USE OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS FOR HEALTH PROMOTION: A STUDY OF SELECTED WEB PORTALS

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ABSTRACT
In the contemporary scenario, individuals are increasingly using the internet to obtain health-based information. Digital media being a fast, interactive and accessible medium has great potential to motivate and influence an individual's behavior, medical practitioners, and policymakers to improve health outcomes. Not just patients but even medical experts and government sectors utilize various online platforms to communicate health-related information. Nowadays, there is an abundance of health-related content on the internet, including web portals, mobile apps, blogs, YouTube channels, etc. This research paper identifies the various online health portals and explores the use of such platforms for health promotion. It analyzes the content available on these platforms with reference to selected online health portals. Further, it aims to find out the barriers in obtaining information through digital platforms and suggest possible measures to overcome these. The survey of internet users was conducted to find out the usefulness of e-health portals and related problems in accessing and using health-based information effectively through online platforms. The study suggests ways to effectively utilize the e-health platforms so that it is easily accessible and understandable to its users.

Keywords: Digital platform, Healthcare, Health promotion, Online portal

1. INTRODUCTION

Health literacyhas become one of the major concerns of policymakers today. It is extremely important for the people to realize the importance of health awareness. Awareness of medical requirements helps in prevention from vulnerabilities. Various mediums are used to promote healthcare services, which includes print, audio-visual and digital media.

Digital platformscan be used effectively to generate and share information regarding health practices. It includes web pages and websites, electronic books and study material, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.

There are multiple advantages of using digital mediums to promote health which includes:

a)   Providing basic and immediate information about various diseases, symptoms, precautions and medicines at lower costs

b)   Accessibility to a platform where patients and medical professionals can connect

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c)   Easy to share information

With the increasing acceptability and easy access, it is today widely used to facilitate communication in the health areas. Not just the general public and patients use it as a medium to seek information on healthcare, but it is also actively used by the medical professionals, healthcare organizations and activists to create and spread informative content regarding health.

It is a convergent platform that provides a plethora of information on various disciplines, health being one of those. It can be effectively used to influence and encourage individuals to adopt healthy habits. Individuals today are actively seeking information through the internet to live a healthy life. They are also engaged in generating and sharing health related content through online health portals including video conferencing with the doctors, emails, online discussion forums, etc.

Healthcare portals like 'Arogya', 'Only My Health', 'Practo', 'Healthy India', 'Med India', 'BabyCenter', 'Vhealth', etc. answer health and fitness related queries, create discussion forums, identify suitable medicines, provide connectivity with medical practitioners besides giving basic information on healthcare.

The quest for information is embedded in individuals. Digital platforms as an important information source seem to have almost all answers to their queries. However, it is also important to acknowledge the extent to which it can serve as a health support system.

2. OBJECTIVES
- To analyze the content on selected health web portals
- To find out the effectiveness of online health portals
- To identify the barriers in accessing online health information

3. HYPOTHESIS
- Digital health portals promote health awareness among its users

4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

"Health Literacy is the ability to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions and follow instructions for treatment."*(American Medical Association Foundation)*Health literacy is of prime importance today. *R.A Logan and E.R Siegel*explain the importance of health literacy in the book '*Health Literacy: New Directions in Research, Theory and Practice.*' They write, "Health Literacy concerns the ability to manage health and navigate the health system. It is relevant for making informed health decisions, patient health outcomes and resulting healthcare costs." *(Logan and Siegel, 2017*)

Digital media can serve as an effective tool to increase health awareness, if we utilize the digital platforms efficiently. "The internet can be considered as a valuable instrument in improving healthcare services, by facilitating efficient, rapid and convenient access to medical education," mentions *Monica Murero, Ronald E. Rice* in the book '*The Internet and Healthcare: Theory, Research, and Practice.* 'However, the book also focuses on the risks of internet dependence for gathering health information. The threats as mentioned here include, *"*lack of control over online content, low reliability, and poor validity of medical information." Further, the book suggests that there is a possible risk of disseminating and applying inappropriate and erroneous information. (Murero& Rice, 2006/2010)

In the research paper '*Health promotion in the digital era: a critical commentary', Deborah Lupton* gives an overview of various types of digital technologies that are used for health promotion which includes health information websites, mobile apps, social media platforms, etc. These platforms can provide people with opportunities to share their health stories and promote health awareness. (Lupton, 2015)

With the changing time, there is a shift in information-seeking behaviour of individuals. "Consumers have moved from consulting their local telephone book to using online directories to find a physical therapist and may now choose a provider based on their Facebook page, blog, or user-created ratings," writes*Gagnon &Sabus* in the research paper '*Professionalism in a Digital Age: Opportunities and Considerations for Using Social Media in Health Care***.'**The studyfocuses on the role of social media in healthcare. It emphasizes on the changing pattern of the information-seeking behaviour of people with the coming of social media. Further, it talks about the new opportunities for healthcare professionals in the digital era. *(Gagnon &Sabus, 2015)*

Mostly studies have focused on use of social media for health promotion. In another book titled '*Participatory Health Through Social Media'*emphasize highlight the utilization of social media by patients and medical experts. Social media acts as a forum of interactions around health issues. They include chat rooms, messaging or online chatting with the clinician. *(Abdul et al., 2016)*

In the research paper titled **'***Trending now: future directions in digital media for the public health sector', Garcia &Scally*analyses the ways in which digital media can be used as a vehicle for the public health sector. It can be used to "track disease spread and mobilize responses to urgent and emerging problems." Since the internet offers multiple data sources to gather health-based content, it makes the user well informed about healthcare issues and preventive measures. *(Garcia &Scally, 2014)*

5. METHODOLOGY

The research paper includes an amalgamation of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Firstly, availability of online health portals was studied.Three portals were selected, and the content was studied in detail. The selection of the portal was based on the traffic received on these websites. Further, a survey was conducted to find out the usefulness of the online health portals. The purpose was also to identify barriers in accessing these online portals. A well-structured questionnaire was given to the respondents. The sample size for the same was 100. The findings were summed up in pie charts.

5.1 SAMPLE DESIGN

Table 5.1.1: Sample Distribution Pattern

Age Group	No. of respondents
15-30 Years	56
31-45 years	30
46-60	11

61 onwards	3

Gender	No. of respondents
Male	40
Female	60

6. STUDY OF ONLINE HEALTH PORTALS

There are online healthcare portals in India which provide much needed guidance on health issues, to provide support services to the information seekers. Some of these include 'Arogya', 'Only My Health', 'Practo', 'Healthy India', 'Med India', 'BabyCenter', 'Vhealth', etc. These portals answer health and fitness related queries, create discussion forums, identify suitable medicines, provide connectivity with medical practitioners besides giving basic information on healthcare. Based on the online traffic estimate tool, Practo, 1mg and MedIndia were one of the top ranked healthcare portals available in India. (*Similar Web*, 2020)

6.1 PRACTO

As the website puts it, "We are a Bridge and Practo is that little bridge that helps the patients cross the river." Practo is an Indian based healthcare portal which acts as a bridge between health seekers and medical experts. Its services are available in 15 countries, almost 50 million appointments with the doctors are booked in a year and has around two lakh healthcare providers. It not just provides basic health information but also provides an opportunity to interact with the doctors and even book appointments. The portal has over 30, 000 doctors. One can even contact pharmacies and order medicines and health products just with a click. It also provides services like full body health checkups. Moreover, the portal has a blog through which it shares informative articles on health-related content. It has different sections for patients, doctors, clinics and hospitals. To make it more convenient for the users, Practo services are also available on its mobile app. Also, there is a review column for its users to share their experiences. Practo is also available on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter making it more accessible. (*Practo | Book Doctor Appointments Online, Order Medicine, Diagnostic Tests, Consult*, 2017)

6.2 1MG

According to the portal, "1mg provides accurate, authoritative & trustworthy information on medicines and helps people use their medicines effectively and safely." 1 mg is an online platform which is accessible for healthcare necessities. It provides home delivery of health products including all types of medicines, vitamins and nutrition supplements at affordable prices to over thousand cities across India. It has the facility to consult with qualified health professionals and chat for free. Users can book lab tests online and even get the reports online. It also has its mobile app which increases its accessibility. Further, it even tries to overcome the language barrier in India by publishing health-based articles in Hindi. According to the portal, the owners are working hard to

make this information available in multiple languages. It serves the diverse interests of users by offering products and services related to allopathic, homeopathic and ayurvedic. Thus, it has revolutionized the lives of consumers and caregivers. *(Online Pharmacy India | Buy Medicines from India's Trusted Medicine Store: 1mg.com, 2015)*

6.3 MEDINDIA

Medindia is an online healthcare platform assisting the audience to reach healthcare professionals and executives worldwide. 'Networking for health' is its mission statement. Medindia is one of the leading health related platforms globally with 10 million monthly page views in terms of traffic, reach, search engine ranking. The portal claims that it provides almost 40 health news items daily having over 35,000 news and research items related to health. These include articles related to diet & nutrition, yoga, lifestyle & wellness, home-made remedies and even beauty tips. There is provision to use various health tools like blood group calculator, blood pressure chart, height weight tools, body fat calculator, vitamin deficiency calculator, etc. Medindia specializes in health information, medical dictionaries, diets, drugs, dental care, cancer, men and women's health, mental health, diabetes, depression, and weight loss. The portal is also available on various social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. (*Medindia - Trusted Information on Health & Wellness*, 1999)

7. DATA ANALYSIS
7.1 USERS AND USAGE OF ONLINE PLATFORMS

In the technological driven era, people mostly use online platforms to gather content on healthcare. Through the survey conducted, it was observed that out of the 100 samples, only 9.8% people do not prefer online mediums to obtain health-based information. Others expressed that they use such platforms to gather information on health-related content.

Further, it is important to note that more than 50% responses were received from people between the age group of 15 and 30 years. Around 30% respondents belong to 31 to 45 years of age group. The rest 11% respondents fall between the age bar 46 to 60 years. However, very few responses were received from people over 60 years of age.
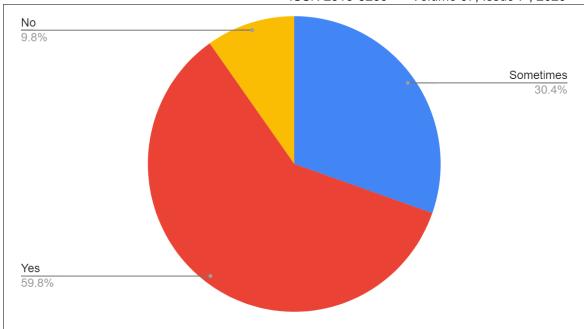
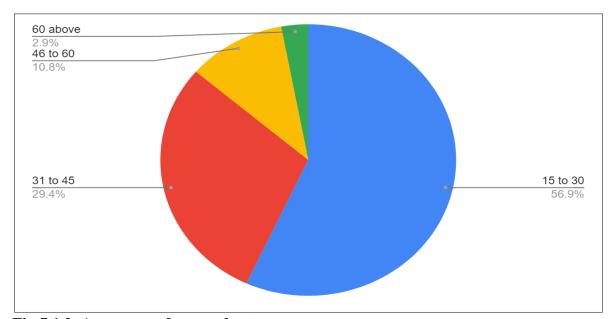**Fig. 7.1.1: Usage of online mediums to obtain health-related information**

Fig-7.1.2: Age group of respondents

7.2 INCREASING DEMAND OF ONLINE HEALTH PORTALS

In the digital era, online health portals have reached the forefront in serving as a health information source for the users. According to the survey results, online portals are being preferred mostly because it is an accessible, convenient and cheaper medium. Also, it takes less time to gather information. Almost 50% respondents opted for all the mentioned reasons. The most favorite option for the respondents was the easy accessibility. For others, it was less time consuming or a cheaper medium.

Factors contributing to increase in demand:
- To consult doctors
- To book medical appointments
- To conduct online health tests
- To search for healthcare information
- To buy health products

As per the survey results, the most preferred reason to use such platforms was the need to search for healthcare information. Clearly, users consider this as a source of information which is available to them at low cost and in a lesser time. Also, almost 90% users recommend such platforms to others.
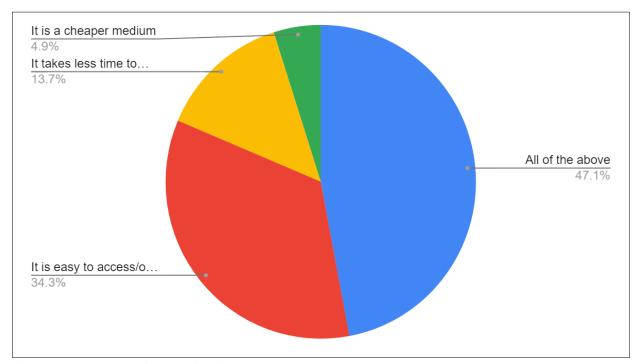

Fig- 7.2.1: Reasons for preferring online health portals

Fig. 7.2.2: Purpose of visiting online health portals
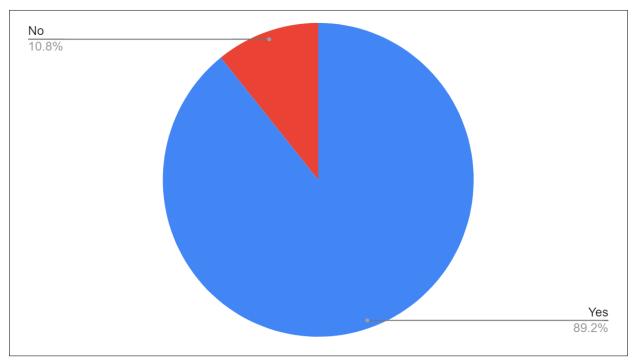

Fig-7.2.3: Would you recommend online health portals to others?

7.3 POPULAR HEALTH PORTALS

Talking about the health portals, the survey depicts Practo (practo.com) is the most popular portal among users followed by Medindia (medindia.net) and 1mg (1mg.com). The respondents also mentioned other portals which they use. The names include PharmEasy (pharmeasy.in), Healthline (healthline.com), Medlife (medlife.com), Fortis Healthcare (fortishealthcare.com), Mayo Clinic (mayoclinic.org), WebMD (webmd.com), and National Health Portal (nhp.gov.in). Some of them even mentioned about searching google for obtaining healthcare content.
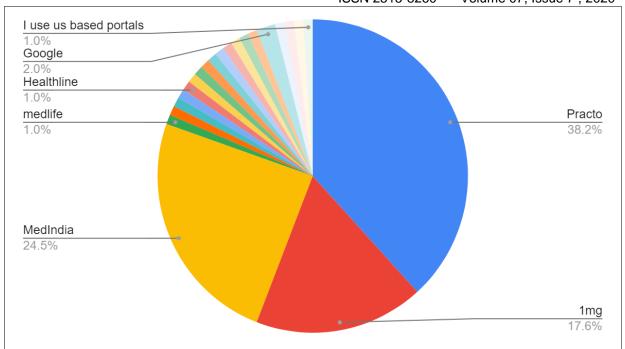
Fig- 7.3.1: Most visited online health portals

7.4 SOLUTION TO HEALTHCARE QUERIES

Online health portals serve as a means of solving health queries of users. It also assures the privacy of content which motivates them to discuss their health issues with the health experts. Almost 80% respondents claim that they often refer to online portals to look up for answers to their health queries. Most of the users find the information useful. As per the survey, around 96% respondents expressed that the information provided was helpful to them.
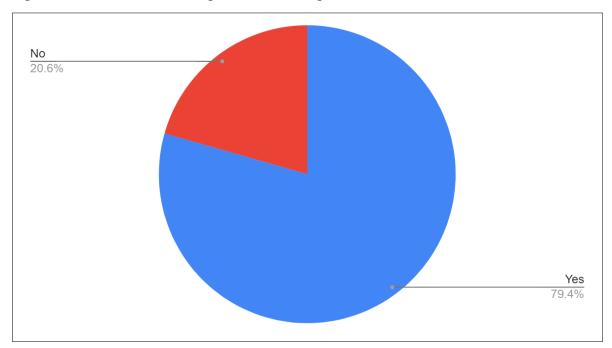
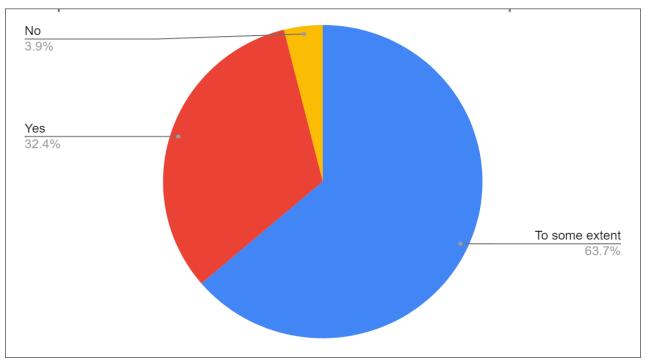**Fig- 7.4.1: Search for health-related queries on the online portals**

Fig-7.4.2: Helpfulness of healthcare information on the online portals

7.5 OFF-LINE MEANS ARE STILL DOMINANT FOR HEALTH-RELATED REQUIREMENTS

The survey depictsthat 98% users consider offline means as well for the health-related requirements. This indicates that users do not entirely rely on the digital medium to fulfil their healthcare necessities.
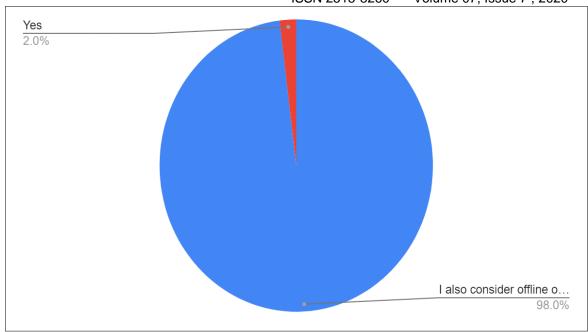
Fig- 7.5.1 Dependence on online portals only for health-related requirements

7.6 BARRIERS IN ACCESSING ONLINE PORTALS

Through the survey, it was found out that around 24% users face difficulty in using such online platforms. The difficulty faced included:

- Complex process of registration

- Language barriers

- Connectivity issues

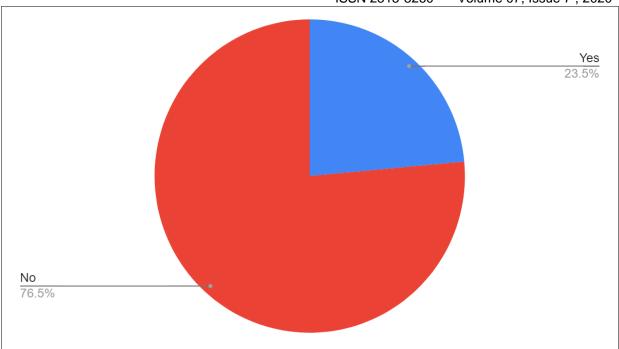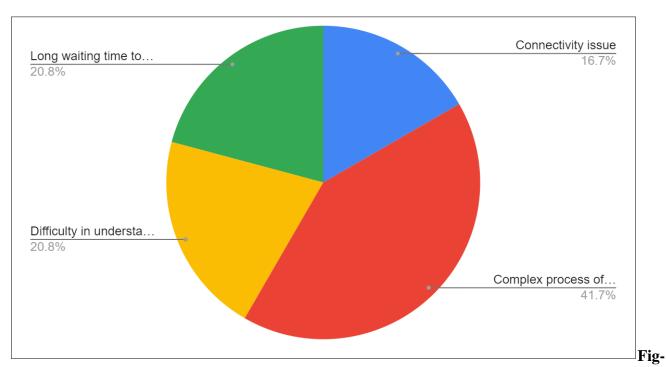- Long waiting time for medical consultations

Fig-7.6.1: Difficulty faced in accessing online portals

Fig-

7.6.2: Barriers in accessing the e-health portals

8. CONCLUSION

Health promotion involves increasing awareness about health and its determinants which leads to improvement of healthcare conditions. Various mass mediums serve to promote health awareness among people. The internet is one such medium. Digital platforms have made inroads in the healthcare sectors. Online health portals have become popular among the users. Internet being a convergent platform, facilitates interaction between patients and health experts conveniently and in cost effective ways.

Based on the traffic received on the portals, Practo, 1mg and Medindia were identified as top portals in India. The hypothesis which states, "Digital health portals promote health awareness among its users" was proved to be true. The study depicts that these portals contain a plethora of information about healthcare content. With the presence of digital portals, it has become convenient to obtain personal health information 24x7. It has allowed patients to consult clinicians from anywhere they want. As per the survey, almost 90% of users want to recommend it to others as well. Thus, it is expected that the popularity of these forums would increase over a period of time.

However, digital medium has its own limitations. The survey depicts it is mostly preferred by younger age groups followed by the middle-aged group falling between 31 to 41 years. Older people (above 60 years of age) prefer traditional mediums. Further, it was observed that health portals probably lack the trust and reliability of its users. It can be said as 98% portal users admit that they do not just depend on the online sources of information. Barriers to access the e-health portals include connectivity issues, difficulty in understanding the language and complex process of registration.

The paper suggests that digital platforms offering healthcare services should be available in multiple languages. Also, the registration should be free and simple to promote such forums among all age groups. In the contemporary scenario, people are increasingly adopting technology in some way or the other, therefore the digital platform must be utilized efficiently to develop and promote the health sector.

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