

Issues Associated with Media and Health Information Seeking Behavior Among the Elderly in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Understanding issues associated with media and health information seeking behavior among the elderly, aids in tailoring public communication campaigns, ultimately enhancing a healthier and more resilient community. In Kibera slum, the elderly face limited access to health resources, including accessibility to a variety of health information sources, exacerbating their informational gap. This hinders their ability to make informed decisions, potentially leading to delayed or inadequate healthcare, further compromising their well-being. The primary objective of this study is to investigate issues associated with media and health information seeking behavior among the elderly in one of Africa's biggest slums, Kibera. Interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews targeting the elderly living in Kibera slum were conducted. Qualitative findings indicated that social support, health status and media related issues were associated with media and health information seeking among elderly slum dwellers. These issues shaped media use for seeking health information. The study recommends that health stakeholders should aim to understand these issues in order to effectively address the unique health needs of this population.

Keywords: Health, information seeking behavior, elderly slum dwellers, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Globally, most studies focusing on elderly's media and health information seeking behavior give more attention to health information seeking patterns through online media and media outlets that provide health information. Wu and Li (2016) studied health information seeking through online media outlets among the Chinese elderly. Wackerbarth and Johnson (2002) studied the frequent sources of health information utilized by older individuals while Smith et al. (2015) studied the challenges of accessing portals citing health literacy and usability as the major constraints. Investigating issues associated with media and health information seeking behavior among the elderly inhabiting informal settlements in Kenya can help in planning purposes particularly because of their vulnerability. It is argued that elderly utilize healthcare resources more than other segments of the population thus have different health information needs (Rice & Fineman, 2004). It is therefore very important to investigate contextual issues influencing health information seeking among the elderly (Lambert & Loisel, 2007; Mills & Todorova, 2016).

In a study exploring the dynamics of social support among the elderly during COVID-19 vaccination and mitigation initiatives, it was discovered that communities served as crucial conduits for health-related information. These social networks played a key role in encouraging the acceptance of vaccinations as a measure to avert serious illnesses and associated complications (Brennan-ing et al., 2023). Individuals who are prone to spending significant amounts of time in their neighborhoods, such as elderly individuals with health challenges, benefit from social support within the community. This support is advantageous as it delivers essential health information (Hoogerbrugge & Burger, 2018). Elderly individuals who hold a more positive view of their neighborhood are less inclined to report suboptimal self-rated health, as they tend to rely on neighbors as their primary sources of health information (Stroope et al., 2017). The elderly population in Europe often obtain health information from their neighbors (Seifert & König, 2019). Cancer patients, including the elderly, utilize twitter virtual community support to seek information about their underlying disease (Tsuya et al., 2014).

The health status, particularly a recent cancer diagnosis, encourage elderly to actively seek for health-related information through online media (Sedrak et al., 2020). Diabetic patients in South West Nigeria possess mobile phones and are open to receiving and paying for diabetes-related information through voice calls and text messages. The utilization of mobile phone technology has the potential to decrease the overall cost of diabetic care for underprivileged populations in developing countries, as it can significantly cut down on the need for commuting and waiting in hospitals (Olamoyegun et al., 2020).

Expanding the accessibility of online health information could potentially exacerbate the unequal access to health information, leading to increased disparities in individuals' health management skills and benefits from healthcare over the long term. However, contrary to previous research implications, this expansion would likely result in little to no increase in the demand for physician services (Suenaga & Vicente, 2022). Diabetic patients in Malaysia and Singapore use mobile phones to seek health-related. Younger individuals and those with higher levels of education were more inclined to utilize mobile health (mHealth) for various health-related tasks (Lee et al., 2020).

Greater Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) severity is significantly associated with social media use for health information especially among individuals with high education levels (Stellefson et al., 2018). In a study investigating the correlation between socio-demographic issues, technology use, and health literacy among individuals with type 2 diabetes, it was revealed that 56 percent of participants faced challenges in comprehending health information provided by healthcare professionals. Those with access to online media required less assistance in understanding instructions, pamphlets, or other written materials from healthcare providers or pharmacies. Notably, individuals with online media access exhibited higher levels of health literacy compared to those without such access (Ramasamy et al., 2016).

A study on the online media use for health information among elderly women with chronic illnesses revealed that 6 out of 10 participants in the Women's Health Initiative reported utilizing online media for health-related information. Particularly, individuals recently diagnosed with cancer showed a higher inclination towards seeking health information online (Sedrak et al., 2020). Diabetic patients in Isfahan are more willing to seek health information in order to prevent or control the complications caused by diabetes. Additionally, patients with a family history of cancer were more active in seeking information about their disease from traditional and interpersonal communication (Zare-Farashbandi et al., 2016).

The primary cohort of Twitter users discussing diabetes consists of individuals impacted by Type 1 diabetes. General Twitter users are particularly interested in seeking out personal experiences and recommendations shared by those affected by Type 1 diabetes, considering this information as crucial when making important health decisions (Gabarron et al., 2015). The prostate and breast cancer communities on Twitter share health information aligned with their common health interests through blogs, to help manage these challenging diseases (Himmelboim & Han, 2014). WhatsApp has emerged as the favored platform for disseminating dementia knowledge, primarily valued for its sharing features rather than its viewing functionality (Shu & Woo, 2020).

The perceived relationships formed with radio programs and individual presenters, developed and maintained through consistent listening, form the foundation for radio's capacity to enhance listeners' health wellbeing (Krause & Fletcher, 2023). Television's preference as a source of health information among the elderly is attributed to its user-friendly interface, ease of learning, and satisfaction (Pires et al., 2023).

WhatsApp provides a cost-effective, secure, and rapid technological solution that enables both clinical and non-clinical communications. It also offers opportunities for enhanced learning and improved patient care while maintaining privacy (Nardo et al., 2016). In a study aiming to determine mobile phone ownership rates and issues influencing the ability to read and access health information delivered via SMS, as well as the willingness to pay for such services among individuals with hypertension in a rural area of Bangladesh, it was discovered that a significantly higher proportion of men, younger individuals, those with education, those in the middle or higher economic classes, and professionals or businesspersons had the ability to read SMS. However, among those who could read SMS, the majority did so only occasionally (Islam et al., 2021).

The utilization of online media and health information technology by elderly patients with chronic diseases offers cost-effective eHealth services. These services include searching for health information online, filling prescriptions, scheduling appointments with healthcare providers, and communicating with them via email. The resulting enhancement in accessibility and convenience allows individuals to remotely access healthcare information and services, ultimately facilitating timely and efficient healthcare delivery (He et al., 2022). The most widely used digital technologies are the mobile health apps and wearable devices among the Singaporean elderly. These channels are perceived to be easy to use and reduce financial cost such as commuting costs to health facilities (Zhang et al., 2023). Twitter offers a space for individuals navigating similar mental health challenges to come together and establish supportive communities. Connecting with others who have shared experiences can diminish feelings of isolation, fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing self-management strategies (Berry et al., 2017).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method which illustrates how human beings encounter a certain phenomenon (Zalta, 2004). Qualitative data was gathered using interview guides administered to elderly, doctor, dietician, pharmacist, social worker, an official from the ministry of health and a communications expert.

Location of Study

The study was conducted in Kibra Sub County's five wards which are; Laini Saba, Makina, Sarango'mbe, Lindi and Woodley.

Target Population

The population the study are individuals aged over 60 years and have resided in Kibra Sub County for at least one year and are psychologically stable. The Kenya population and housing census 2019 report indicates that the older population aged 60 years and above is 5,189 (KNBS, 2019).

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

This study used purposive sampling technique to pick a sample of 30 elderly persons from all the five wards in Kibra Sub County. Dodovskiy (2016) argues that the purposive sampling technique, sometimes referred to as judgment sampling, is the intentional selection of participants based on their qualities. Underlying theories or a specific number of participants is not a necessity in this nonrandom sampling technique. Basically, this technique is valuable in qualitative research to identify the best quality of cases using available resources efficiently and effectively.

Two public health centers and two level 4 healthcare facilities were purposively selected. The choice of these health facilities was based on the fact that they are most frequented by the elderly with low incomes in the Sub-County. However, a variety health facility, individuals and groups was significant in this study for purposes of acquiring assorted health information seeking dynamics and encounters from a range of health stakeholders to enhance the study's conclusions. The 30 elderly persons comprised of 6 elderly persons of equal gender representation in each of the 5 wards. Personal interviews were conducted for all the 30 elderly persons. In addition, the sample included 6 Key Informants and 3 Focus Group Discussions. The Key informants comprised of a doctor, dietician, pharmacist, social worker, an official from the ministry of health and a communications expert working on a health project related to the elderly in Kibra.

The Focus Group Discussions comprised of 8 members per ward comprises of 4 males and 4 females. Key informants were identified through the Sub County ward administrator by asking about the various health professionals living in the area.

Data Collection Instrument

Data was collected through interviews, focus group discussion (FGD) and key informant interviews (KIIs). Face to face personal interviews were held with all the 30 elderly persons to allow collection of in-depth information. Key informant interviews were conducted with a doctor, dietician, pharmacist, social worker and an official from the ministry of health and a communications expert working on a health project related to the elderly in Kibra. The Kibra Sub County administrator helped in the selection of these respondents. The identities of the respondents were kept anonymous. For good and fair research, an introductory letter from University of Nairobi, and National Commission of Science and Technology research permit number 616658 were obtained before embarking on the study. Furthermore, consent forms were provided to the study participants to allow them make the critical decision to participate in the study. Other ethical aspects that were considered for this study were language, participant consent, recording, and accessibility of the venues that was used for the FGDs.

RESULTS

Social Support

SMSs with neighbors promoted taking vaccinations, consumption of healthy diets and medication adherence.

“SMS from my neighbors inform me about pneumonia and influenza vaccinations, sharing schedules, and locations.” (S03)

“SMS with neighbors really help me because am immobile by providing health information, minimizing hospital visits, and reducing transport costs for consultations.” (M07)

A Doctor who was a key informant noted SMS with neighbors have enhanced nutrition of elderly in slums by sharing healthy recipes and meal ideas. One of the participants in Makina ward focus group noted that:

“SMS with neighbors offer me timely reminders to take my medication because I suffer from respiratory related complications.”

Across focus group discussions it was noted that, the elderly was able to save on transportation costs to health facilities when they needed vital health information. Additionally, some of the elderly were immobile due to terminal diseases and therefore the neighbors came in handy to provide the required health information. Across focus groups it was noted that phone calls with children provided personalized health advice and immediate responses to questions promoting medication adherence and consumption of balanced diets. Personal connection, trust, and emotional support are crucial issues that make elderly in slums prefer family phone calls over SMS with neighbors for health information. These phone calls especially with their children helped the elderly navigate online media when seeking health information.

Health Status

An array of media platforms empowered elderly to manage symptoms and make informed health decisions.

“Phone calls with children and SMS with neighbors guide on nutrition and diabetes management. Emails with doctors advise on nutrition and exercise to reduce anxiety. WhatsApp messages with social health workers provide vaccination information. TV programs, like Health Diary on NTV every Sunday at 6:30 pm, address anxiety, stress, depression, and mood disorders.” (LSO4)

“Utilizing my mobile phone, I receive valuable health information through phone calls with my children, SMS from neighbors, and WhatsApp messages with friends which helps me manage diabetes and high blood pressure.” (W05)

“...NTV's (A leading Television Station) “Health Diary” programme that airs every Sunday at 6:30 pm and hosted by Gladys Gachanja provides tips on meal planning and preparation to manage my high blood pressure. WhatsApp video calls with friends and WhatsApp messages with nurses have helped verify health information sought from television. Ramogi TV (A leading vernacular Television station) through Penj laktar (Ask the Doctor) programme aired daily at 6pm educates me on dietary modification for diabetes management.” (S08)

“My children and grandchildren use their mobile phones to seek health information on my behalf to help manage low blood pressure and arthritis. It's heartening how technology bridges the gap, helping elderly slum dwellers access crucial health knowledge for our well-being through our children.” (L04)

“Radio Maria's (Christian station) 'Health Show' aired every Wednesday from 1pm to 2 pm and SMS with friends' aid in preparing special diets for managing Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) and diabetes. I frequently seek health information from radio because its cheap and uses language that is easy to understand unlike social media which is relatively expensive and requires digital literacy skills which I lack.” (LSO1)

“Phone calls with family members and WhatsApp video calls with friends provide me with diabetes health information sourced from doctors. Our community thrives on social support from family and friends, empowering us with valuable insights for healthier living.” (MO5)

A pharmacist who was a key informant noted that a significant number of elderly slum dwellers diagnosed with cancer often relied on telephone conversations with their children to seek information about cancer-related health topics. A social worker who was a key informant noted that elderly slum residents with diabetes and cancer histories employed various communication avenues, including radio, television, WhatsApp, SMS, phone calls, and email, to access health information, thereby improving their capacity to effectively manage these conditions. A communication expert who was a key informant noted that elderly slum dwellers prefer phone calls as opposed to twitter communities for health information due to familiarity, trust in family bonds, personalized interactions, and limited digital access. Phone calls offer a direct and reliable channel, ensuring a more accessible and culturally resonant means of seeking health support and information. A dietician who was a key informant noted that WhatsApp videocalls connect elderly slum dwellers with friends and health workers, fostering personalized interactions. WhatsApp messages with healthcare professionals, including nurses, doctors, pharmacists, and volunteer coordinators, provide vital dietary guidance.

Media related issues

Understanding media-related issues was essential for identifying diverse needs and circumstances of seeking health information among elderly slum dwellers.

“A Radio morning show known as Inooro Rucini, through “Ugima wa Mwiri” (Good health) show hosted by Wambui Wa Muturi offers heart health information and body exercises to prevent chronic diseases. I trust this presenter who always shares relatable health content.” (S02)

“...Ramogi TV (A leading vernacular Television station) through Penj laktar (Ask the Doctor) programme aired daily at 6pm educates me on dietary modification such as carbohydrate management for diabetes. The programme also helps me with symptom recognition and doctor consultations. The show aids comprehension through its audio-visual format, culturally tailored health content, simple language, and demonstrations which nurture a sustained health-conscious mindset.” (L07)

Across the focus groups it was noted that WhatsApp video calls were used to connect with friends and healthcare professionals for reminders about medications, maintaining a balanced diet, scheduling doctor consultations, and ensuring timely vaccinations. Moreover, exchanging WhatsApp messages with nurses also encouraged medication adherence and doctor consultations. A communication expert noted that SMS with neighbors and health experts for health information among elderly slum dwellers, offer a channel with flexible language use, cost-effectiveness, and timely community health updates, bridging health communication gaps. An official from the Ministry of Health noted that in resource-constrained settings, online media such as emails empower elderly slum dwellers by delivering crucial health information.

“Limited digital literacy hinders elderly slum dwellers from utilizing mobile health apps and wearable devices, making these technologies uncommon sources of health information in underserved communities such as Kibera slum.” (W04)

“I rely more on traditional media and interpersonal communication when seeking health information because they are accessible channels. Limited internet access, unfamiliarity with Twitter platform, preference for local languages.” (M04)

DISCUSSION

The study sought to investigate the issues associated with media and health information seeking behavior among the elderly in Kenya, based on the participant responses, social support, health status and media related issues shape health information seeking. This was illustrated by the interviews with elderly, doctor dietician, pharmacist, social worker, an official from the ministry of health and a communications expert. The study established that neighbors, family members and friends provided health-related social support through SMS by sharing wellness tips, offering encouragement, and exchanging information about local health resources. Elderly slum dwellers, facing unique health challenges, increasingly relied on diverse media channels, including online and offline media sources, to seek vital health information. In the dynamic landscape of health information dissemination, the impact of media-related issues on diverse platforms such as radio, television, WhatsApp, SMS, online media, mobile health apps, and Twitter was a critical concern, particularly among elderly slum dwellers. Media-related issues such as accessibility, language and literacy, credibility and trustworthiness, cultural relevance, media format, digital literacy, social influence and economic issues played a crucial role in shaping how elderly slum dwellers consumed health information.

Conclusion

The study concluded that there are various issues associated with health information seeking behavior among elderly slum dwellers. They include social support, health status, and media-related issues. Social networks such as neighbors provided valuable health information to elderly slum dwellers through SMS. Elderly used media for reassurance and social connectedness in order to lessen health anxiety. Various ailments such as diabetes and hypertension also led to media use for health information. Media related issues such as language and media format also shaped health information seeking among elderly slum dwellers. Comprehending issues that are associated with health information seeking behavior among elderly slum dwellers is important in the formation of contextualized health communication campaigns. Low social economic status and unique challenges faced by elderly slum dwellers require strategic techniques to improve healthcare in these underserved areas.

Recommendations

The researchers recommend that health stakeholders should aim to understand issues associated with health information seeking behavior among elderly slum dwellers. This will help in addressing unique health needs of this population. As individuals age, their health concerns often increase, necessitating access to reliable health information. Issues such as social support, health status and media related issues shape health information seeking among elderly. Health stakeholders should work towards empowering elderly with health knowledge and capacity to navigate health information through media. This will in turn enhance informed decision making and self-management of health conditions, and ultimately improves healthcare in later life.

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