Patterns of Online Health Information Seeking Among Gen Z Nigerians: A Behavioral Analysis

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Abstract

Background: The increasing accessibility of smartphones, internet connectivity, and social media platforms has revolutionized how health information is sought globally. In Nigeria, where infrastructural challenges often constrain access to traditional healthcare services, Generation Z (Gen Z) has turned to online platforms as their primary source of health-related information. This shift reflects the demographic's digital nativity and preference for convenience, anonymity, and engaging, interactive content.

Objectives: This study explores the behavioral patterns, motivations, and challenges of seeking online health information among Gen Z Nigerians. It focuses on the platforms and sources used, perceptions of trustworthiness, and the influence of socio-cultural and digital literacy factors.

Methods: A qualitative research design was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with 30 participants aged 18–24 years from urban and rural areas of Nigeria. The data were analyzed thematically using the Self-Efficacy Model and the Uses and Gratifications Theory.

Results: The findings reveal six key themes. Social media platforms, including Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, dominate as primary sources for health information due to their accessibility and engaging formats. However, trust in online health information varies, with many participants relying on peer recommendations or influencers rather than verified medical sources. Peer and influencer-driven content significantly shapes health decisions concerning fitness, mental health, and nutrition. Cultural stigmas surrounding sensitive topics, such as sexual and mental health, push many young Nigerians to seek information anonymously online. Challenges include the prevalence of misinformation, overwhelming and contradictory content, and limited internet access in rural areas.

Conclusion: Online health information influences positive health changes, such as improved diets or fitness routines, and adverse outcomes, such as reliance on unverified remedies. The findings note critical gaps in digital health literacy.

Keywords: Cultural-Stigmas, Digital Health Literacy, Misinformation, Online platform, Social-Media.

1. Background

The Internet has become essential for accessing information across various domains, including health (1). Information in the present age can be regarded as the bedrock of any society because the more informed it is, the more developed it will become. Information

plays a vital role in all human activities and disciplines, especially for human sustenance, competitive advantage, and advancement of the frontiers of knowledge (2-3). In recent decades, the proliferation of smartphones, increased internet connectivity, and the ubiquity of social media platforms have revolutionized how individuals seek and consume health-related information (4). This transformation is particularly evident in developing countries like Nigeria, where access to traditional healthcare systems remains constrained by infrastructural deficiencies, long waiting times, and uneven distribution of health facilities (5).

Generation Z (Gen Z), typically defined as those born between 1997 and 2012, is distinguished by its digital nativity (6). Having grown up in an era of rapid technological advancement, this demographic group is characterized by its reliance on the Internet for communication, education, and daily activities(7). Research indicates that Gen Z individuals are more likely to seek health information online than older generations due to their familiarity with digital tools and platforms (8). The pursuit of health information online has recently emerged as a favored method due to its accessibility and breadth of information, ease of searching, cost-effectiveness, interactivity, and anonymity (9). Online health information encompasses "any details concerning symptoms, diagnoses, and treatments of various diseases, as well as general information about weight loss, healthy diets, or wellness advice (10).

Nigeria's healthcare system faces significant challenges, including a doctor-to-patient ratio far below the World Health Organization's (WHO)(11) recommended standard (12). These challenges often force individuals to seek alternative means of obtaining health information and advice. For Gen Z Nigerians, more inclined to engage with technology online, health information-seeking behavior (HISB) has become a global trend(10). The

Internet provides a gateway to health education, offering solutions to address symptoms, preventive care, and even mental health support (7,13). The concept of Online Health Information-Seeking Behaviour (HISB) pertains to the methods by which individuals pursue information regarding their health, associated risks (14), illnesses (15), and behaviors that promote health protection (16,17). However, the unregulated nature of online health content raises concerns about the accuracy, reliability, and potential dangers of misinformation (18). This study seeks to explore these issues by examining the behavioral patterns, motivations, and challenges Gen Z Nigerians face in their quest for online health information. This research will generate insights to inform strategies for improving the quality of digital health content and fostering a more health-literate generation.

This study explores the behavioral patterns of online health information-seeking among Gen Z Nigerians. The specific objectives are:

Aim

1: To identify the platforms and sources used by Gen Z Nigerians for health information. 2: To assess this demographic's trust and perception of online health information. 3: To provide recommendations for improving the quality and accessibility of online health resources tailored to Gen Z Nigerians.

2. Objective

This study explores the behavioral patterns, motivations, and challenges associated with online health information-seeking among Gen Z Nigerians. It focuses on the platforms and sources used, perceptions of trustworthiness, and the influence of socio-cultural and digital literacy factors.

3. Methods
Research Design

This study follows a descriptive qualitative research design, which is ideal for capturing

detailed, contextual insights into the health information-seeking behaviors of Gen Z Nigerians.

Study Setting

The research is conducted in Nigeria's urban and rural settings to account for the diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds, access to technology, and cultural influences that may impact health information-seeking behaviors. Nigeria is an ideal location for this study due to its large population of Gen Z individuals, rapid internet penetration, and varying levels of access to healthcare services. The urban areas include major cities like Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt, while rural areas like Epe and Ibeju-Lekki (Lagos State), Nyanya, and Gwagwa (Abuja) were selected to capture participants from regions with potentially limited access to digital resources.

Participant Selection

A purposive sampling technique selects participants from different socio-economic backgrounds and geographical regions to ensure diversity and capture a wide range of health information-seeking behaviors. The inclusion criteria for the selection of the participants were:

Age: Participants must be between 18 and 24 years old, as this is the defined age range for Gen Z.

Health Information-Seeking Behavior: Participants must have actively sought health-related information online in the past six months, regardless of the frequency or type of information sought.

Informed Consent: Participants must be willing to participate in the study and provide informed consent, understanding that their responses will remain confidential.

Language: Participants must be fluent in English or a local Nigerian language and have the ability to communicate effectively in interviews.

The final sample consists of 30 participants (15 males, 15 females), with a mix of urban and rural participants in three major Nigerian States. These individuals were selected from universities, community centers, and through social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) to ensure that a wide range of young people are represented in the study.

Data Collection Method

The semi-structured interview approach was used to collect data, which is well-suited for qualitative research. The semi-structured format ensures that the same core topics are addressed across all interviews while allowing in-depth exploration of individual experiences.

Interview Process

The interviews were conducted in person or via video calls, depending on the availability and location of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participant's consent to ensure accurate transcription and analysis. Interviewing was done in a private, quiet environment to ensure confidentiality and minimize distractions. In rural areas, interviews were conducted in a secure place like the Community Town Hall and local gathering places (Community Leader's Place) where participants felt comfortable. All participants were assured privacy, and their personal information will not be shared.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews are transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, an inductive approach well-suited for qualitative research. The thematic analysis allows for identifying patterns, themes, and categories in the data that emerge during the interviews.

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this research integrates the Self-Efficacy Model and the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) alongside a conceptual model that combines individual, technological, and socio-cultural factors to

analyze the behavioral patterns of Generation Z Nigerians in seeking online health information. Self-Efficacy Model. The Self-Efficacy Model, developed by Albert Bandura, focuses on an individual's belief in their capability to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific outcomes. This model emphasizes that self-efficacy influences people's thinking, feeling, and acting. High self-efficacy often leads individuals to engage in proactive behavior, while low self-efficacy may result in avoidance of challenges. In the context of this study, the Self-Efficacy Model is relevant for understanding how Gen Z Nigerians approach online health information seeking.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) examines why individuals actively seek out specific media to satisfy particular needs. This theory asserts that users are not passive consumers but actively choose media that fulfill their informational, social, or entertainment needs. UGT is particularly pertinent to understanding the motivations of Gen Z Nigerians to seek health information online. The theory highlights that their use of platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok is driven by these media's convenience, anonymity, and engaging nature. For sensitive topics such as mental or sexual health, these platforms offer a safe space to access information without fear of judgment, fulfilling their need for privacy and relatability.

Integration and Justification

These theories collectively provide a robust framework for analyzing Gen Z Nigerians' online health information-seeking behavior. The Self-Efficacy Model offers insight into the individual-level factors, such as digital confidence and decision-making abilities, that influence their engagement with online health resources. UGT, on the other hand, explains the media preferences and motivations that drive their choice of platforms and content types.

These theories align with the study's focus on behavioral patterns, motivations, and challenges. They help contextualize why this demographic relies heavily on social media for health information and how individual and environmental factors shape their behaviors. Applying these frameworks ensures a comprehensive analysis that addresses psychological and socio-cultural dimensions of online health information-seeking among Gen Z Nigerians.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their rights. Written informed consent was obtained before the interviews commenced. Participants' identities are kept confidential. Data are anonymized, and all identifying information (such as names) is removed from the transcripts. Participation is voluntary, and participants are informed that they can withdraw from the study without any consequences. All audio recordings, transcripts, and notes are securely stored in password-protected files to ensure data security and participant privacy.

4. Results

The results of the semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 Gen Z Nigerians (15 males, 15 female), aged between 18 and 24 years, regarding their online health information-seeking behaviors, identified several recurring themes that reflect the underlying patterns, motivations, and challenges in health information-seeking among young Nigerians. These findings provide insights into how social media, peer influence, trust in online content, and cultural factors shape the health information-seeking behaviors of this demographic.

Theme 1: Predominance of Social Media as a Primary Source for Health Information

The most significant finding in the study was the dominance of social media platforms as the primary source for health-related information among Gen Z Nigerians. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok were mentioned by almost all participants (90%) as the places where they primarily access health information. Participant 5 (Female, 21, Lagos): "I mostly go to Instagram for health tips. I follow a few fitness influencers who have post-workout routines and healthy meal ideas. It feels like they understand what young people like me need." Participant 12 (Male, 22, Port Harcourt) stated, "I use YouTube often for health information, especially when I need a more detailed explanation. Some videos show how to exercise correctly or what foods to eat if you want to get fit." The widespread availability of mobile Internet and the popularity of visual content (e.g., videos, infographics) on these platforms were highlighted as significant factors influencing this preference. Health content on Instagram is often found through hashtags and health influencers who post daily health tips, fitness routines, and lifestyle choices.

Theme 2: Trust Issues with Online Health Information

Despite the heavy reliance on social media for health information, trustworthiness was a significant concern for many participants. About 70% of participants expressed uncertainty about the reliability of the health content they encountered online. A recurring strategy for verifying the trustworthiness of health content involved looking at the number of likes, shares, or comments associated with a post, as these indicators often influenced their perception of the content's credibility. Only 20% of participants reported checking the credentials of the content creators or cross-referencing information from recognized health sources. Participant 17 (Female, 19, Abuja) said, "I do look at how many people like or comment on a post to gauge its trustworthiness.

Nevertheless, honestly, I still get confused. Sometimes, I find health info that contradicts what others say. I do not know who to trust sometimes." Participant 9 (Male, 23, Jos) Said, "I try to make sure that the sources I follow have some medical credentials, but not all do. I do not always feel confident about the information, but I do not know where else to look."

Theme 3: Influence of Peer and Social Media Influencers on Health Decisions

A major driver of health information-seeking behaviors for Gen Z Nigerians is the influence of peers and social media influencers. Approximately 60% of participants mentioned following social media influencers who share their health experiences, fitness routines, and wellness tips. Participants often viewed these influencers as more relatable and trustworthy than traditional media sources, particularly for mental health, body image, and nutrition. Participant 6 (Female, 20, Lagos) said, "I follow a couple of people who post about mental health. They make me feel like it is okay to talk about mental health, which I do not think I would do if I did not see people like them talking about it openly.". Peer recommendations were also cited as an important factor in health decision-making, with participants discussing how they seek validation or advice from friends before adopting health practices shared by influencers. Participant 14 (Male, 22, Enugu) said, "I trust my friends more than anyone else. If they say something worked for them, I will try it myself. However, social media influencers also have a big impact, especially when they show results."

Theme 4: Cultural Sensitivities and Stigma Around Sensitive Health Topics

The study also revealed that cultural sensitivities play a significant role in the health information-seeking behaviors of Gen Z Nigerians. Participants indicated that they often turn to online platforms for information on sensitive health topics such as sexual health, mental health, and reproductive health, as these are subjects not easily discussed in public or within families. Participant 4 (Female, 18, Lagos) said, "I do not feel comfortable talking about sexual health with anyone in my family. I turn to online resources to learn more, especially because most community members are too shy to have those discussions." 80% of participants stated that they would prefer researching these topics online rather than talking to family members or healthcare professionals due to the stigma and cultural taboos surrounding such issues in Nigerian society.

Theme 5: Challenges and Barriers in Accessing Reliable Health Information

A notable challenge in seeking online health information was the overload of conflicting information, which made it difficult for participants to differentiate between credible sources and misinformation. Participant 8 (Female, 21, Abuja) said, "Sometimes, the Internet is flooded with too much info, and I get overwhelmed. There are days I give up because I can no longer tell what is real or fake." Approximately 50% of participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the amount of health content available, with some mentioning that they often found contradictory information on the same health topics. The accessibility issue was also cited, as some participants, especially from rural areas, mentioned having limited access to reliable internet connections, which hindered their ability to conduct thorough health searches. Participant 21 (Male, 22, Bayelsa) stated, "The internet connection is terrible in rural areas. It is hard to get any real research done, and sometimes, the data I need is unavailable on local sites. That is frustrating."

Theme 6: Impact of Online Health Information on Health Decisions

The study found that online health information had a tangible impact on the participants' health-related decisions. Approximately 6% of participants stated that they had adopted health practices (such as changing their diet, exercise routines, or seeking mental health support) based on information they found online. Participant 2 (Female, 20, Lagos) stated, "I have changed my diet after watching a video about healthy eating habits. The content was convincing, and I noticed I started feeling better after a few weeks." However, some participants also reported adverse outcomes, such as attempting unproven weight-loss diets or using unverified health supplements. Participant 3 (Female, 23, Abuja) shared her experience: "I once tried a weight-loss smoothie recipe I found online that everyone was raving about. It made me feel sick for days, and I later found out some of the ingredients were not even safe for consumption."

5. Discussion

Predominance of Social Media as a Primary Source for Health Information

The majority of Gen Z Nigerians rely on social media for health information, as it is a key source of health-related content. This trend is supported by literature on digital platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok (7,19,20). Participants also follow fitness influencers for workout routines and meal ideas, highlighting Instagram's ability to present health information in an aesthetic and accessible format (20). As noted in the study, TikTok's popularity for

quick health tips and viral trends aligns with its reputation as a platform that delivers bite-sized, engaging content (20). However, this rapid consumption of information also raises concerns about the accuracy and reliability of the content, a challenge frequently highlighted in research (21). Gen Z values authenticity and relatability over traditional expert authority, making Instagram a popular resource for health advice (22). Instagram's influencers share content tailored to followers' interests, fostering trust and connection. Step-by-step demonstrations help users internalize and replicate health practices (23-24), bridging the gap between theoretical advice and practical implementation (25). This depth of content is particularly appealing to Gen Z Nigerians who, as highlighted by (26), often seek immediate and practical solutions to health concerns.

Influence of Peer and Social Media Influencers on Health Decisions

Social media influencers are pivotal in shaping the health decisions of Gen Z Nigerians, as highlighted by the literature and findings. Approximately 60% of participants in the study reported following influencers who share health experiences, fitness routines, and wellness tips. This aligns with (20,27), who emphasize the role of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube in providing visually engaging and relatable health content that resonates with this demographic. Participant 6's comment about feeling encouraged to discuss mental health after observing influencers reflects the literature's assertion that Gen Z values authenticity over authority (28). This preference for peer-like, approachable content further validates the role of influencers as a bridge to discussing stigmatized or sensitive health topics, as supported by (29). The findings also reveal that peer recommendations are crucial in shaping health behaviors. Participants, such

as Participant 14, reported trusting their friends' opinions and experiences more than traditional sources of health information. This finding aligns with (9) and (10), which highlight the importance of peer influence in the health decisions of Gen Z individuals. The literature further emphasizes that Gen Z values personal and relatable content, often prioritizing peer-driven advice over professional medical guidance (30). The interplay between social media influencers and peer influence is evident, with participants frequently seeking validation from friends before adopting health practices shared by influencers.

Cultural Sensitivities and Stigma Around Sensitive Health Topics

The findings from the study align closely with the existing literature on the health information-seeking behaviors of Gen Z Nigerians, particularly concerning the influence of cultural sensitivities and stigma around sensitive health topics. The study revealed that 80% of participants prefer researching topics such as sexual health, mental health, and reproductive health online rather than discussing them with family members or healthcare professionals due to the cultural taboos and societal stigma surrounding these issues (31). For instance, the literature notes that many individuals, particularly in Nigeria, turn to online platforms for health information due to their privacy and anonymity. As discussed by (32), these online spaces provide a sense of security and freedom, allowing individuals, especially young people, to explore health concerns that may otherwise be difficult to discuss openly within their communities or families. The findings of this study align with this notion, as participants in the study explicitly mentioned their discomfort with discussing sensitive topics like sexual health with family members. Instead, they preferred

online resources that allowed them to navigate these issues discreetly (33).

The anonymity provided by online platforms also plays a crucial role in enabling Gen Z Nigerians to access sensitive health information. As highlighted (29), remaining anonymous allows individuals to explore topics related to mental health, sexual health, and reproductive health without fear of judgment or stigma. This highlights the critical role of online spaces in providing a more accessible and non-judgmental environment for health-seeking behavior, especially when discussing specific health topics that are often culturally discouraged.

Challenges and Barriers to Accessing Reliable Health Information

A significant challenge highlighted in the results is the overload of conflicting information, which participants find overwhelming. This mirrors the findings from the literature, where it is noted that Gen Z Nigerians, as digital natives, are bombarded with vast amounts of health-related content online, much of which may not be credible. The literature by (21) and (19) suggests that the sheer volume of online health content often includes misinformation or unverified advice, which can lead to confusion among young people seeking health information (34). The results also reflect the influence of peer and influencer-driven content, where participants express reliance on non-professional sources for health information (35). The study found that Gen Z Nigerians often seek health advice from influencers or online communities, which can be contradictory and difficult to trust. This reliance on peer-driven content raises concerns about the accuracy of health practices without proper medical guidance (19). The desire for emotional validation from online communities is a strong motivator in health information-seeking behaviors (33), potentially exposing Gen Z Nigerians to unverified or harmful health behaviors.

Finally, the cultural sensitivities and stigma surrounding specific health topics such as sexual health, mental health, and reproductive health continue to influence how Gen Z Nigerians access health information. The results show that participants prefer seeking information about sensitive health issues online due to societal taboos. This behavior is consistent with the literature, where online platforms provide anonymity, allowing Gen Z to explore stigmatized topics discreetly (29). This preference for anonymity is essential in contexts where discussing specific health topics openly is culturally taboo or uncomfortable. However, while this provides a sense of privacy and safety, it also exposes individuals to misinformation and unverified content, as the anonymity of the Internet allows less-regulated information to proliferate (21).

Impact of Online Health Information on Health Decisions

The findings from the study align closely with several key themes in the literature surrounding online health information-seeking behaviors, especially among Gen Z Nigerians (24). As highlighted by (12,36,37,38), the Internet is increasingly the first point of reference for health-related queries, and this tendency is particularly evident among younger generations like Gen Z (39). The study revealed that 65% of participants made health-related decisions ranging from dietary changes to seeking mental health support based on online information. The findings echo the literature's observation (40) that Gen Z often adopts health practices promoted through online channels, as seen in Participant 2's decision to change her diet after watching a video on healthy eating habits (41). This reflects Gen

Z's preference for accessible, visually engaging, and interactive content (8), with a reliance on social media influencers and peer-driven health advice (33). However, the adverse outcomes reported by some participants also underscore the risks associated with unverified online health information, a concern raised in multiple studies (19,42). Participant 3's experience of trying an unsafe weight-loss smoothie recipe she found online highlights the dangers of acting on health advice without consulting professionals. This aligns with the literature's emphasis on the prevalence of misinformation and the dangers of relying on peer and influencer-driven content (33).

6. Conclusion

The study explores Generation Z Nigerians' online health information-seeking behaviors, highlighting the importance of social media as a primary source. However, relying on unverified sources and cultural taboos can lead to misinformation and poor health decisions. The study emphasizes the dual role of digital platforms in empowering individuals with health information and amplifying misinformation risks without proper health literacy and regulatory measures. Addressing these challenges is crucial for improved health outcomes for Gen Z Nigerians.

Recommendation

To address the challenges associated with online health information-seeking among Generation Z Nigerians, it is crucial to enhance digital health literacy through targeted educational programs that teach young people how to evaluate online health information and identify credible sources critically. Schools and universities should integrate these skills into their curricula. Collaborations between healthcare professionals and social media influencers

can ensure the dissemination of accurate, engaging, and evidence-based health content. Improved internet infrastructure, especially in rural areas, is essential to ensure equitable access to reliable health resources. Additionally, culturally sensitive digital health content must be developed to address stigmatized topics like mental health and sexual health, providing non-judgmental and accessible guidance. Finally, robust policies and partnerships with technology companies should be established to regulate misleading online health content, ensuring the promotion of verified information while removing harmful misinformation. These measures collectively support informed health decisions and better outcomes for this demographic.

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