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## **Enticing users towards online medical consultancy services in Chennai city**

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**Abstract**---The information technology has made health care providers to offer online/virtual consultation to the users/patients or a follow up about his/her health conditions from their respective homes itself. Online/virtual medical consultation is drawing attention of many and is increasingly becoming very popular as a powerful tool to offer a potential solution to health care services. It enables patients to share, transfer, and communicate data or information in real time with the physician/doctor at a clinical site. With the empowered patients, increased demands on health care and demand by patients for Internet-based services this paper examines the adoption of online/virtual consultation by the patients in the health care context. Further, it makes an attempt to understand the factors responsible to choose online consultation by patients and examines the satisfaction of the users/patients through e-consultation. Finally, this study tries to identify the strategies which can be used by health care providers in order to entice users/patients towards online/virtual consultation. This study tries to provide insights in these related areas.

**Keywords**---doctor-patient, online medical-consultancy service, health care, medical care, digital platform, satisfaction.

### **Introduction**

The health care industry is one of the more complex service industries. The health care system has unique attributes that distinguish it from other service systems. These attributes include the orientation of delivery of individualized services; the high degree of professionalism in the health and medical care industry; and the complexity and scope of the industry. Today, the health care industry has been undergoing a revolution. The health care has been a sellers' market so long, that the people who are involved in it had no concept of competition, marketing, pricing or promotion. The face of medical market place has been altered now-a-days. In the modern era of information technology there is

a paradigm shift in the way individuals look for medical information with an increasing number going first to the Internet before talking with their physicians. Also, there is an increasing interest from patients in accessing Internet-based services, including text-based consultations with doctors. These consultations can be part of the regular communication between a patient and his/her doctor or be carried out without any previous relationship. As result, professionals in the medical field today, use advanced information and communication technology (ICT) to reach out to their patients for diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease.

Medical consultation via the Internet is called tele advice, teleconsultation or online consultation. Virtual/online consultation is one where various health care providers from different hospitals and medical institutes provide remote medical consultation services to patients using digital platform. These digital platforms offer many benefits, such as reduced medical costs, improved medical service efficiency and more efficient health care resource distribution to the patients. Under this digital platform, the patient communicates with a doctor/physician for a consultation or for a follow-up about his or her health condition via video conferencing and tele medicine systems. The consulting expert is the consulting clinician (typically, a physician); and the remote client is a remote patient.

### **Objectives of the study**

- To identify the profile relating to users of online consultancy in medical and health care context in Chennai city;
- To examine the factors and reasons responsible to choose online medical consultancy services; and
- To analyze the satisfaction of users towards online medical consultancy services and suggest measures to improve it.

### **Review of literature**

Many studies have been conducted regarding the use of telemedicine and e-consultation in health care context. Most of these studies are focused on telemedicine effectiveness, efficiency, and capability to improve health care services. Vimalananda et al found that e-consultation between care providers improves patients' access to specialty care without the need for face-to-face consultation by sharing patient records electronically in asynchronous mode between health care providers. Maarop and Win found that a teleconsultation system that utilized the asynchronous store-and-forward method was considered an effective tool between Malaysian primary and tertiary health care facilities, due to the need for such services among health care providers and its perceived ease of use and usefulness. Roine et al found that telemedicine technology provided an efficient and effective method of electronic referrals and video conferencing between primary and secondary health care providers, which saved health care services costs, especially in the transmission of computed tomography images and other services, such as teleradiology, tele-neurosurgery, telepsychiatry, and transmission of echocardiographic reports. Similarly, Hasselberg et al reported that image-based telemedicine systems for medical expert consultation in acute care of injuries provided valid diagnosis and influenced patient management by

ensuring diagnostic validity, system quality, and satisfaction for clinicians and users. Caffery et al found that telehealth interventions helped in reducing waiting times, waiting lists, and unnecessary appointments for patients who were seeking access to specialist outpatient services.

### **Justification of the paper**

Virtual/online consultancy in health and medical care services offers advantages such as convenience, time saving and cost saving. Understanding the satisfaction of the patients with e-consultancy services is more imperative. This is because the concept of quality in medical care comprises of patient satisfaction, effectiveness and innovation. The issue of patient satisfaction has wide spread implications. It has been shown that patient satisfaction affect not only the physician-patient relationship but also patient's health status. Patients who are dissatisfied tend to avoid physician visits, not follow treatment recommendations or change their doctors. These are the activities which disrupt their medical care and can compromise their health outcomes. As a result, this study is conducted with an objective to identify the factors and the reasons responsible to choose online/virtual medical consultancy services; and examine the patient's satisfaction towards online/virtual consultancy services in the medical and health care context. Additionally, the current research study also provides managerial implications to entice users/patients towards online consultancy in health care and medical care services.

### **Research design**

This study has been conducted using both primary and secondary data. The primary data has been collected from 70 respondents, to know about their satisfaction towards e-consultation in the health care and medical care context, through a well-structured questionnaire. A convenience sampling technique has been applied. The respondents with access to a smart phone, laptop/computers or both from Chennai city have been selected on the basis of convenience. The respondents who use Skype or use mobile apps for virtual consultation have been considered for the study. Secondary data has been collected from books, journals, periodicals and website. The simple percentage method has been applied for this paper.

### **Data analysis and interpretation**

Table 1  
Demographic Profile of Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
Below 25 years	6	08.58
25-35 years	32	45.71
36-45 years	21	30.00
Above 45 years	11	15.71
Total	70	100.00
Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	37	53.00

Female	33	47.00
Total	70	100.00
Education	Frequency	Percentage
Under graduate	6	08.58
Graduate	29	41.43
Post graduate	18	25.71
Professional	13	18.58
Diploma holder	4	05.70
Total	70	100.00
Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Salaried employee	35	50.00
Business/Self-Employed	14	20.00
House-Wife	12	17.15
Student	6	08.58
Retired	3	04.27
Total	70	100.00
Monthly /Family Income	Frequency	Percentage
Less than Rs.25,000	17	24.29
Rs.25,000-Rs.50,000	22	31.43
Rs.50,001-Rs.75,000	21	30.00
Above Rs.75,000	10	14.28
Total	70	100.00

Source: Primary data

**Interpretation:** Table 1 shows that 53% are male and 47% female; 45.71 % of the respondents are between 25-35 years; 41.43% of the respondents are graduates, while salaried employee category comprise of 50%; and monthly/family income category of between Rs.25,000 - Rs.50,000 comprise of 31.43% according to this study.

Table 2

Factors responsible to choose online medical consultancy service, usage pattern and period of usage of the respondents

Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Through advertisements	9	12.85
Through friends/relatives	13	18.57
Through doctor's advice	19	27.14
Through self	24	34.29
Through internet	5	07.15
Total	70	100.00
Frequency Of Use	Frequency	Percentage
Once a month	10	14.29
Once in 3 months	25	35.71
Once in 6 months	18	25.71
Once in a year	13	18.58

Whenever required	4	05.71
Total	70	100.00
Period of Usage	Frequency	Percentage
less than 1 year	23	32.85
more than 1 year	47	67.15
Total	70	100.00

Source: Primary data

**Interpretation:** Table 2 shows the factors responsible to choose online medical consultancy by the respondents, the frequency and period of usage by respondents. 34.29% have chosen online medical consultancy services on their own; while 35.71% use online medical consultancy services once in 3 months ; and 67.15% have opted for online consultancy services for more than 1 year according to this study.

Table 3  
Reasons for choosing online medical consultancy services by respondents

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
convenience	36	51.16
cannot afford doctors visit	2	2.85
doctors too busy	4	5.71
no time to visit a doctor	15	21.42
difficulty to get an appointment	3	4.28
feel uncomfortable when seeing a doctor	10	14.28
TOTAL	70	100.00

Source: Primary data

**Interpretation:** Table 3 reveals the reasons to choose online medical consultancy services by respondents. 51.16% of the respondents have stated convenience factor as the reason for choosing virtual consultancy services, 2.85% of the respondents are not being able to afford a doctor's visit while 5,71% of the respondents feel that doctors are too busy to answer questions in person, 21.42% of the respondents have difficulty to find time to visit a doctor, 4.28% of the respondents have stated difficulty to get an appointment, while 14.28% of the respondents feel uncomfortable when seeing a doctor.

Table 4  
Overall Satisfaction of Respondents with online/virtual medical consultancy services

Overall Satisfaction	Frequency	Percentage
Highly satisfied	19	27.14
Satisfied	32	45.72
No idea	4	05.71
Dissatisfied	9	12.86
Highly dissatisfied	6	08.57
Total	70	100.00

Source: Primary data

**Interpretation:** Table 4 reveals that 27.14% of the users have high level of satisfaction with online medical consultancy services, 45.72% are satisfied, 5.71% have no idea, while 12.86% are dissatisfied and 8.57% are highly dissatisfied with online medical consultancy services.

Table 5  
Patronage Intentions of Respondents towards online/virtual medical consultancy services

Patronage Intentions	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	37	52.86
No	23	32.86
Don't know	10	14.28
Total	70	100.00

Source: Primary data

**Interpretation:** Table 5 reveals that 52.86% of the respondents have intentions to patronize online medical consultancy, while 32.86% have no such intentions and 14.28% have no idea about it.

### Managerial implications

The following strategies can be used to entice patients towards online medical consultancy services.

- Necessary training is to be given both to the physician/doctor and patient to use microphones, web cameras and digital cameras in case of online medical consultancy services.
- The physicians/doctor should provide links to online resources such as informative web pages, images and photos to patients which might be time saving for the physician and it will also increase patients' knowledge. This can entice patients to use online medical consultancy services.
- Medical consultation is highly professional. In case of virtual medical consultancy physicians need to be credible or trustworthy to attract and retain patients. An important component of a physician-patient relation is trust. Ethical guidelines are to be followed by physicians to maintain confidentiality and privacy of the medical information of the patients.
- In case of online medical consultancy between the physician-patient, security issues such as encryption have to be regulated, routines for integration with medical records is to be established and reimbursement of online payment issues by patients are to be resolved.
- Patient evaluation, which is the feedback left on the platform by previous patients about the physician which is often displayed in the form of ratings, stars and reviews can also draw the attention of the patients during online medical consultancy. This feedback may serve as signals of service quality, which impact patients' willingness to adopt online medical consultancy .
- Patient-physician interaction is also an important feature as well. The frequency and depth of interaction on the platform show the ability and willingness of a physician to provide high-quality service, which may influence patients to use online medical consultation. Use of simple and

easily understood language in the answers can also help in retaining online users/patients.

- Web surveys could be an alternative to consider when it is important to get answers on sensitive issues such as an evaluation of patient satisfaction after an appointment with a physician.

## Conclusion

The Internet not only allows easy access to medical information but also to medical consultation. It is probable that in the near future an increasing number of doctors will adopt e-consultancy via the Internet to be a natural part of their communication with patients. In the new era of online technology medical consultancy services has become the new normal of working which can entice the users and create a competitive advantage. Therefore, it becomes imperative to understand users/patients satisfaction with virtual consultancy in the context of medical and health care services. This study has been conducted with this objective through questionnaire method and data has been collected from 70 respondents who use Skype or use mobile apps for virtual consultation in Chennai city. The findings of the study revealed that convenience factor is the reason to use online medical consultancy. Further, the study revealed that majority of respondents are satisfied with online health care services and they are interested to continue using online medical consultation in future also. By using enticing strategies the health care providers can attract new users/patients and make them remain loyal successfully.

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