, is not only determined by scientific standards or formal authority alone.

The Influence of Credibility Evaluation on Online Health Consultation Decisions

The study's findings indicate that evaluating the credibility of digital health information is a key factor bridging the gap between information seeking and the decision to use online health consultation services. When the information obtained was perceived as clear, consistent, and from a source perceived as trustworthy, participants reported feeling confident and at ease in proceeding with the online consultation. This information helped them assess the severity of their symptoms, understand potential initial treatments, and determine whether an online consultation was an appropriate step before deciding on further action (Zhang et al., 2025). In these situations, information credibility plays a role in reducing the uncertainty that often accompanies health decisions.

Conversely, when the information they found was conflicting, too general, or came from questionable sources, participants tended to experience confusion and doubt. This led some to delay decisions, conduct additional research, or switch directly to face-to-face services because they felt online consultations were not yet reliable enough (Vega et al., 2023). Some participants also revealed that overly technical or overwhelming information actually increased their anxiety and made them feel their health condition was more serious than it actually was. In these cases, decisions were no longer based on clear understanding, but rather on an emotional urge to immediately seek reassurance through direct interaction with a medical professional.

These findings demonstrate that credibility evaluations serve as a filtering mechanism in the digital health decision-making process. Information deemed credible tends to strengthen the intention to use online consultations, while questionable information can hinder or divert the decision to other services. In other words, information credibility not only influences consumers' knowledge levels but also shapes their perceptions of risk and safety regarding *telemedicine services*. Within the consumer decision-making framework, this process reflects the stages of evaluating alternatives before a final decision is made. The credibility of digital information serves as the basis for building trust in the service, which ultimately determines whether consumers feel confident enough to use online health consultations. Thus, the decision to use *telemedicine* is not only a result of medical necessity but also the process of interpreting and assessing the quality of previously obtained information.

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study indicate that evaluating the credibility of digital health information is a multidimensional, dynamic, and contextual process. Consumers assess credibility not only based on rational indicators such as the source of the information and the comprehensiveness of the message, but also through an interpretation process influenced by personal experiences, current health conditions, and emotional states at the time of the information search. Credibility is not simply an attribute inherent in information, but rather the result of the interaction between information characteristics and an individual's frame of meaning (Malhotra et al., 2025). These findings suggest that the credibility evaluation process occurs in stages. In the initial stages, consumers tend to make quick judgments based on superficial cues such as website appearance, author identity, or association with medical institutions. However, as the information's relevance to personal circumstances increases, the evaluation process becomes more in-depth and reflective, involving comparisons between sources, adjustments to prior experiences, and consideration of potential risks. This suggests that credibility evaluation is situational. The higher the perceived health urgency, the greater the emotional involvement in the evaluation process.

Unlike previous quantitative approaches that tend to statistically map relationships between variables, this study confirms that credibility is perceived and negotiated subjectively by consumers. Scientifically accurate information is not necessarily immediately perceived as credible if it aligns with an individual's experiences or expectations. Conversely, objectively less robust information can feel convincing when it aligns with personal concerns or beliefs. In other words, credibility evaluations are determined not only by the objective quality of the information but also by the meaningful fit between the message and the consumer's life context. The implications for decisions about using online health consultation services are significant. Credibility evaluations serve as a filtering mechanism that determines whether digital information will translate into concrete actions. When information is deemed credible and relevant, consumers tend to feel more confident proceeding with online consultations, perceiving them as a logical and safe step (Marsanda & Naryoso, 2024). Conversely, when credibility is questioned, consumers delay decisions or even avoid digital services.

Thus, the credibility of digital health information serves as a psychological foundation for building trust in *telemedicine*. These findings confirm that in the context of digital healthcare, consumer decision-making is not solely rational, but rather the result of an integration of cognitive assessments and emotional responses. Therefore, efforts to increase *telemedicine utilization* require more than simply providing accurate information; they also

require attention to how that information is communicated, perceived, and interpreted by consumers in health situations often fraught with uncertainty and anxiety.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The research results show that evaluating information credibility plays a crucial role in determining the decision to consult online. Information perceived as clear, consistent, and from a trusted source tends to foster confidence and lower perceived risk, thus encouraging participants to proceed with online consultations. Conversely, information that is contradictory, overly technical, or from a questionable source triggers confusion and anxiety, leading to delayed decisions or a switch to in-person services.

Credibility evaluation serves as a filtering mechanism between the information search stage and the decision to use digital health services. This process involves perceptions of risk, safety, and trust in health technology. Thus, the decision to use *telemedicine is driven by the quality of an individual's interpretation of the credibility of the information. This study confirms that the credibility of digital health information is a crucial foundation for building trust in* online health consultation services. These findings provide practical implications for digital health service providers to ensure the clarity and authority of information sources, as well as theoretical implications for enhancing understanding of consumer decision-making processes in the digital health realm.

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