

Effect of Stigmatization and Privacy Concerns on Engagement in Virtual Health Communities

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Abstract

Communication in virtual health communities (VHCs) is characterized by convenience, non-judgmental interactions, and anonymity, and provides social support. Patient's engagement and interactions in online health communities may enhance patient's knowledge of health conditions, treatments, and health self-management activities. Moreover, VHCs could benefit healthcare management through understanding patients' needs and preferences to build a patient-centered e-health system. Although engagement in VHCs is voluntary, it varies in quality and quantity. The privacy concern of personal information and identity disclosure of people with stigmatized illnesses could be an obstacle for participation and knowledge sharing in the VHCs. The study draws on the literature of virtual communities, social media engagement and public health communication. The study explains the dual dimensions of engagement in VHCs, which includes the quality and quantity of engagement. In addition, it addresses the stigmatization and privacy concerns of individuals and their impact on members' engagement along with the reciprocity and homophily factors. The theoretical framework proposed in this paper contribute to the literature of health informatics, participation and interaction in social media, and information privacy. Furthermore, the proposed model can be used as a foundation for future empirical research to better understand communication in virtual health communities. And thus improve engagement and expand it to include communication between physicians and patients to enhance the quality of care.

Keywords

Virtual health communities, Homophily, Reciprocity, and Stigmatization.