

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.¹
- To increase the use of the platform, perspectives of end users must be gathered.²
- 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.³

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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