

# The use of symptom checkers by young adults for COVID-19 related symptoms: a qualitative study

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## Background & Objectives

- Symptom checkers are potentially beneficial tools during pandemics.<sup>1</sup>
- To increase the use of the platform, perspectives of end users must be gathered.<sup>2</sup>
- Our objectives were to understand the perspectives and experiences of young adults (aged between 18 and 34 years of age) related to the use of symptom checkers for assessing COVID-19-related symptoms and to identify areas for improvement.

## Methods

- Qualitative research design and semi-structured interviews with 22 university students.
- Think-aloud exercise using Babylon Health and WebMD symptom checkers.
- Questions related to using a symptom checker for COVID-19 related symptoms and areas for improvement.
- Independent inductive thematic analysis by three researchers.<sup>3</sup>

## Results & Key Takeaways

### Main themes related to the decision of using a symptom checker for COVID-19 symptoms:

- Presence of symptoms or a combination of symptoms
- Fear of seeking in-person healthcare services
- Knowledge about COVID-19 symptoms
- Awareness about symptom checkers
- Trust
- Paranoia
- Curiosity

*"I think when you asked me about whether or not I would go to a clinic, I would not go in this pandemic. It put symptom checkers in a more positive light for me." (P21)*

*"I would seek out symptom checkers because it is tough to remember all the symptoms that are coming up everyday like the rash on the feet or loss of smell." (P15)*

*"Lack of awareness, I did not know the platform existed. I would definitely use it if I knew about it." (P18)*

*"At this point, I don't know who made the websites and if they are credible, are they tech people or are they doctors behind the scene?" (P10)*

*"When I typed in things related to my sore throat a lot of other things would pop up and I didn't know the difference between the symptoms. So, I wish it explained the differences between the sub-sections of having a sore throat." (P9)*

### Five main areas for improvement were identified:

- Information about the creators of the platform
- Explanation of symptoms
- Personalised experience
- Language options
- Option to get tested

**Key takeaway:** Symptom checkers have the potential to reduce the burden on healthcare systems, especially during pandemics; however, these platforms could be improved to increase use.

**References:** (1) Fraser H, Coiera E, Wong D. Safety of patient-facing digital symptom checkers. *Lancet* 2018;**392**:2263–4; (2) Davis FD. Perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and user acceptance of information technology. *MIS Quarterly* 1989;**13**:319–40; (3) Castleberry A & Nolen A. Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: is it as easy as it sounds? *Curr Pharm Teach Learn* 2018;**10**:807–15.

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