



Perceived Influence of Internet Use on Health Information Seeking Behaviour among University Students in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Internet use has become an important source of health information for undergraduates, improving health awareness and encouraging proactive health seeking behaviour. However, the extent to which it influences undergraduates' health-seeking behavior remains unclear. This study determined perceived influence of internet use on health information seeking behaviour among undergraduate students in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria. Five objectives with five corresponding research questions guided the study. A descriptive survey design was utilized. The study population consisted of 13,067 degree undergraduate from federal institutions in Owerri, Imo State. Stratified random sampling procedure was used to select entire 300 undergraduate students as the sample size. The self-structured questionnaire was utilized for data collection. Data were analysed using frequency and percentage to answer the research questions. The results revealed that slightly more than half (53.7%) of university students perceived internet use as having an influence on their health information-seeking behaviour. Above half of the university students perceived internet use as influencing their preventive health information-seeking behaviour, while a similar proportion perceived an influence on curative health information-seeking behaviour. Likewise, above half of university students perceived internet use as influencing their health-related risk-avoidance behaviour. The authors therefore recommended that university authorities should organize awareness campaigns through various media platforms and incorporate educational courses on appropriate health-seeking behaviour, Educating students about the proper use of online health information and the potential consequences of excessive or inappropriate internet health-seeking behavior can help reduce the prevalence of self-directed internet health information seeking among undergraduate students. The study further recommend that University communities should provide free access to reliable health information portals and collaborate with credible online health platforms to direct students to accurate and verified health information

Keywords: Influence, Internet use, Health information-seeking behaviour, Health, University students

Introduction

The internet has revolutionized the way individuals access health-related information. Globally, internet use has expanded rapidly, with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimating that approximately 6 billion people, representing 74% of the world's population, used the internet in 2025. Research also demonstrates the growing importance of the internet for seeking health information among students. For example, a study of university students found that 99.1% had consulted at least one web-based source of health



information, with general health websites and Wikipedia among the most frequently consulted sources. In Nigeria, Adegbilero-Iwari et al. (2025) studied 361 non-medical undergraduate students and found that students' online health information-seeking behaviour was associated with factors including previous experience and the presence of chronic health conditions. Adegbilero-Iwari et al. (2025) reported that 83.2% of 304 Nigerian undergraduates used the internet for health information, while 94.1% used the internet daily; convenience was the leading reason for seeking health information online. Nwagwu and Aero (2020) examined 1,145 adolescent girls in Owerri, Imo State, and found that more than 73% had used the internet, while 55.19% of out-of-school girls identified the internet as a source of reproductive health information. These findings indicate that the digital environment has become an important avenue for accessing health information, particularly among young people and students, because of its accessibility, convenience, and ability to provide information beyond geographical boundaries. However, concerns about the accuracy and credibility of online information make it important to understand how students search for, evaluate, and use health information obtained from the internet.

Among the demographic groups that extensively utilize the internet for health purposes, students constitute a particularly important population. Their familiarity with digital technologies, curiosity, and frequent use of smartphones and social media platforms make them more likely to search for, obtain, and share health-related information online (Zhu et al., 2023). Consequently, online platforms have become a major source of health information for students, influencing their decisions and actions regarding health and well-being. This increasing reliance on digital sources for health information is closely connected to students' health-seeking behaviour, particularly how they identify health concerns, search for information, evaluate available options, and make decisions about seeking appropriate care.

Health-seeking behaviour refers to the actions individuals take to maintain health, prevent illness, and obtain appropriate care when health problems arise (Bamidele et al., 2023). It encompasses decisions about whether, when, and where to seek healthcare and may involve formal healthcare services, self-care, consultation with family and friends, or other sources of health advice. An important component of health-seeking behaviour is health information-seeking behaviour, which refers to the ways individuals actively search for, access, evaluate, and use information to understand health conditions and make informed decisions about their health. With the increasing availability of digital technologies, the internet has become an important source through which individuals seek health information, including information about symptoms, diseases, prevention, treatment, and available healthcare services. Among students, this behaviour is particularly relevant because their frequent use of smartphones, search engines, social media, and other digital platforms provides convenient access to health information. However, the availability of information online does not necessarily mean that students will use reliable or appropriate sources, and the information obtained may influence whether they seek professional healthcare or rely on self-care. Therefore, examining students' health information-seeking behaviour through online platforms provides an important basis for understanding their broader health-seeking behaviour, which is the focus of the present study.

Health-seeking behaviour may take different forms depending on an individual's health needs, the perceived risk or severity of a health condition, and the purpose for which care or health information is sought. One important form is preventive health-seeking behaviour, which focuses on actions taken before the occurrence of illness to maintain health and reduce the risk of disease. Such behaviours may include immunization, routine health screening, health education, regular physical activity, and other healthy lifestyle practices (Tabaja et al., 2024).



Preventive health-seeking behaviour is therefore closely associated with an individual's willingness to identify potential health risks and take appropriate measures before they develop into serious health problems. In contrast, curative health-seeking behaviour occurs after the onset of illness and involves seeking assistance to diagnose, manage, or treat an existing health problem. This may include the use of formal healthcare services, informal sources of care, or traditional healthcare practices (Anagaw et al., 2023). Other forms include self-care and self-medication, delayed or reactive health-seeking behaviour, and gender-responsive health-seeking behaviour. These different patterns demonstrate that health-seeking behaviour is not limited to visiting healthcare facilities but encompasses a range of decisions and actions through which individuals respond to actual or perceived health needs.

The different forms of health-seeking behaviour are influenced not only by the availability of healthcare services but also by how individuals perceive their health conditions, risks, and available options for care. Perception therefore plays an important role in shaping health-seeking behaviour because individuals respond to health information and symptoms based on how they understand and interpret them. Perception is the process through which individuals interpret and organize information from their environment to develop meaningful understanding and experiences. In the context of health, perception influences how people recognize symptoms, assess health risks, interpret health information, and make decisions about whether and where to seek healthcare. Onyechi (2023) defined perception as the process of using the senses to acquire information about the surrounding environment and form opinions or judgments. Among students, their perceptions of health information obtained through the internet may influence how seriously they view health concerns, the credibility they attach to online information, and their decisions to seek professional healthcare or engage in self-care. In this study, perception refers to students' views, opinions, and understanding of the influence of the internet on their health-seeking behaviour.

The perceived influence of the internet on health-seeking behaviour has both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, access to online health information may increase health awareness, promote healthy lifestyles, encourage preventive practices, and facilitate informed decision-making (Bamidele et al., 2023). Conversely, the internet may expose users to inaccurate, misleading, or unverified health information, leading to self-diagnosis, inappropriate self-medication, delayed professional consultation, and increased health anxiety, commonly referred to as cyberchondria (Zhu et al., 2023).

In many developing and middle-income countries, online health information may also serve as an alternative to formal healthcare services due to factors such as healthcare costs, stigma, distance, and limited access to healthcare facilities (Ezeah et al., 2023). This situation is particularly relevant among students in tertiary institutions who may rely heavily on internet-based resources to address their health concerns. Furthermore, university environments expose students to various health challenges, including stress, sexually transmitted infections, substance abuse, and mental health problems. Consequently, understanding how students perceive the influence of the internet on their health-seeking behaviour has become increasingly important.

Several factors influence internet health-seeking behaviour among students, including age, gender, education, income, health literacy, cultural beliefs, and access to healthcare and digital resources. These factors can affect how students identify health concerns, search for information, and decide whether to seek professional care.

The Health Belief Model (HBM) provides a useful framework for understanding this behaviour. It suggests that health actions are influenced by perceived susceptibility, severity,



benefits, barriers, cues to action, and self-efficacy. For example, students who believe they are at risk of a health condition or that it is serious may be more likely to search for health information online. Perceived benefits, such as the convenience and accessibility of the internet, may encourage online health-seeking, while barriers such as cost or limited access to healthcare may increase reliance on online sources. Cues such as experiencing symptoms or seeing health information on social media can also trigger information seeking. Thus, the HBM helps explain how students' perceptions influence their use of the internet for health-seeking purposes.

Beyond socio-demographic factors and health perceptions, the characteristics of the internet itself can influence students' health-seeking behaviour. Accessibility and convenience make the internet an attractive source of health information because students can search for information at any time and from almost any location (Shomuyiwa et al., 2023). The availability and quality of online health information may also affect students' willingness to rely on internet sources when making health-related decisions. In addition, digital literacy influences students' ability to search for, understand, and evaluate online health information. Social media, peer recommendations, and online discussions can further encourage students to seek health information and share their experiences. Therefore, accessibility, convenience, information quality, digital literacy, and social media exposure are important factors to consider when examining the influence of the internet on students' health-seeking behaviour (Lee et al., 2023).

The influence of the internet on health-seeking behaviour can be observed in several ways. First, it provides students with convenient access to information about diseases, symptoms, treatment, prevention, and healthy lifestyles. Studies among Nigerian undergraduates have found that students commonly search online for information on nutrition, fitness, HIV/AIDS, malaria, mental health, and sexual and reproductive health (Osuchukwu et al., 2024). Second, online health information may support preventive health-seeking behaviour by increasing students' awareness of healthy lifestyles and disease-prevention practices. Adegbilero-Iwari et al. (2021) found that 51% of Nigerian undergraduates used online health information as a basis for lifestyle changes. Third, the internet may influence curative health-seeking behaviour by helping students recognize symptoms, explore treatment options, and decide whether to consult healthcare professionals. Osuchukwu et al., (2024) reported that many students sought professional medical advice after obtaining health information online. Therefore, the internet may influence students' preventive and curative health-seeking decisions by shaping their access to health information, awareness, and responses to health concerns.

Despite the increasing dependence on internet-based health information among students, there is limited information regarding how students perceive the influence of the internet on different dimensions of health-seeking behaviour, particularly in Owerri, Imo State. Specifically, little is known about the perceived influence of the internet on health-seeking behaviour information, preventive health-seeking behaviour, curative health-seeking behaviour, and risk-avoidance health behaviour among students. This gap in knowledge necessitates an investigation into these aspects of health-seeking behaviour. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the perceived influence of the internet on health-seeking behaviour information, preventive health-seeking behaviour, curative health-seeking behaviour, and risk-avoidance health behaviour among students in Owerri, Imo State, with a view to providing evidence that may guide health education, digital health literacy programmes, and policy interventions aimed at promoting appropriate health-seeking practices among students.



Therefore, this study seeks to examine the perceived influence of internet use on health information-seeking behaviour, preventive health-seeking behaviour, curative health-seeking behaviour, and risk-avoidance health behaviour among undergraduate students in Owerri, Imo State, with a view to providing evidence that may guide health education, digital health literacy programmes, and policy interventions aimed at promoting appropriate health-seeking practices among students.

Methods

The study adopted descriptive survey design. A survey design is a design in which the characteristics of groups of individuals are investigated (Lane, 2022). This method was used because it surveys the nature of the phenomenon as it exists among large number of people in their environment. Ejifugha & Kalu (2023) also stated that this design permits the investigation of the current status of the phenomenon from a population in their natural setting. The population of the study comprised 13,067 university undergraduate students in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria, (Office of the Registrar 2025). A sample size of 300 students was used for the study. A two-stage sampling technique was employed. In the first stage, three higher federal institutions were selected from the four higher federal institutions within the study area. In the second stage, purposive sampling was used to select 300 students from the three selected institutions. One hundred students were selected from each institution, comprising 50 males and 50 females. Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire titled “Perceived Influence of Internet use on Health information Seeking Behaviour Questionnaire (PIHSBQ).” The questionnaire consisted of four sections with a total of 20 items. Section A contained five items assessing the influence of the internet on access to health information. Section B contained five items assessing the perceived influence of internet use on preventive health-seeking behaviour. Section C contained five items assessing the perceived influence of the internet on curative health-seeking behaviour, while Section D contained five items assessing the perceived influence of the internet on risk-avoidance health behaviour. Responses were obtained using Yes/No options. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics of frequency and percentages.

Results

Table 1: Perceived Influence of Internet use on Health Information Seeking Behaviour among University Students in Owerri (n=300)

S/N	Items	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Frequently searched the internet for health-related information	165(55.0)	135(45.0)
2	Online health information influences my decision to visit a doctor	154(51.3)	146(48.7)
3	Trusted health information found online	169(56.3)	131(43.7)
4	Use of social media to learn about health issues	161 (53.7)	139(46.3)
5	Compared different online sources before accepting health-related information	157 (52.3)	143(47.7)
	Average	161(53.7)	139(46.3)



Table 1 shows that slightly more than half (53.7%) of the students in Owerri Imo State perceived internet use as influential in their health information-seeking behavior, such as: frequently searched the internet for health-related information, Online health information influences my decision to visit a doctor, trusted health information found online, Use of social media to learn about health, and compared different online source before accepting health

Table 2: Perceived Influence of Internet use on Preventive Health information Seeking Behaviour among Students in Owerri Imo State. (n=300)

S/N	Items	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Use of internet to learn how to prevent illnesses	168(56.0)	132(44.0)
2	Following online health information to maintain healthy lifestyle	174(58.0)	126(42.0)
3	Regular reading of online content about disease prevention	180(60.0)	120(40.0)
4	Relying on online health tips for improving on diet or physical fitness	151 (50.3)	149(49.7)
	Average	168(56.0)	132(44.0)

Table 2 shows that above half (56.0%) of the students in Owerri Imo State perceived internet use as influencing their preventive health information-seeking behavior, such as: use of internet to learn how to prevent illnesses, following online health information to maintain healthy lifestyle, regular reading of online content about disease prevention and relying on online health tips for improving on diet or physical fitness.

Table 3: Perceived Influence of Internet use on Curative Health Information Seeking Behaviour among Students in Owerri, Imo State (n=300)

S/N	Items	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Searching online for possible causes of symptom of a disease	159(53.0)	141(47.0)
2	Have used online remedies to treat minor health issues	164(54.7)	136(45.3)
3	Consulting the internet before taking medication or supplements	172(57.3)	128(42.7)
4	Prefer to research health issues online before seeking medical help	155 (51.7)	145(48.3)
	Average	163(54.3)	137(45.7)

Table 3 shows that more than half (54.3%) of the students perceived internet use as influencing their curative health information-seeking behavior, such as: Searching online for possible causes of symptom of a disease, have used online remedies to treat minor health issues, consulting the internet before taking medication or supplements, and Prefer to research health issues online before seeking medical help.



Table 4: Perceived Influence of internet use on risk avoidance health behaviour among students in Owerri Imo State. (n=300)

S/N	Items	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Reading of articles to learn how to prevent diseases	167(53.0)	133(47.0)
2	Following online influencers or blogs that focused on healthy lifestyle	158(54.7)	142(45.3)
3	Have changed diet or exercise routine based on online advice	161(57.3)	139(42.7)
4	Used information from the internet to make healthier daily choices	185 (51.7)	115(48.3)
5	Avoidance of risky behaviours after learning their consequences	151 (51.7)	149(48.3)
	Average	164(54.7)	136(45.3)

Table 4 shows that more than half (54.7%) of the students in Owerri Imo State perceived internet use as influencing their health-related risk avoidance behavior, such as: reading of articles to learn how to prevent diseases, following online influencers or blogs that focused on healthy lifestyle, Have changed diet or exercise routine based on online advice, Used information from the internet to make healthier daily choices, and Prefer avoidance of risky behaviours after learning their consequences.

Discussion

The findings presented in Table 1 revealed that slightly more than half of the students in Owerri, Imo State, perceived internet use as influential in their health information-seeking behaviour. This suggests that the internet has become a relevant source through which students obtain and assess health information. The finding reflects students' use of the internet to frequently search for health-related information, learn about health through social media, compare information from different online sources, assess the credibility of online health information, and make decisions about visiting a doctor. The finding may be attributed to the accessibility, convenience, and speed of obtaining health information through smartphones, search engines, websites, and social media platforms. Students can search for information about symptoms, diseases, prevention, and treatment without necessarily visiting a healthcare facility. This is consistent with (Osuchukwu et al., 2024), who found that Nigerian university undergraduates used the internet to obtain information on various health-related issues and that online information could influence their health-related decisions. Similarly, Adegbilero-Iwari et al. (2021) reported substantial use of online health information among Nigerian undergraduates, indicating that the internet has become an important avenue for accessing health information. However, the fact that only 53.7% of the students perceived the internet as influential also suggests that online health information does not have the same level of influence on all students. Some students may still prefer healthcare professionals, family members, or other traditional sources of health information. Differences in digital literacy, trust in online information, access to reliable internet services, and previous experiences with healthcare may contribute to this variation. Overall, the finding indicates that the internet plays a moderate but important role in students' health information-seeking



behaviour in Owerri, Imo State. The result further emphasizes the need for students to develop the ability to identify credible online health information, particularly because information obtained from the internet may influence subsequent health decisions.

The findings presented in Table 2 revealed that more than half of the students in Owerri, Imo State, perceived internet use as influencing their preventive health-seeking behaviour. This indicates that the internet plays a moderately important role in helping students obtain information and make decisions aimed at preventing illness and maintaining good health. The finding is reflected in students' use of the internet to learn how to prevent illnesses, follow online health information to maintain a healthy lifestyle, regularly read online content about disease prevention, and obtain health tips relating to diet and physical fitness. The finding may be attributed to the convenience and accessibility of online health information. Through search engines, social media, health websites, and other digital platforms, students can easily access information on disease prevention, nutrition, physical activity, hygiene, and healthy lifestyles. This is consistent with findings by (Osuchukwu et al., 2024), which showed that Nigerian undergraduates used online sources to obtain information on various health issues. Similarly, Adegbilero-Iwari et al. (2021) reported substantial use of online health information among Nigerian undergraduates and its potential influence on health-related decisions. However, the fact that 44.0% of the students did not perceive the internet as influential suggests that online health information may not influence all students equally. Differences in digital literacy, access to reliable internet services, trust in online information, and preference for healthcare professionals or other sources may explain this variation. Overall, the finding suggests that the internet has become a moderately important source of preventive health information among students in Owerri, Imo State. Its accessibility provides students with opportunities to learn about disease prevention and healthy living, although the reliability and quality of online health information remain important considerations.

Table 3 revealed that more than half of the students in Owerri, Imo State, perceived internet use as influencing their curative health-seeking behaviour. This finding indicates that the internet has a moderate influence on how students respond to existing health problems and seek information about possible treatment. Specifically, students reported searching online for possible causes of disease symptoms, using online remedies for minor health issues, consulting the internet before taking medications or supplements, and researching health conditions before seeking medical help. The finding may be attributed to convenience, accessibility, and speed of obtaining health information online. Students can use smartphones, search engines, social media, and health websites to obtain information about symptoms, medications, treatment options, and self-care. This is consistent with Nwankwo and Adediran (2020), who found that Nigerian undergraduates used online sources to obtain information about various health conditions and treatment-related issues. The finding also agrees with Nwankwo and Adediran (2020) who reported substantial use of online health information among Nigerian undergraduates. However, the fact that 45.7% of the students did not perceive the internet as influential suggests that online health information does not determine curative health decisions for all students. Some may prefer consulting healthcare professionals or relying on family and other trusted sources. Concerns about the accuracy of online information and the risks associated with self-medication may also limit reliance on internet-based health information.

Table 4 revealed that more than half of the students in Owerri, Imo State, perceived internet use as influencing their health-related risk-avoidance behaviour. This influence was reflected in specific behaviours, including reading online articles to learn how to prevent diseases, following online influencers and blogs that focus on healthy lifestyles, changing their diet or



exercise routines based on online advice, using information obtained from the internet to make healthier daily choices, and avoiding risky behaviours after learning about their consequences online. The finding suggests that the internet has become an important source of preventive health information for students, particularly because it provides convenient and continuous access to information about disease prevention, healthy living, and the consequences of harmful behaviours. The finding may be attributed to the increasing availability of health-related content through social media platforms, health websites, blogs, online campaigns, and other digital channels. Students can easily access information about nutrition, physical activity, substance use, sexual health, disease prevention, and other lifestyle-related risks. Exposure to such information may increase students' awareness of the potential consequences of unhealthy behaviours and encourage them to make healthier decisions. The finding also demonstrates that internet use extends beyond simply obtaining health information, as some students reported translating online information into changes in their diets, exercise routines, and everyday health choices.

The present finding is consistent with Lee et al. (2023), who reported an association between online health information-seeking behaviour and health-promoting behaviour among undergraduate students. Similarly, Onyechi (2023) found that young people use online platforms to obtain health information, suggesting that digital media can play an important role in shaping health-related awareness and behaviour. The present finding is also supported by recent evidence that digital health information and health literacy can influence students' ability to access, understand, and apply health information in making health-related decisions. However, the finding differs from that of Nwankwo and Adediran (2020), who reported that a majority of students were influenced by internet use in relation to risk-avoidance health behaviour. In the present study, although more than half (54.7%) of the respondents perceived an influence, this does not represent an overwhelming majority. The difference may be explained by variations in study populations, geographical settings, internet accessibility, digital health literacy, frequency of internet use, and the types of health information encountered by students. Differences in students' ability to critically evaluate online health information may also affect whether information obtained from the internet results in actual behavioural changes. Overall, the finding indicates that the internet plays a meaningful role in students' risk-avoidance health behaviour in Owerri, Imo State. The fact that students reported using online information to prevent diseases, modify lifestyle practices, make healthier daily choices, and avoid risky behaviours demonstrates the potential of digital platforms as tools for health promotion. However, because online health information varies in accuracy and reliability, health education programmes should also equip students with the skills needed to identify credible health sources and distinguish evidence-based information from misleading or harmful content.

Conclusion

This study concluded that internet use has a notable influence on the health-seeking behaviour of students in Owerri, Imo State. The findings revealed that a substantial proportion of students perceived that internet-based health information influences their general health-seeking behaviour, preventive health-seeking behaviour, curative health-seeking behaviour, and risk-avoidance health behaviour. The influence of the internet on these dimensions of health-seeking behaviour may be attributed to the increasing accessibility of digital technologies, widespread use of social media platforms, and the availability of online health information.



The study further established that the internet serves as an important source of health information that shapes students' decisions and actions regarding disease prevention, treatment-seeking, and the avoidance of health risks. Although some of the findings were consistent with previous studies, others differed from earlier reports, suggesting that variations in internet access, digital literacy, study settings, and sociocultural factors may influence the extent to which students utilize online health information. Overall, the study concludes that the internet plays a significant role in influencing students' health-seeking behaviour and has become an important tool for promoting health awareness and informed health-related decision-making among students in Owerri, Imo State.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made as follows:

1. Organizing awareness campaigns in the media and teaching courses on the proper use of health seeking behaviour and the consequences of self-internet health seeking behaviour could help in reducing the rate of internet health seeking information among the undergraduate students.
2. Universities should raise awareness and integrate digital health literacy and certified online consultation services to help students identify credible sources and understand the risks of self-treatment
3. University communities should provide free access to reliable health information portals and collaborate with credible online health platforms to guide students towards verified content and as organize a workshops to build students' digital health literacy skills.
4. There should be an inclusion of digital health literacy courses in the universities curriculum and also develop an official online portal that provides access to verified medical resources among students.
5. Public health authorities should make reliable health content widely accessible and educate students on how to identify trustworthy online health platforms.

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