

Prevalence And Manifestation of Cyberchondria in Indian Adults

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ABSTRACT

Cyberchondria, which is described as an excessive, anxiety-driven online health search, has emerged as a significant mental condition in the digital age. Despite its growing prevalence, comprehensive data on cyberchondria in India is not yet available, particularly on its prevalence, severity, and domain trends. This research is proposed to be one of the first investigations on this topic within the Indian setting. This study aims to assess the prevalence and severity of cyberchondria in Indian adults using the Cyberchondria Severity Scale (CSS-12). It seeks to identify trends in the severity of cyberchondria by calculating mean scores for each of the CSS-12 dimensions: excessiveness, compulsion, distress, and reassurance-seeking. The goal is to determine the overall prevalence of cyberchondria in the sample population and compare the findings to current literature to identify trends or differences within the Indian context. The study finds a research vacuum by improving our understanding of cyberchondria in India and laying the groundwork for future therapies and public health initiatives to mitigate its consequences on mental health.

Keywords: *Cyberchondria, Indian Prevalence, CSS-12*

Cyberchondria is considered to explain a situation where people compulsively search the internet for health matters: in many cases, this habit becomes obsessive subjecting the people to anxiety and worry. Although the word's creator is yet unknown, studies show that writer Ann Carrns first mentioned "cyberchondria" in the Wall Street Journal in 1999; nevertheless, the exact person who coined the term and the exact timing of its first use remain unknown (Starcevic & Berle, 2013). Later, the media helped the term to become more well-known because of its uniqueness in stressing the negative effects of technological development and its ability to offer an interesting story (WebMD, 2020). This led to its being included in the Oxford Dictionary as "unfounded anxiety regarding one's health, frequently induced or intensified by excessive online searches for medical information." Although many researchers have defined cyberchondria throughout the years, most mental health professionals have not adopted the word "cyberchondria" due to terminological uncertainty (Zheng, H., et al 2020). Many times, mental health experts classify this issue as "hypochondriasis" or "health anxiety." In the digital age, the phenomenon of cyberchondria, or health anxiety, still causes great concern despite ongoing

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Received: April 17, 2025; Revision Received: April 26, 2025; Accepted: April 29, 2025

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nomenclature debate. Easy access to large amounts of medical knowledge available online might aggravate health-related worries and fears, therefore compromising mental well-being.

Studies have shown that cyberchondria can exacerbate pre-existing anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), creating a vicious cycle of reassurance-seeking and increased anxiety. As the prevalence of cyberchondria continues to grow, particularly in regions with high internet penetration, understanding its underlying mechanisms and impact on mental health has become increasingly important. This phenomenon can lead individuals to constantly seek out new information about their health concerns, leading to increased anxiety and distress. The constant access to health information online can also make it difficult for individuals to trust their own judgment and seek appropriate medical advice. Hence why it is important to understand its manifestation in an Indian context.

This study is essential for several reasons. Cyberchondria is an escalating public health issue, especially in nations such as India, where internet use is surging, while access to dependable healthcare is still restricted. The obsessive nature of online health inquiries may result in considerable emotional anguish, misunderstanding of symptoms, and superfluous healthcare consumption, hence exacerbating the load on already overtaxed healthcare institutions. Secondly, India has not yet gathered extensive data on the prevalence and severity of cyberchondria, making this research one of the first investigations into this topic within the Indian setting. Comprehending the incidence, severity, and domain patterns of cyberchondria in India is crucial for formulating targeted treatments and public health policies. Third, the COVID-19 pandemic has markedly increased the incidence of cyberchondria. The epidemic prompted widespread uncertainty, fear of contagion, and a continuous stream of health-related material online, resulting in a significant increase in internet health inquiries. A multitude of folks sought information online on symptoms, treatments, and vaccines, many receiving contradictory or distressing content that exacerbated worry and turmoil. This event, sometimes termed "COVID-19-related cyberchondria," underscores how global health crises may exacerbate the compulsive behaviors linked to cyberchondria. This study seeks to provide meaningful insights for healthcare practitioners, policymakers, and educators to formulate targeted interventions that encourage healthy online health-seeking habits and mitigate the impact of cyberchondria on mental health. By tackling this contemporary psychological concern, we may enhance individual well-being and foster a more knowledgeable and health-literate society.

- What is the prevalence and degree of cyberchondria among Indian adults?

Objective:

- To evaluate the prevalence and degree of cyberchondria in Indian adults using the Cyberchondria Severity Scale (CSS-12).

Aim: To identify patterns or differences in the prevalence of cyberchondria in the Indian Context.

Hypothesis:

A notable incidence of cyberchondria exists among Indian adults.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Cyberchondria: Origins and Comorbidities

The Internet has become commonplace for individuals to seek medical information in the past two decades. Zheng, H. (2022) This can lead to the phenomenon of Cyberchondria, a compulsive pattern of online – health-related searching, and is thought to be especially common among people with high levels of health anxiety Zheng, H. (2022). Studies have shown that searching for health information may indeed increase levels of distress and uncertainty about one’s feared condition (White and Horvitz, 2009; Bau), and potentially lead to greater functional impairment (Doherty-Torstrick, Walton, & Fallon, 2016). Although some researchers argue that, unlike general health anxiety, cyberchondria is uniquely tied to the compulsive use of the internet for health information, which can perpetuate cycles of anxiety and reassurance-seeking Zheng, H. (2022). Individuals with high levels of anxiety are more likely to engage in cyberchondria, as the internet provides a readily available but often overwhelming source of health information. Research by Singh and Brown (2016) suggests that cyberchondria is a maladaptive coping mechanism for individuals with health anxiety, as the internet provides a temporary sense of control but ultimately reinforces anxiety through exposure to ambiguous or alarming information. The abundance of evidence supports that cyberchondria is often seen as a modern extension of health anxiety where the internet serves as a catalyst for amplifying fears and misinterpretations of benign symptoms (Starcevic, 2017).

Cyberchondria can be viewed as a digital-age revolution of hypochondriasis, where the internet amplifies health-related anxieties and reinforces catastrophic thinking (Starcevic, 2017). According to Muse et al (2012) cyberchondria shares many features with hypochondriasis, such as excessive worry about health, but it's distinguished by its reliance on health information, which can perpetuate cycles of anxiety and reassurance-seeking. Several articles equated cyberchondria with hypochondriasis using terms such as “the online counterpart of hypochondria” (Zheng. H., 2022). Subsequently, the New York Times defined cyberchondria as “the irrational fear of some phantom illness” (Wollan, 2018). As a result of its terminological ambiguity, the term cyberchondria is not widely accepted among mental health specialists. More specifically, while cyberchondria can be a manifestation of hypochondriasis in the age of technology, which refers to a sort of mental condition, it can also be considered as a behavior of mere online medical information seeking. Consequently, even though cyberchondria has been discussed explicitly or implicitly in several news strips, its description is still elusive. Scholars have concentrated especially in recent years on the conceptualization of cyberchondria, offering a spectrum of explanations for these phenomena.

Cyberchondriasis corroborates the intricate relationship between excessive online health inquiries and the worsening of co-morbid psychological disorders. Norr et al. (2015) discovered that cyberchondria is significantly associated with co-morbid conditions including health anxiety and OCD, as the compulsive tendencies of online health inquiries reflect the repetitive behaviors characteristics of these disorders. Furthermore, Individuals with depressive symptoms may turn to the internet for reassurance but end up feeling more anxious and overwhelmed (Starcevic et al.,2019), Mathes et al 2018 states that symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder and somatic symptom disorder, suggesting a shared vulnerability to excessive worry and maladaptive coping strategies. Overall, cyberchondria develops as a multidimensional phenomenon caused by the interaction of psychological, behavioural, and digital elements. Its origins can be traced back to the widespread availability of online health information, combined with cognitive vulnerabilities like

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intolerance of uncertainty, catastrophic thinking, and metacognitive views. Moreover, cyberchondria often exists alongside a range of mental health disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and depression, highlighting its role as both a manifestation and a contributing element in these conditions. The compulsive tendency to engage in internet health searches exacerbates pre-existing symptoms, leading to a detrimental cycle of anxiety and the pursuit of reassurance.

Cognitive – Behavioral model of cyberchondria

According to Starcevic and Berle (2013), the cognitive-behavioural model (CBM) posits that cyberchondria is maintained by a cycle of reassurance-seeking behaviors and cognitive distortions, such as overestimating the likelihood of severe illness. Mathes et al 2018, suggest that cyberchondria is maintained by a feedback loop, where online health searches temporarily reduce anxiety but ultimately reinforce catastrophic thinking and compulsive behaviors. This loop is driven by cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, where individuals selectively concentrate on information that corroborates their anxiety. The model emphasizes how cyberchondria is maintained by a cycle of cognitive distortions, such as overestimating the likelihood of severe illness, and behavioural reinforcement through repeated online reassurance-seeking (Starcevic & Berle, 2013). The cognitive-behavioral model of cyberchondria offers a comprehensive framework for comprehending the frequency and intensity of this phenomenon in contemporary culture. According to Fergus and Spada (2017), cyberchondria is driven by maladaptive cognitive processes, such as catastrophic thinking and intolerance of uncertainty, which are exacerbated by the accessibility of online health information. These cognitive distortions lead individuals to engage in excessive and compulsive health-related searches, reinforcing their anxiety and perpetuating the cycle of cyberchondria. Research conducted by McElroy and Shevlin (2014) supports this model, highlighting that individuals harboring dysfunctional beliefs about health and illness are predisposed to exhibit significant signs of cyberchondria, as they are more likely to exhibit severe cyberchondria, as they rely on online searches to mitigate their anxieties, ultimately resulting in increased suffering. In addition, the behavioral reinforcement component of the model explains why cyberchondria is prevalent in populations with high internet usage, as the temporary relief gained from online searches encourages repeated behavior, even when it worsens anxiety (Starcevic et al., 2019).

This cognitive-behavioral cycle not only highlights the mechanisms underlying cyberchondria but also underscores the need for targeted interventions to address its prevalence and severity, particularly in vulnerable populations such as those with pre-existing anxiety or obsessive-compulsive traits.

Prevalence and manifestation patterns

Research on the frequency of cyberchondria- characterized by too intense and anxiety-driven online health searches has been growing. Studies have shown different frequency rates; (McElroy and Shevlin, 2014) found about 20% of their sample had moderate to severe degrees of cyberchondria. (Fergus and Spada, 2017) also noted greater rates among those who had suffered from pre-existing anxiety. Nevertheless, differences in measuring instruments and sample size affect the prevalence estimates in different research. Using the Cyberchondria severity scale, for instance, has produced higher rates than previous evaluation tools (Bajcar & Babiak, 2021). Finding at-risk groups and guiding focused treatments depend on an awareness of these differences.

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The global incidence of cyberchondria exhibits significant variability, with studies indicating rates between 10% and 20 % in the general population (Doherty-Torstik et al.,2016). The extensive availability of internet connection and the simplicity of obtaining health-related information have facilitated the emergence of cyberchondria. Vismara et al. 2020 performed a comprehensive study and discovered that cyberchondria is most common among those with pre-existing health concerns or obsessive-compulsive traits. Their research suggested that around 15-20% of persons display moderate to severe cyberchondria, with elevated rates noted in communities with restricted access to healthcare experts.

The intensity of cyberchondria is directly correlated with the level of health worry and the person's dependence on online health resources. Fergus and Spada (2018) investigated the severity of cyberchondria utilizing the cyberchondria severity scale SCC and discovered that persons with elevated CSS scores had markedly increased discomfort and impairment in everyday functioning. Their research emphasized that severe cyberchondria is defined by compulsive online health inquiries, misunderstanding of symptoms, and continual reassurance-seeking activities, which sustain a cycle of anxiety and misery. Starcevic and Berle (2019) investigated the severity of cyberchondria and its effects on mental health, observing that persons with pronounced cyberchondria frequently endure increased worry, dread, and discomfort, especially when confronted with disturbing or contradictory health information online.

In recent years, cyberchondria has been on the rise in India, especially in its metropolitan areas. About 15–25% of Indian individuals show signs of cyberchondria, according to Singh and Gupta (2021), in a cross-sectional research. According to the study, urban people—who have easier access to the internet—are more prone than rural people to search excessively online for health information. In the same vein, Sharma and Palanichamy (2018) examined cyberchondria among Indian college students and found a 30% incidence rate. The study linked a lack of knowledge about trustworthy health information sources with the rising use of cell phones and the internet among young adults, hence explaining this high prevalence.

In India, cultural and social elements affect the degree of cyberchondria. Due to restricted access to healthcare specialists, which aggravates the severity of cyberchondria, Kumar and Singh (2020) discovered that people in India commonly rely on internet health information. The study also observed that cultural stigma connected with mental health problems hinders people from seeking professional help, therefore causing them to rely on internet sources for self-diagnosis and treatment. This dependence on frequently dubious accurate online information aggravates health worry and helps to explain the growing frequency and severity of cyberchondria in the nation.

Cyberchondria Domain Patterns: Behavioral Patterns

Cyberchondria is marked by excessive and recurrent online health inquiries, frequently resulting in heightened worry and suffering. McElroy and Shevlin (2014) created the Cyberchondria Severity Scale (CSS) to assess these activities, highlighting critical features like obsession, distress, excessiveness, and reassurance-seeking. Their research revealed that persons with elevated CSS scores frequently participate in extended online health inquiries, notwithstanding the transient comfort afforded by reassurance-seeking. This tendency is especially common among those with pre-existing health concerns, who are more prone to misread benign symptoms as indicators of serious illness.

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In the Indian context, Sharma and Palanichamy (2018) noted that college students often make online health inquiries driven by curiosity and health-related worry. This conduct frequently results in increased anxiety, as kids encounter contradictory or distressing information. The research highlighted the necessity for initiatives to encourage appropriate online health-seeking activities and mitigate the adverse effects of cyberchondria.

Cognitive Patterns

Cognitive processes in cyberchondria are characterized by catastrophic thinking, symptom misunderstanding, and an exaggerated perception of illness probability. Fergus and Spada (2017) examined the cognitive dimensions of cyberchondria, observing that persons with elevated health concerns are predisposed to catastrophic thinking and misread mild symptoms as indicators of severe disease. Their research emphasized the significance of metacognitive beliefs in sustaining cyberchondria, as individuals frequently perceive their online health inquiries as essential for harm prevention. Cognitive patterns of cyberchondria in India are shaped by cultural ideas and behaviors. Kumar and Singh (2020) discovered that consumers frequently depend on internet health information because of a distrust of healthcare experts or the conviction that they can self-diagnose and manage their ailments. This cognitive habit intensifies health worry and aggravates the intensity of cyberchondria among the Indian people.

Affective Patterns

Emotional patterns in cyberchondria encompass increased anxiety, dread, and discomfort, frequently provoked by exposure to disturbing or contradictory health information online. Starcevic and Berle (2013) observed that persons with cyberchondria frequently undergo a cycle of worry and reassurance-seeking, wherein online health inquiries offer transient comfort but eventually intensify misery. Their research highlighted the necessity for treatments to mitigate the emotional effects of cyberchondria and foster healthy coping strategies.

In India, the emotional dynamics of cyberchondria are shaped by cultural shame and restricted access to healthcare. Singh and Gupta (2021) discovered that individuals frequently encounter increased worry and panic when they lack access to dependable healthcare services, prompting them to depend on internet sources for comfort. This emotional pattern exacerbates the severity of cyberchondria and underscores the necessity for culturally attuned therapies to mitigate the emotional ramifications of cyberchondria within the Indian setting.

Cyberchondria is an escalating psychological problem marked by excessive and anxiety-fuelled internet health inquiries. The incidence of cyberchondria differs worldwide, with elevated rates noted in populations with restricted access to healthcare providers. In India, the incidence and severity of cyberchondria are shaped by cultural and socioeconomic variables, such as the stigma around mental health and restricted access to dependable healthcare services. The behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of cyberchondria exacerbate its severity and influence on mental health, underscoring the necessity for treatments that foster appropriate online health-seeking practices and mitigate the adverse effects of cyberchondria. Future study ought to concentrate on creating culturally attuned therapies and investigating the enduring effects of cyberchondria on mental health.

Rationale behind the Cyberchondria Severity Scale

The Cyberchondria Severity Scale, often referred to as CSS-12, is a validated instrument recognized for assessing the severity of cyberchondria. The Cyberchondria Scale-12 (CSS-12) is a condensed version of the original Cyberchondria Scale (CSS) created by McElroy and Shevlin in 2014. The objective is to effectively measure the multifaceted nature of cyberchondria. This document will outline the key reasons the CSS-12 is a dependable and appropriate tool for studying cyberchondria, particularly in relation to my research. A robust theoretical foundation The Cyberchondria Scale-12 (CSS-12) is based on a well-established theoretical framework that encompasses the essential characteristics of cyberchondria. The following aspects are included: A persistent need to incessantly search the internet for health-related information is termed compulsion. The emotional suffering and anxiety caused by doing health queries online is termed discomfort. The extent to which engaging in health-related web searches interferes with regular activities is termed excessiveness. The tendency to seek solace from online sources to alleviate health-related symptoms is termed "reassurance-seeking." McElroy and Shevlin (2014) assert that the Cyberchondria Severity Scale-12 (CSS-12) is a comprehensive tool for assessing the severity of cyberchondria, as its attributes align with the understanding of cyberchondria as a multifaceted phenomenon. A high level of validity and dependability the CSS-12 has shown robust psychometric properties, exhibiting exceptional reliability and validity across many demographic groups. Merely a single illustration: The CSS-12 has a high degree of internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values between 0.85 and 0.92 across studies. This indicates that the scale effectively assesses the trait of cyberchondria (Bajcar & Babiak, 2021). The construct's validity: The CSS-12 has been validated across several cultural settings, including both Western and non-Western populations, indicating its applicability in various scenarios (Singh & Gupta, 2021). Consequently, the CSS-12 is a reliable and relevant tool for assessing the severity of cyberchondria across several populations, including the Native American context. 3. Considerations of efficiency and feasibility the original CSS has been streamlined into a more concise version called CSS-12, with 12 components instead of 33. This enhances efficiency and practicality for implementation in research environments, particularly in contexts where time and participant engagement are critical constraints. Although brief, the Cyberchondria Scale-12 (CSS-12) preserves the fundamental aspects of cyberchondria. This guarantees the capturing of essential aspects of the construct without compromising depth or accuracy (McElroy & Shevlin, 2014). 4. Cultural Appropriateness The CSS-12 has been verified across several cultural contexts, including India, making it a suitable tool for researching cyberchondria in non-Western populations. Merely a single illustration: In India, Singh and Gupta (2021) validated the CSS-12, affirming the instrument's reliability and validity within this cultural context. The study results demonstrated that the CSS-12 effectively assessed the severity of cyberchondria in adults in India, underscoring its cross-cultural applicability. The CSS-12 has been used in research initiatives across several geographies, including Europe, North America, and Asia, demonstrating its versatility and efficacy in various situations (Bajcar & Babiak, 2021; Fergus & Spada, 2018). The CSS-12 is a suitable tool for my research, which aims to examine cyberchondria in both global and Indian contexts. Its cross-cultural versatility makes it an ideal instrument for my study. 5. Alignment with the Research Objectives The CSS-12 aligns well with the objectives of my research, which are to accomplish the following aims: Examine the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional tendencies associated with cyberchondria. Investigating the prevalence of cyberchondria across many cultural contexts is essential. The multidimensional nature of the CSS-12 facilitates a comprehensive assessment of these traits, making it an excellent tool for achieving the objectives of my research. 6. A Comparative Analysis with Alternative Instruments Multiple instruments may

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assess health anxiety and associated characteristics; however, the CSS-12 was specifically designed to examine cyberchondria.

Only one illustration: The Health Anxiety Inventory (HAI) evaluates general health anxiety; however, it does not include the traits associated with doing online health inquiries. The Internet Addiction Test (IAT) assesses problematic Internet use but does not focus on health-related inquiries. The Cyberchondria Scale-12 is particularly intended to evaluate the unique behavioral and psychological characteristics associated with cyberchondria. Consequently, it is the most appropriate tool for my research. 7. Evidence-Based Support A significant amount of evidence substantiating the efficiency of CSS-12 has been gathered owing to its widespread use in empirical research. For instance: Global

Studies: Fergus and Spada (2018) used the CSS-12 to examine the relationship between cyberchondria and metacognitive perspectives. They demonstrated the use of the CSS-12 in understanding the cognitive elements of cyberchondria. Singh and Gupta (2021) used the CSS-12 in their examination of Indian research to assess the prevalence and intensity of cyberchondria in India. They emphasized the importance of the CSS-12 in non-Western contexts. This empirical evidence provides more rationale for the use of the CSS-12 in my research.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study combines a systematic review of current literature with a quantitative survey grounded on the Cyberchondria Severity Scale (CSS) using a quantitative descriptive survey design. While the quantitative phase gauges the frequency and severity of cyberchondria by means of organized self-reported responses from participants. In addition, the two datasets are examined and then compared to find trends and discrepancies, and a thorough knowledge of how cyberchondria influences individuals.

Participants

The study included 400 random participants sampled from across India. Random sampling was employed to minimize selection bias and ensure that the sample reflected the general population. of the broader population and to minimize selection bias. Participants were drawn from various regions, including North India, South India, West India, East India, Central India, Northeast India, and Union Territories. Capturing the variety of India's population and comprehending geographic variances in cyberchondria severity contingent on this regional representation.

The sample consisted of individuals aged 18 and above, with no constraints regarding gender, degree of education, or socioeconomic level. An online survey distributed using Google Forms made it possible to reach a wide audience and be accessible. By means of random sampling, each individual of the target population had an equal opportunity of being chosen, thereby improving the generalizability of the results.

Materials

The primary instrument employed in this study was the Cyberchondria Severity Scale-12 (CSS- 12), a validated measure designed to assess the severity of cyberchondria. The CSS-12 evaluates health- related anxiety and compulsive online health information-seeking behaviors across 12 items. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always), with higher scores indicating greater severity of cyberchondria.

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The CSS-12 has been widely used in previous research and has demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.90$) and validity. It measures four key dimensions of cyberchondria: compulsion, distress, excessiveness, and reassurance. For this study, the Excessiveness and Reassurance subscales were of particular interest, as they capture the behaviors most closely associated with excessive symptom-checking and reassurance-seeking.

The survey was administered in English to ensure consistency in responses. Participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their data, which helped to reduce response bias and encourage honest reporting.

Procedure

The study was conducted entirely online to maximize accessibility and engagement. The CSS-12 questionnaire was completed using a Google Form, and the survey link was spread across various online channels, including social media, email, and online forums. The use of online data collection methods allowed for rapid recruitment of participants from across India.

A clear, brief description of the study, including its purpose, procedures, and the voluntary nature of participation. Informed consent was obtained electronically before participants proceeded to complete the questionnaire. The survey took approximately 10–15 minutes to complete, and participants were able to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Data collection occurred over 2 months, after which responses were compiled and organized using Google Sheets. The dataset was cleaned to remove incomplete or inconsistent responses, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the data. The cleaned dataset was then analyzed using statistical software to identify trends and patterns within the responses. The results of the study were then presented in a research report, detailing the key findings and implications of the data. Overall, the research study provided valuable insights into the topic at hand and contributed to the existing body of knowledge in the field. Participants were thanked for their time and contribution to the study upon completion.

Data Analysis

The dataset was analyzed using Google Sheets, with formula inputs used to calculate the sum of total scores, mean scores, and thresholds for categorizing cyberchondria severity. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the prevalence of cyberchondria severity across three categories: low, moderate, and severe. Prevalence percentages were calculated for the entire sample, as well as for specific regions within India, to identify geographic trends. The four dimension means were calculated to understand the relationship of each.

Sampling Justification

The use of random sampling was a key strength of this study, as it ensured that the sample was representative of the broader population. Random sampling minimizes selection bias and enhances the external validity of the findings, allowing for generalizations to be made about the prevalence of cyberchondria in India. The decision to recruit 400 participants was based on practical considerations, including time constraints and resource availability, while still ensuring a sufficiently large sample size for robust statistical analysis.

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Data Management

All data were managed and stored securely to protect participant confidentiality. Responses were collected anonymously through Google Forms and exported to Google Sheets for analysis. The dataset was stored on a password-protected computer, and access was restricted to the research team. Data cleaning and analysis were conducted in accordance with best practices for quantitative research, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the results.

RESULTS

Table 1: Prevalence of cyberchondria across Indian regions

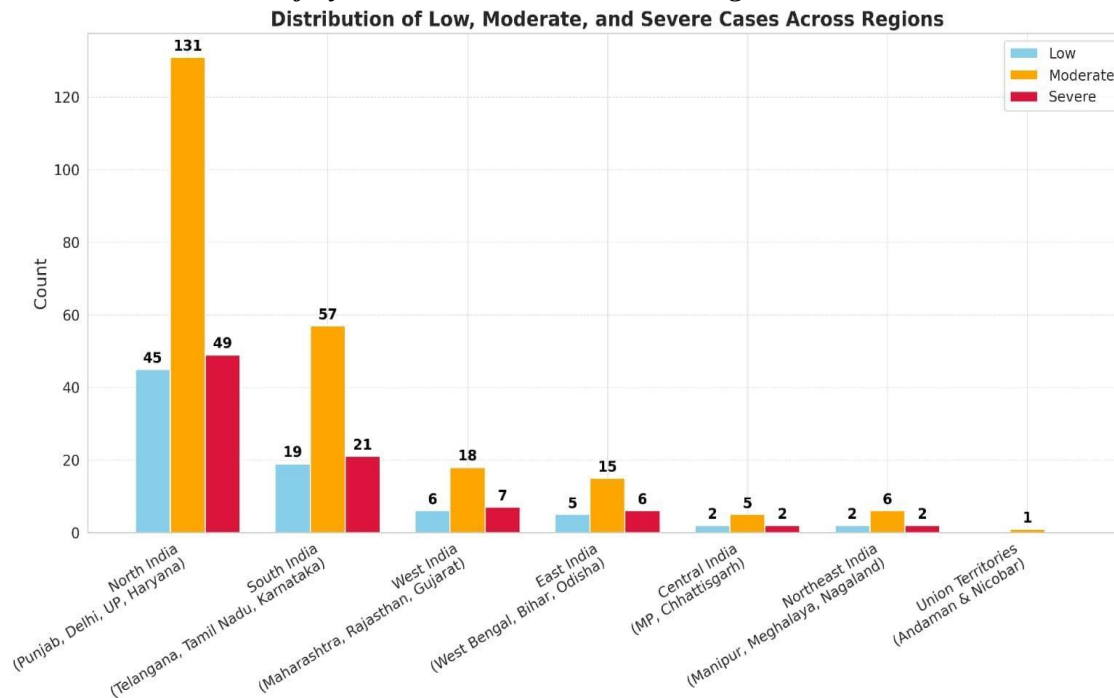
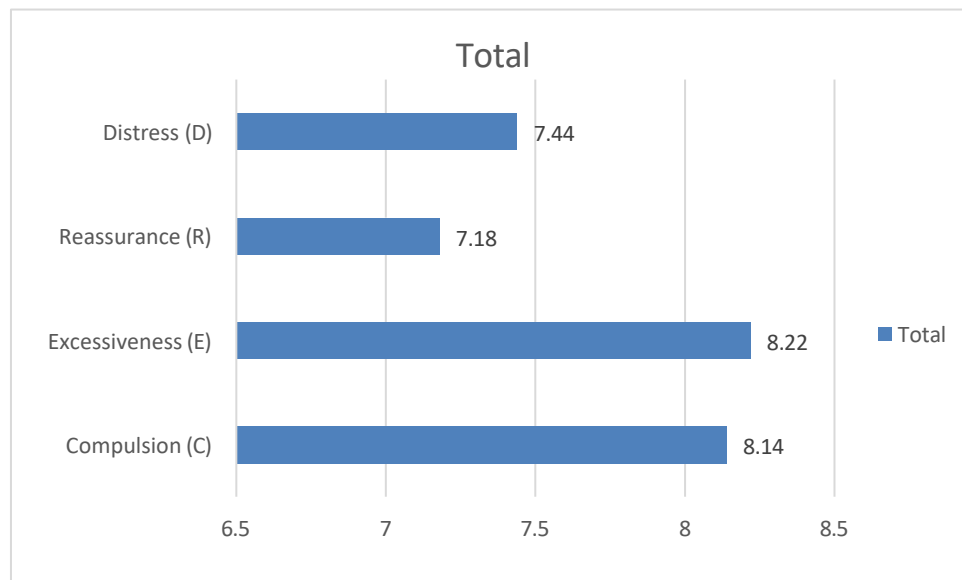


Figure 1: Mean scores of dimensions



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Analysis of results

Regional Distribution of Cyberchondria Cases

- North India (Punjab, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Haryana) has the most serious cases (131), indicating a significant impact of cyberchondria in this region.
- South India (Telangana, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka) had the mildest and severe cases, with 57 and 21, respectively.
- West India (Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Gujarat) and East India (West Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha) have a high prevalence of cyberchondria, although few reported instances.
- Central, Northeast, and Union Territories have relatively low rates, possibly due to low internet penetration or health information-seeking practices.

Component-wise breakdown

- The highest score categories are excessiveness (8.22) and compulsion (8.14), indicating that many people perform frequent, excessively intensive internet searches.
- Although their numbers are relatively low, stress (7.44) and reassurance-seeking (7.18) are significant because they imply that internet health inquiries generate anxiety but do not always provide comfort.

Key Takeaways

- North India appears to have the most severe cyberchondria; South and West India also have considerable rates.
- Obsessive and compulsive behaviors are prevalent, implying that therapies should focus on minimizing the frequency of health searches.
- Tension and reassurance-seeking remain considerable; therefore, psychological treatment or digital literacy initiatives may help to reduce anxiety over online health information.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the data analysis, combined with the theoretical and empirical insights into cyberchondria, provide a comprehensive understanding of this modern psychological phenomenon. Cyberchondria, characterized by excessive and anxiety-driven online health searches, has emerged as a significant mental health concern, particularly in the digital age, where access to health information is ubiquitous. The data analysis reveals important patterns in the prevalence and distribution of cyberchondria across different regions, while the theoretical framework and empirical studies shed light on its cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions. This discussion integrates these findings to explore the implications of cyberchondria, its relationship with other psychological disorders, and the cultural factors that influence its manifestation.

Prevalence and Regional Distribution

The data analysis indicates that cyberchondria is not uniformly distributed across regions. As seen in Table 1, **North India** accounts for the majority of entries (56.25%), with Punjab, Delhi, and Uttar Pradesh being the primary contributors. This could be attributed to higher internet penetration and urbanization in these areas, which facilitate greater access to online health information. In contrast, regions like **Central India** and **Northeast India** show significantly lower prevalence rates, possibly due to limited internet access and lower levels of digital literacy. The **South India** region, with 24.25% of entries, also shows a substantial

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presence of cyberchondria, particularly in states like Telangana and Tamil Nadu, where internet usage is high among the urban population.

The overall prevalence distribution reveals that **58.40%** of the population falls into the **Moderate** category, suggesting that a significant portion of individuals engage in online health searches that may lead to heightened anxiety. The **severe** category, representing **21.80%** of the population, highlights a concerning trend where individuals are likely experiencing significant distress and impairment due to their compulsive health-related internet use. This aligns with previous research by McElroy and Shevlin (2014), who found that approximately **20%** of their sample exhibited moderate to severe cyberchondria.

Cyberchondria and Comorbidities

Cyberchondria is closely linked with other psychological disorders, particularly health anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and depression. The cognitive-behavioral model (CBM) of cyberchondria, as proposed by Starcevic and Berle (2013), explains how individuals with pre-existing anxiety disorders are more likely to engage in compulsive online health searches. The availability of online health information exacerbates cognitive distortions, such as catastrophic thinking and intolerance of uncertainty, which are what drive this behavior. The data supports this model, as individuals in the severe category are likely to exhibit higher levels of health anxiety and OCD traits, reinforcing the cycle of anxiety and reassurance-seeking.

Moreover, the emotional patterns associated with cyberchondria, such as increased anxiety and fear, are particularly pronounced in populations with limited access to healthcare services. In India, cultural stigma surrounding mental health further exacerbates the problem, as individuals are more likely to rely on online sources for self-diagnosis and treatment rather than seeking professional help. This reliance on often unreliable online information perpetuates the cycle of anxiety and contributes to the severity of cyberchondria.

Cultural and Socioeconomic Factors

The data analysis highlights the role of cultural and socioeconomic factors in shaping the prevalence and severity of cyberchondria. In India, the lack of access to reliable healthcare services and the stigma associated with mental health issues drive individuals to seek information online, often leading to misinterpretation of symptoms and increased anxiety. Studies by Singh and Gupta (2021) and Kumar and Singh (2020) have shown that urban populations, with greater internet access, are more likely to engage in excessive online health searches compared to rural populations. This is further supported by the high prevalence of cyberchondria among college students, as noted by Sharma and Palanichamy (2018), who found that 30% of Indian college students exhibited signs of cyberchondria.

The cultural context also influences the cognitive patterns associated with cyberchondria. In India, distrust of healthcare professionals and the belief in self-diagnosis contribute to the reliance on online health information. This cognitive bias, combined with the emotional distress caused by exposure to alarming or contradictory information, creates a feedback loop that sustains and exacerbates cyberchondria.

Domain Data Analysis

The domain data from the **Cyberchondria Severity Scale (CSS-12)** provides further insights into the behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions of cyberchondria, as seen in Figure 1. The **excessiveness** dimension, with a mean score of **8.287**, indicates that participants engage in prolonged and repetitive online health searches, likely driven by anxiety and uncertainty. This aligns with the cognitive-behavioral model, which posits that individuals with cyberchondria struggle to control their online health-seeking behaviors, even when they recognize their excessiveness.

The **compulsion** dimension, with a mean score of **8.14**, suggests that participants are aware of their excessive behaviors but find it difficult to stop. This cognitive awareness, combined with the inability to control the behavior, highlights the compulsive nature of cyberchondria. The **Distress** dimension, with a mean score of **7.44**, indicates that these behaviors significantly impact participants' emotional well-being, leading to high levels of panic and health anxiety (HA). This is consistent with previous research by Starcevic and Berle (2013), who found that individuals with cyberchondria experience a cycle of anxiety and reassurance-seeking, which ultimately exacerbates their distress.

The **reassurance** dimension, with a mean score of **7.18**, is the lowest among the domains, suggesting that even when participants seek reassurance through online health searches, it does not fully alleviate their concerns. This finding underscores the maladaptive nature of cyberchondria, as the temporary relief gained from reassurance-seeking is often outweighed by the long-term increase in anxiety and distress.

Implications for Intervention

The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to address cyberchondria, particularly in populations with high internet usage and limited access to healthcare services. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is effective in treating health anxiety and related disorders, and it could be adapted to address the specific cognitive distortions and behavioral patterns associated with cyberchondria. Interventions should focus on reducing catastrophic thinking, improving tolerance of uncertainty, and promoting healthier online health-seeking behaviors.

Additionally, public health campaigns aimed at increasing awareness of reliable health information sources and reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues could help mitigate the prevalence of cyberchondria. In the Indian context, culturally sensitive interventions that address the unique cognitive and emotional patterns of cyberchondria are essential. For example, educational programs targeting college students could help them develop critical thinking skills to evaluate online health information more effectively.

The Role of the Cyberchondria Severity Scale (CSS-12)

The **Cyberchondria Severity Scale (CSS-12)** has proven to be a valuable tool in assessing the severity of cyberchondria across different cultural contexts. Its robust theoretical foundation, high reliability, and validity make it particularly suitable for research in non-Western populations, such as India. The CSS-12's ability to capture the multidimensional nature of cyberchondria, including its behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions, aligns well with the objectives of this study. By using the CSS-12, this research has been able to provide a comprehensive assessment of cyberchondria in the Indian context, contributing to a deeper understanding of its prevalence and impact.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the prevalence and patterns of cyberchondria, there are some limitations. The data analysis is based on self-reported entries, which may be subject to bias. Additionally, the regional distribution of cyberchondria may not fully capture the nuances of cultural and socioeconomic factors that influence its manifestation. Future research should aim to explore these factors in greater depth, using larger and more diverse samples. Longitudinal studies could also provide insights into the long-term effects of cyberchondria on mental health and well-being.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, cyberchondria is a complex phenomenon that has influences from psychological, behavioral, and cultural factors. The data analysis reveals significant regional variations in its prevalence, with higher rates observed in urban areas with greater internet access. This also indicates that cyberchondria is a growing issue in the Indian population. Future research should continue to explore the cultural and socioeconomic factors that contribute to this phenomenon to develop more effective and culturally sensitive interventions as this research set a groundwork for further extensive research in Indian settings.

By addressing the cognitive distortions, behavioral patterns, and emotional distress associated with cyberchondria, we can help individuals develop healthier ways of managing their health-related anxieties and reduce the burden of this modern psychological issue. The domain data from the CSS-12 further emphasizes the need for interventions that target the excessive and compulsive nature of online health searches, as well as the emotional distress they cause. Ultimately, a comprehensive approach that combines cognitive-behavioral therapy, public health education, and culturally sensitive interventions will be crucial in addressing the growing prevalence of cyberchondria and its impact on mental health.

The compulsion dimension, in particular, highlights the need for strategies that help individuals break the cycle of compulsive online health searches, which are often driven by anxiety and uncertainty. By focusing on these key areas, we can work towards reducing the prevalence and severity of cyberchondria, ultimately improving the mental well-being of individuals in both urban and rural settings.

In addition to therapy and education, implementing digital literacy programs may also be beneficial in helping individuals navigate online health information in a more balanced and informed manner. Furthermore, promoting healthy coping mechanisms and stress management techniques can aid in reducing the anxiety and distress associated with cyberchondria. By taking a holistic approach to addressing this issue, we can create a more supportive and understanding environment for individuals struggling with cyberchondria, ultimately leading to improved mental health outcomes for all.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Vemuri, T.I. & Prusty, B. (2025). Prevalence And Manifestation of Cyberchondria in Indian Adults. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 13(2), 1078-1093. DIP:18.01.096.20251302, DOI:10.25215/1302.096