Health Information Encountering on Social Media: An Exploratory Study*

소셜 미디어에서의 건강정보 조우에 대한 탐색적 연구

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ABSTRACT

Although health information encountering is a significant aspect of information behavior on social media, it has been understudied in the literature. The study aims to investigate the factors that influence health information encountering on social media in three contexts: environmental characteristics, personal characteristics, and network characteristics. Online surveys were conducted with social media users at a university in Seoul, South Korea. A total of 316 responses were collected, and hierarchical regression analysis was performed to test the hypotheses. Significant predictors affecting health information encountering included environmental characteristics, such as unexpected leads and trigger connections in social media; personal characteristics, such as frequency of health information seeking and perceived health status of users; and network characteristics, such as users' self-disclosure on social media. It contributes to the literature on health information-seeking behavior by shedding light on unintentional health information behavior, which is a more common behavior among users. The study highlights social media as a potential health information-seeking channel to effectively cope with emergent health issues and identifies the major factors affecting health information encountering on social media. This study draws on survey data collected in September 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the findings should be interpreted within this temporal context.

초 록

소셜 미디어에서의 건강정보 조우(encountering)는 정보행태의 중요한 측면임에도 불구하고, 의도적 정보탐색에 비해 기존 연구에서 충분히 다루어지지 않았다. 본 연구는 소셜 미디어 환경에서 건강정보 조우에 영향을 미치는 요인을 환경적 특성, 개인적 특성, 네트워크 특성의 세 가지 맥락에서 분석하는 것을 목적으로 한다. 이를 위해 대한민국 서울 소재 한 대학의 소셜 미디어 이용자를 대상으로 온라인 설문조사를 실시하여 총 316부의 응답을 수집하였고, 가설 검증을 위해 위계적 회귀분석을 수행하였다. 분석 결과, 소셜 미디어 내의 '의외성 유발(unexpected leads)'과 '조우 촉진 가능성(trigger connections)'과 같은 환경적 특성, 건강정보 탐색 빈도와 이용자가 인식하는 자신의 건강 상태와 같은 개인적 특성, 그리고 소셜 미디어에서의 '자기노출(self-disclosure)'과 같은 네트워크 특성이 건강정보 정보에 유의미한 영향을 미치는 요인으로 나타났다. 본 연구는 이용자에게 보다 일반적으로 나타나는 비의도적 건강정보 행태에 주목함으로써, 건강정보 탐색 행태 연구 분야에 이론적 기여를 한다. 또한 소셜 미디어가 신종·긴급 보건 이슈에 효과적으로 대응할 수 있는 잠재적 건강정보 탐색 채널임을 강조하고, 소셜 미디어에서의 건강정보 조우에 영향을 미치는 주요 요인을 규명하였다. 본 연구는 코로나19 팬데믹이 지속되던 2021년 9월에 수집된 설문 자료를 기반으로 하였으며, 연구 결과는 이러한 시기적 맥락을 고려하여 해석될 필요가 있다.

Keywords: information encountering, health communication, health information seeking behavior, social media, survey research
정보조우, 헬스 커뮤니케이션, 건강정보 탐색 행태, 소셜 미디어, 설문조사

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1. Introduction

Social media has revolutionized the way people communicate and interact with each other. It has also become an essential source of health information, with more people relying on social media platforms to find health-related information (Alzghaibi, 2023; Fox, 2011; Neely et al., 2021; Thackeray et al., 2013; Zhang, 2013). Social media provides a favorable environment for both providing and obtaining health information. From the perspective of health information providers, social media can be an effective channel to disseminate health information and health promotion campaigns over a wide range and to empower health information consumers (Chou et al., 2013; Neely et al., 2021; Yi, 2018). Meanwhile, from the perspective of health information consumers, participating in social media is the basis for maximizing the impact of health information sharing to meet both socio-emotional and information needs (De la Peña & Quintanilla, 2015; Hackman & Pember, 2016; Zhang et al., 2013; Zhao & Zhang, 2017). Social media's impact on people's health information-seeking behavior has been the focus of numerous studies. Previous studies on health information behavior have predominantly discussed intentional information seeking, while unintentional information behavior in social media environments has received less attention. The present study, thus, employs Erdelez's (1997) theory of information encountering in the context of social media to empirically examine unintentional health information behavior in digital environments. Information encountering is defined as the process of "finding interesting, useful or potentially useful information when looking for different, some other information, not looking for any information in particular or not looking for information at all" (Erdelez & Makri, 2020, 736).

One of the noteworthy information-seeking behaviors appearing in the social media environment is that the proportion of information obtained by chance is high (Chang et al., 2024; Khoo, 2014; Sun et al., 2013). Social media facilitates information encountering because of its features such as newsfeeds, which promote information browsing and sharing, help to form relationships between users, and provide personalized and up-to-date information (Dantonio et al., 2012; Lu, 2012; Panahi et al., 2016). A previous study found that 90% of respondents encountered at least one health-related topic by chance, compared to 65% who actively sought out health information (Kelly et al., 2010). Similarly, other studies have examined that accidental acquisition of health information is more common than intentional seeking across different health topics (Hirvonen et al., 2012; Pálsdóttir, 2010; Shim et al., 2018). Moreover, the continued increase of SNS use through smartphones has led to more opportunities to encounter information through SNS (Kim, 2019). In these contexts, it is essential to pay attention to users' health information encountered on social media to better understand consumer health information seeking in everyday life.

Although research on incidental health information acquisition has grown in recent years, it remains less extensively examined than intentional health information seeking. Moreover, few quantitative studies

have modeled how environmental, individual, and network factors jointly shape health information encountering. The present study, thus, aims to examine the experiences of information consumers who unintentionally obtain useful health information from social media. Specifically, the study addresses research questions as follows:

1) What kind of health information do users of social media encounter?
2) What factors affect social media users' encounters with health information?

By examining unintentional health information behaviors in the influential information environment of social media, the study can provide theoretical implications that have been understudied. The findings could help to identify the factors that affect users' health information encountering on social media, which could suggest practical insights for healthcare providers to develop effective health promotion strategies. Because the data were collected in 2021 under a pandemic information environment, the results represent a snapshot of Korean college students' health information encountering at that time. We discuss how this temporal context may influence interpretation.

2. Literature review

2.1 Information Encountering

Traditionally, research on information behavior has discussed information seeking as an individual's conscious and active behavior to satisfy their needs (Case & Given, 2016). However, finding information by chance is an important part of information behavior. Many studies have attempted to understand unintentional information acquisition (Erdelez, 1997; 2004; Foster, 2004; Savolainen, 1995; Williamson, 1998; Wilson, 1997).

Erdelez (1997) introduced the concept of information encountering as "memorable experiences of accidental discovery of useful or interesting information" (p. 412). In her early studies (Erdelez, 1997; 1999), she identified "information encountering" as consisting of four elements: the information user involved, the environment in which the user encounters information, the actual encountered information, and their information need that was satisfied. She ranked information users from "non-encounters" to "super-encounters" according to the frequency of these experiences and their cognitive or affective responses. This led to her finding that users with certain psychological states and individual characteristics (e.g., sensitivity to information, curiosity, desire to explore, interest in diverse areas) are likely to encounter information. In her later studies, she identified functional elements as "noticing," "stopping," "examining," "capturing," and "returning" (Erdelez, 2004) and contextual factors as user-related, information-related, task-related, and environment-related (Erdelez & Makri, 2020). The present study extends Erdelez's model of information encountering by incorporating the environmental factor framework proposed by McCay-Peet and Toms (2015) to explain

unintentional health information acquisition within social media environments. The environmental factors are further described in detail in the subsequent hypothesis section.

Other than information encountering, unintentional acquisition of information has been discussed as a variety of concepts, such as an accidental or opportunistic discovery of information (Erdelez & Makri, 2011; Williamson, 1998), incidental information acquisition (Heinström, 2006), non-directed monitoring (McKenzie, 2003), serendipity (Foster & Ford, 2003), and information scanning (Niederdeppe et al., 2007). These share common aspects of finding information and the unexpectedness and value involved, which conceptually corresponds to information encountering (Agarwal, 2015). In particular, studies have pointed out the need for an individual to perceive an experience as serendipitous for the process of serendipity to be complete (Makri & Blandford, 2012; McCay-Peet & Toms, 2015; Rubin et al., 2011).

The present study, therefore, uses “information encountering” to cover other related concepts of unintentional information acquisition that are characterized by finding information, perceived unexpectedness, and value. This is in accordance with its definition of “finding interesting, useful or potentially useful information when looking for different some other information, not looking for any information in particular or not looking for information at all” by Erdelez and Makri (2020, 736). For example, in a social media environment, these experiences would occur while users are searching for specific information on SNS, checking for updates through browsing their newsfeed, and communicating with friends.

2.2 Unintentional Acquisition of Health Information: Factors and Behaviors

Previous studies on health information behavior have often explored unintentional acquisition as information scanning, within the context of broader information acquisition behaviors. This has included information sourced from the internet (Askola et al., 2010; Basic & Erdelez, 2015; Ruppel, 2016; Shim et al., 2018; Tian & Robinson, 2009) or social media (Hackman & Pember, 2016; Kim, 2012; Syn & Kim, 2016; Thackeray et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2017; Zhang, 2013; Zheng, 2014).

Many of these studies have identified a significant relationship between the unintentional acquisition of health information and personal factors. For example, those who are female, young, highly educated (Nelissen et al., 2017; Ruppel, 2016; Tian & Robinson, 2009), and frequent users of information sources (Nelissen et al., 2017; Suh, 2015; Tian & Robinson, 2009) are more likely to encounter health information unintentionally. Health-related factors, such as cognitive ability (e.g., eHealth literacy) (Shim et al., 2018), psychological orientation (e.g., health consciousness, fear of cancer), and situation (e.g., health perception, cancer experience) (Nelissen et al., 2017; Suh, 2015) have also been found to influence unintentional acquisition. Other health-related

factors include health information-seeking experiences (Pálsdóttir, 2010; Ruppel, 2016; Shim et al., 2018; Tian & Robinson, 2009), enrollment in health education (Basic & Erdelez, 2015), and having a regular healthcare provider (Thackeray et al., 2013). These findings suggest that having a health information need or interest in the topic is essential for unintentional health information encountering to occur. Meanwhile, factors related to the information itself include the type of health information provider, one's trust in them, and topic sensitivity (Ruppel, 2016; Syn & Kim, 2016).

Several exploratory studies have also focused on diverse health information behaviors on social media, mostly among college students. These studies have identified some common themes. For instance, social media presents unique values as a health information source by developing networks between users. Users can communicate with friends or health groups, evaluate the credibility of information based on these communities, and feel positive motivation or pressure to improve their health from peer groups (Hackman & Pember, 2016). Furthermore, although social media has been used to obtain health information on general topics (Zhang, 2013), users rarely seek information related to actual health problems or sensitive topics, and many users were concerned about the credibility of the information based on different topics and providers (Hackman & Pember, 2016; Zhang et al., 2017; Zhang, 2013). Additionally, not many users actively shared their personal experiences, preferring passive acquisition due to the openness of the social media environment that caused them to worry about subjective norms or their portrayed images (Hackman & Pember, 2016; Thackeray et al., 2013; Zhang, 2013).

Meanwhile, health information behavior on social media among Korean college students exhibits a comparable pattern. Social media serves as a useful channel for obtaining general health information, such as healthy lifestyles or weight loss, and to identify others with similar experiences (Kim, 2012). Cross-cultural evidence further suggests that Korean users tend to place greater trust in experience-based, socially mediated health information compared to users in Western contexts, reflecting a distinctive orientation toward social networks and relational norms (Song et al., 2016; Yi, 2018). Within this context, when health issues are sensitive or when information originated from highly credible providers (e.g., medical professionals, healthcare institutions, or government agencies), students are more likely to engage passively, which is consistent with concerns about social norms, self-presentation, and appropriateness of participation (Syn & Kim, 2016).

More recent studies and reviews further emphasize social media's role as both an intentional and unintentional health information channel (Alzghaibi, 2023; Chang et al., 2024; Neely et al., 2021; Stifjell et al., 2025). The COVID-19 era has substantially increased individuals' reliance on social media as a primary source of health-related information (Alzghaibi, 2023; Neely et al., 2021), during which online health information scanning occurred more frequently than deliberate seeking (Chang et al., 2024). In particular, young adults are increasingly turning to social media

platforms for information, preferring them over traditional search engines (Stifjell et al., 2025). Recent evidence further suggests that unintentional acquisition in these environments is shaped by individual factors, including frequency of information seeking, perceived health status, and habitual patterns of social media use (Chang et al., 2024; Stifjell et al., 2025), as well as platform characteristics such as ease of use, interactive functionalities, and inclusive design (Chang et al., 2024; Stifjell et al., 2025). Network characteristics, such as expanding social media networks to include credible sources, also increase the likelihood that encountered health information is noticed and attended to (Neely et al., 2021).

3. Hypotheses

Based on previous research, the present study proposes hypotheses about the relationship between health information encountering on social media and environmental, personal, and network factors.

3.1 Environmental characteristics of social media

The environmental factors were drawn from previous studies that identified the external factors influencing serendipitous information encountering and developed an instrument to measure them (McCay-Peet et al., 2015; McCay-Peet & Toms, 2015). Information users are likely to experience information encountering in an environment that provides diverse and abundant resources and personalized information that satisfies individuals' interests or needs (Baek et al., 2017; Björneborn, 2017; Lu, 2012; Panahi et al., 2016; Taramigkou et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2018).

One example of such a trigger-rich (McCay-Peet et al., 2015) environment that initiates information encountering is the "information ground," in which health information encountering is facilitated through active sharing of information (Pálsdóttir, 2011). Meanwhile, in the process of serendipitous encountering, users make connections between triggers and their various needs, problems, interests, experiences, or knowledge to recognize the potential value of the encountered information (Makri & Blandford, 2012; Rubin et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2018). Making connections between diverse information resources is not only more frequent in such environments but also more meaningful and contextually rich. In particular, McCay-Peet and Toms (2015) emphasize that connection-enabling environments foster curiosity, attentional shifts, and openness, which in turn enhance the depth of serendipitous encounters. Similarly, Björneborn (2017) and Makri et al.(2014) highlight that social platforms with visualization tools and low interactional boundaries help users reinterpret information, recall prior experiences, and recognize new associations among ideas. Such environments, therefore, enrich users' cognitive engagement and increase the likelihood that serendipitous encounters will lead to valuable insights or actions.

A trigger- and connection-rich environment makes it easy for users to frequently come across diverse information through social interactions that lead to in-

formation encountering (Björneborn, 2017; Dantonio et al., 2012; McCay-Peet & Toms, 2015; Taramigkou et al., 2013). Thus, the study hypothesizes that the extent to which social media is trigger and connection rich will affect how frequently users encounter health information on that media:

H1a. The extent to which social media is trigger- and connection-rich will positively influence the frequency of health information encountering.

Users are more likely to encounter information when they receive assistance in paying attention to triggers that may satisfy their interests or needs within the vast amount of content available. Therefore, environments that highlight triggers (McCay-Peet et al., 2015) through sensory stimuli, such as visualization, links, or recommendations for resources, can facilitate information encountering by enabling users to recognize potentially valuable information (Björneborn, 2017; Jiang et al., 2015; Jiang et al., 2018; Rubin et al., 2011; Taramigkou et al., 2013). These stimuli in social media can remind users of their latent needs and efficiently alert them to recent trends in their areas of interest (Baek et al., 2017; Lu, 2012; Panahi et al., 2016; Rubin et al., 2011). Based on these findings, the present study hypothesizes that highlighting triggers is associated with information encountering:

H1b. The frequency of encountering health information on social media will be influenced by the extent to which triggers are highlighted.

Unexpectedness is a major component of serendipitous information encountering, as identified by previous studies (Makri & Blandford, 2012; McCay-Peet & Toms, 2015; Rubin et al., 2011; Taramigkou et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2018). These authors discussed the occurrence of chance, novelty, and surprise in various experiences of encountering, including the sources or methods in which the information was encountered and the content or value of the information itself. Thus, encountering is likely to happen in an environment where users often experience unexpected or surprising information (McCay-Peet et al., 2015).

H1c. The extent to which social media exposes users to unexpected information will affect how frequently they encounter health information.

3.2 Individual characteristics of social media users

Health information-seeking behavior is the purposeful and active behavior to find health information (Lambert & Loiselle, 2007; Niederdeppe et al., 2007). Although it is a concept contrary to information encountering, people who are highly active in seeking health information through diverse online and offline sources are more likely to encounter health information (Pálsdóttir, 2010; Ruppel, 2016; Shim et al., 2018; Tian & Robinson, 2009). These findings indicate that one's needs or interests that motivate health information seeking also influence information encountering or unintentional discovery of relevant

information. Thus, we can hypothesize as follows:

H2a. The frequency of seeking health information will affect how frequently users encounter health information on social media.

In the context of online or everyday information-seeking behavior, information literacy is closely related to personal factors that influence information encountering, such as background knowledge, sensitivity to information, and attitude toward information (Jiang et al., 2015; Rubin et al., 2011). Meanwhile, eHealth literacy is a cognitive ability related to health that includes six literacy types, including information literacy, media literacy, and health information literacy (Norman & Skinner, 2006). Previous findings have shown that individuals with higher eHealth literacy levels are more likely to encounter health information online (Shim et al., 2018). Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H2b. The eHealth literacy level of users will affect the frequency of their health information encountering on social media.

Information encountered by users is typically perceived as either interesting or helpful in solving their problems (Erdelez, 1999; Jiang et al., 2015). In the case of health information, a user's interest in specific health topics is crucial for the prepared mind to recognize the value of the information encountered (Basic & Erdelez, 2015; Tian & Robinson, 2009). This interest can be related to a user's health consciousness, which is a psychological orientation linked to their sense of responsibility for maintaining their health (Hong, 2015). Previous studies have shown that those with higher health consciousness are more likely to seek and scan health information from different sources, spend more time on various health topics, and have a stronger emotional response to the information (Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Hong, 2015; Suh, 2015). Thus, this study hypothesizes that:

H2c. The health consciousness level of the users will affect how frequently they encounter health information on social media.

In addition, a user's perceived health status is used to measure their prior health problems or explicit information needs related to their overall health condition, which is part of the prepared mind for information encountering (Lu, 2012; Rubin et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2018). Research has shown that there are differences in health information-seeking behavior based on users' perceived health status, with healthier individuals being less likely to encounter health information because they perceive it to be less useful or have reduced health information needs (Nelissen et al., 2017; Suh, 2015). Therefore, this study hypothesizes that:

H2d. The perceived health status of the users will affect how frequently they encounter health information on social media.

3.3 Network characteristics of social media users

Self-disclosure on social media refers to revealing personal information to unspecified individuals within a certain network (Krasnova et al., 2010). It fosters social interactions and information sharing between users, enriches social media content, and is the basis for personalized recommendations that help expand and strengthen one's network with similar interests or needs, affecting the content they are exposed to (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Chen, 2013; Krasnova et al., 2010). Previous studies have shown that users who disclose more on social media, especially on SNS, are more likely to encounter serendipitous information (Lutz et al., 2017). Moreover, factors such as personal relationships with information providers and friends who share similar health conditions or information needs influence the use of social media to look for health information (Syn & Kim, 2016; Zhang, 2013). Based on previous findings, this study hypothesizes that:

H3a. Users' level of self-disclosure that characterizes their social media network will affect how frequently they encounter health information through that media.

4. Methods

4.1 Data collection

The study recruited users with general information needs as well as users with health issues, because the purpose of the present study was to examine health information encountering in social media rather than intentional health information seeking. At the time of study design, 2019, the most recent national statistics indicated that Koreans' SNS usage rate was the highest for people in their twenties (82.3%) with Facebook (now Meta) (44.7%), Twitter (now X) (20.7%), and Instagram (18.1%) being the three most commonly used platforms (Kim, 2019). Based on these statistics, we conducted purposive sampling with college students in their twenties attending a university located in Seoul, Korea; the study was limited to users who had been using one of the three major pre-pandemic social media platforms in the year of 2021. Participants were recruited via university mailing lists, and online surveys were conducted by email for one week in September 2021. Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous. No personally identifiable information or sensitive health data were collected, and the general principles of informed consent and confidentiality were observed. An incentive (a 5,000 KRW Starbucks gift card) was provided on a first-come, first-served basis to some participants.

4.2 Instrument development

The study instrument was guided by prior studies, as presented in Table 2, which addressed information encountering as well as its related concepts, such as serendipity and health information behavior studies that discussed unintentional acquisition. The instru-

ment was reviewed by three faculty members in the field of information science and was piloted by ten college students to make improvements. It was composed of three parts: 1) questions related to demographic profile; 2) factors that influence health information encountering on social media (i.e., environmental characteristics of social media and individual and network characteristics of users); and specific encountering experiences (i.e., frequency of encountering, topics, and providers of the information). Most items in the questionnaire were measured by a five-point Likert scale, labeled from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” or from “never” to “very frequently.”

4.3 Data analysis

A total of 316 responses were valid and used for hypothesis testing (Nam & Yi, 2021). Of these, 294 responses that answered all the questions were used for frequency analysis, which was performed to identify the demographic characteristics of respondents, their social-media-using behavior, and their experiences of health information encountering in social media. Next, hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses in accordance with the theoretical framework, entering the variables sequentially in the following order: environmental factors, individual factors, and network factors.

5. Results

5.1 Demographic characteristics and social media use behavior

Frequency analysis of the demographic characteristics of the total 316 respondents indicated that they were approximately 23 years old on average (SD = 2.98), 114 people (36.08%) were male and 202 people (63.92%) were female. Regarding participants’social media use behavior, 210 people (66.46%) selected Instagram as the platform they most associated with information encountering, followed by 77 people (24.37%) who selected Facebook, and 29 people (9.18%) who selected Twitter. Most participants used the particular social media between 3.5 and 7 hours (115 people, 36.39%), and less than 3.5 hours (92 people, 29.11%) in a week. This was followed by participants who used between 7 and 10.5 hours (54 people, 17.09%), between 10.5 and 14 hours (29 people, 9.18%), and more than 14 hours a week (26 people, 8.23%).

5.2 Health information encountering on social media

The study measured the frequency of health information encountering on a particular social media with the Likert scale (from 1: “never” to 5: “very frequently”). As presented in Table 1, the total mean score of encountering frequency was 3.05 (SD = .95), and Facebook had the highest mean score of 3.12.

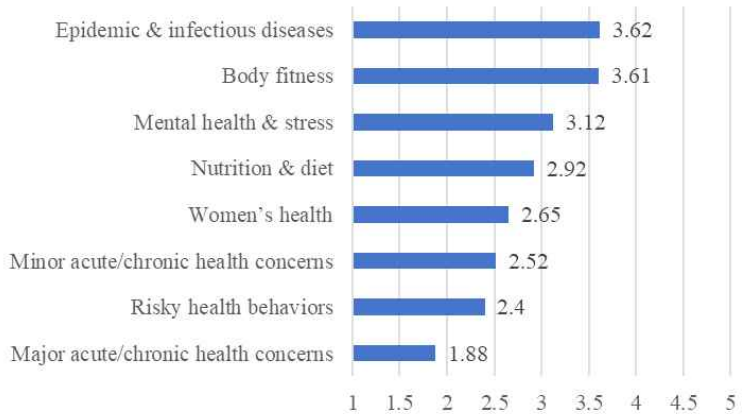
〈Table 1〉 The frequency of health information encountering on social media

Social media	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Instagram	210	3.02	.97	1.00	5.00
Facebook	77	3.12	.93	1.00	5.00
Twitter	29	3.08	.84	1.00	4.33
Total	316	3.05	.95	1.00	5.00

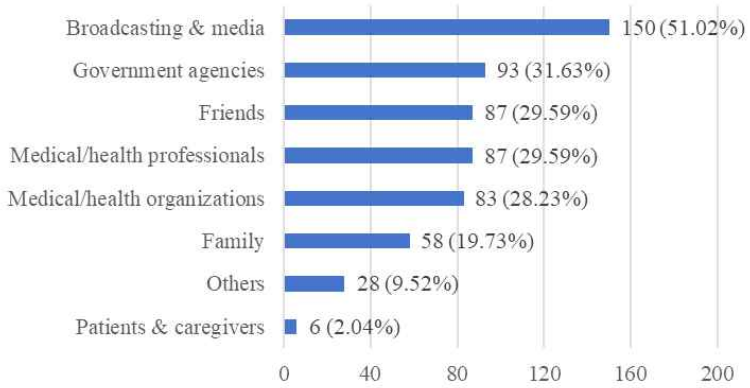
Note: Likert scale from 1 = never to 5 = very frequently was used.

To understand the specific encountering experiences on social media, the study measured the encountering frequency of the individual health information topic using a Likert-type scale (from 1: "never" to 5: "very frequently"). A total of 294 respondents had encountered an average of 6.18 topics (SD = 2.37) out of the total 8 topics categorized by Baxter et al. (2008). As shown in Figure 2, epidemic and infectious diseases (e.g., COVID-19, hepatitis B) and body fitness (e.g., exercise, body weight) were the topics that participants encountered most often, with a mean score of 3.62 and 3.61, and were encountered by 257 people (87.41%) and 264 people (89.80%). The prominence of epidemic and infectious diseases reflects the COVID-19 information environment of 2021, during which communicable disease topics were highly salient. This was followed by mental health and stress encountered by 247 people (84.01%) with a score of 3.12, and nutrition and diet by 252 people (85.71%) with a score of 2.92. The least encountered topic was major acute or chronic health concerns (e.g., cancer, major surgery), with a mean score of 1.88 and encountered by 159 people (54.08%).

Regarding health information providers, respondents had encountered information directly provided or



〈Figure 1〉 Health information topics encountered on social media (N=294). Likert scale from 1 = never to 5 = very frequently was used.



〈Figure 2〉 Health information providers encountered on social media (N=294). Respondents were allowed to choose more than one.

shared by an average of 2.01 sources (SD = 1.19) out of the total eight providers (Syn & Kim, 2016). As presented in Figure 2, broadcasting and media (e.g., health sections of newspapers, health-related television shows) were the health information providers from which the most respondents, 150 people (51.02%), encountered information. This was followed by, in descending order of frequency, government agencies (e.g., Ministry of Health and Welfare, Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Ministry of Food and Drug Safety); friends; medical or health professionals (e.g., doctors, therapist, health care workers); medical or health organizations (e.g., health service providers, health professional or supporting organizations); family and so on.

5.3 Reliability of variables

The present study used Cronbach's alpha to test the reliability of variables. Table 2 presents the definition of each variable and the test results. All the variables exceeded the cutoff value of 0.60.

5.4 Hypothesis testing

Table 3 presents the results of hierarchical regression analysis, including the independent variables that have significant effects on the frequency of health information encountering in social media ($F = 12.045$, $p < .001$). This model explains the effects of the environmental characteristics of social media, individual characteristics of social media users, and network characteristics of social media users on the frequency of health information encountering by 21.9% (Adj $R^2 = .219$).

Regarding H1a through H1c, only exposes users to unexpected information (H1c, $p = .002$, $\beta = .181$) has a significant effect on the frequency of health information encountering. The standardized coefficient ($\beta = .181$) indicates a moderate positive effect, suggesting that users who are more frequently exposed to unexpected content on social media are

〈Table 2〉 Definition of the variables and reliability analysis (Cronbach's a)

Variables	Definition	Items	Likert scale	a
trigger- and connection-rich	The extent to which the selected social media contains various useful or interesting resources and makes the relations between them apparent (McCay-Peet et al., 2015)	6	1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree	.848
highlights triggers	The extent to which the selected social media directs the user's attention to useful or interesting resources (McCay-Peet et al., 2015)	3		.635
exposes users to unexpected information	The extent to which the selected social media provides opportunities for unexpectedness (McCay-Peet et al., 2015)	5		.830
frequency of health information seeking	How frequently a user actively obtained online or offline health information in the past 12 months (Pálsdóttir, 2010)	4	1: never to 5: very frequently	.663
eHealth literacy	A user's perception of their ability to seek, evaluate, and use online health information (Norman & Skinner, 2006)	7	1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree	.893
health consciousness	The extent to which a user's interest in health is integrated into their everyday life (Dutta-Bergman, 2004)	3		.826
perceived health status	A user's perception of their overall health condition (Nelissen et al., 2017)	1	1: very unhealthy to 5: very healthy	–
self-disclosure	The extent to which a user discloses their personal information to others on social media (Krasnova et al., 2010; Lutz et al., 2017)	4	1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree	.831
frequency of health information encountering on social media	How frequently a user unintentionally obtained useful or interesting health information on the selected social media in the past 12 months (Heinström, 2006)	3	1: never to 5: very frequently	.859

〈Table 3〉 Hierarchical regression analysis for environmental, individual, network factors predicting health information encountering on social media

Factor	Variable	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	p
		B	Std. error	β		
Constant		-.234	.413		-.567	.571
Environmental	Trigger- and connection-rich	.111	.077	.087	1.446	.149
	Highlights triggers	-.034	.075	-.027	-.450	.653
	Exposes users to unexpected information	.232	.073	.181	3.180	.002**
Individual	Frequency of health information seeking	.245	.061	.209	4.000	<.001***
	eHealth literacy	.110	.064	.091	1.722	.086
	Health consciousness	.022	.080	.015	.274	.784
	Perceived health status	.159	.059	.137	2.676	.008**
Network	Self-disclosure	.161	.053	.165	3.014	.003**

Note. F value = 12.045 (p<.000), Adj R^2=.219
* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001, bold font: .05 < p < .1

considerably more likely to encounter health information unintentionally. As for H2a through H2e, three variables—frequency of health information seeking (H2a, $p < .001$, $\beta = .209$), eHealth literacy (H2b, $p = .086$, â = .091), and perceived health status (H2d, $p = .008$, $\beta = .137$)—showed significant or marginally significant effects on the frequency of health information encountering. The standardized coefficients indicate that health information seeking has the strongest positive effect ($\beta = .209$), while perceived health status shows a moderate positive effect ($\beta = .137$), and eHealth literacy demonstrates a weaker yet marginally significant effect ($\beta = .091$). These results suggest that users who actively seek health information, perceive themselves as healthier, and possess higher eHealth literacy are more likely to encounter health information unintentionally on social media. Regarding H3a, social media users'self-disclosure ($p = .003$, $\beta = .165$) also had a significant positive effect on the frequency of health information encountering. The standardized coefficient ($\beta = .165$) represents a moderate effect, indicating that users who engage in higher levels of self-disclosure on social media are more likely to experience unintentional health information encounters.

In conclusion, five hypotheses were supported, while three were not—those related to trigger- and connection-rich environments, highlighted triggers, and health consciousness. Among the significant predictors, the frequency of health information seeking ($\beta = .209$) exhibited the strongest positive effect on health information encountering, followed by exposure to unexpected information ($\beta = .181$), which indicated a moderate positive effect. Self-disclosure ($\beta = .165$) and perceived health status ($\beta = .137$) also demonstrated moderate but weaker positive effects.

6. Discussion

Social media has rapidly evolved as a major source of health information, distinct from traditional media and websites, by shaping new patterns of online health information behaviors. Within these environments, information encountering—the unintentional discovery of useful information—represents a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of users' health information behavior. While previous studies have mainly focused on intentional information seeking, this study examined the unintentional experiences of social media users, identifying how environmental, individual, and network characteristics influence health information encountering.

The findings revealed that the study participants occasionally encountered health information on social media within the past year of 2021, primarily related to health management, fitness, nutrition, mental health, and stress, while information on severe or chronic conditions was less frequently encountered. This pattern aligns with earlier research on college students' health information behavior (Baxter et al., 2008; Kim, 2012; Oh & Kim, 2014; Zhang, 2013). The prevalence of encounters involving mental health and stress suggests that these topics reflect heightened informational needs among young adults in Korea.

Hence, developing targeted health information services that address psychological well-being may be particularly beneficial.

The main sources of encountered information were authoritative providers (e.g., broadcast media, government agencies, medical professionals), supported by personal networks such as friends. This supports the notion that institutional actors can enhance public health communication by strategically using social media to deliver credible and engaging information.

6.1 Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, the results extend Erdelez's (1997) model of information encountering by confirming that environmental affordances—particularly exposure to unexpected information—play a significant role in facilitating unintentional information acquisition. This finding echoes Makri and Blandford's (2012) process-oriented view of serendipitous information behavior, which highlights the role of novelty and surprise in triggering meaningful encounters. The integration of McCay-Peet and Toms's (2015) environmental factor framework further clarifies that trigger-rich and connection-enabling environments in social media heighten the probability of encountering health-related content.

In addition, the relationship between information seeking and encountering (Pálsdóttir, 2010; Shim et al., 2018) found here supports Savolainen's (1995) Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) model, suggesting that habitual engagement with health topics expands one's readiness to process and recognize information serendipitously. Likewise, users with higher eHealth literacy were more capable of noticing and interpreting unintentional health information, reinforcing the view that literacy enhances serendipity preparedness.

6.2 Cultural and practical implications

The present study also contributes a culturally grounded understanding of health information behavior within the Korean social media landscape. Platforms such as Instagram (visual-centered and trend-driven) and Twitter (now X, conversational and issue-oriented) dominate young adults' social media use, where self-disclosure and network visibility serve as important cues for information diffusion. These characteristics suggest that Korean users' tendency to share lifestyle and well-being content—often indirectly related to health—creates fertile ground for unintentional encounters. Furthermore, Korean social norms emphasizing trust in institutional sources (Bae & Yi, 2019) and relational harmony (Yi, 2018) may shape how users evaluate or redistribute health content, differing from Western contexts where individual curiosity or exploration often drive serendipity.

Practically, the findings suggest that public health authorities and healthcare organizations should leverage social media environments that expose users to unexpected yet reliable information. Designing algorithms or recommendation systems that balance personalization with novelty by integrating semantic-distance-based suggestions and diversity-enhancing mechanisms (Taramigkou et al., 2013) can in-

crease the likelihood of valuable health encounters. Moreover, health campaigns on social media platforms could encourage users to disclose their health interests, which in turn would facilitate network-based diffusion of credible health information. Educational initiatives to enhance eHealth literacy would also strengthen users' ability to recognize, evaluate, and utilize health information encountered unintentionally.

6.3 Limitations

The study's temporal context is an important limitation. Social media affordances and usage patterns have evolved since the data were collected in September 2021, particularly with the growing prominence of TikTok and other short-form platforms. Accordingly, the findings may not fully reflect today's environment. Nevertheless, our dataset and findings offer enduring insights in the following context. Because this dataset captures Korean college students' behaviors during a transformative pandemic period, it provides a valuable baseline for future comparative studies examining post-pandemic shifts. Also, the study's theoretical model focuses on mechanisms of health information encountering across feed-based platforms, which conceptually extend to newer platforms with similar affordances. Most importantly, it is grounded in established information behavior theory rather than platform-specific statistics. As such, the theoretical associations among environmental exposure, individual preparedness, and network-related behaviors are likely to remain stable over time.

7. Conclusion

This study extends the existing literature on health information behavior by empirically examining unintentional health information encountering within social media environments. While prior studies have primarily focused on intentional health information seeking, this research highlights how environmental affordances, individual preparedness, and network engagement jointly shape unintentional exposure to health information. Specifically, health information encountering on social media was significantly influenced by exposure to unexpected information (environmental factor), frequency of health information seeking, perceived health status, eHealth literacy (individual factors), and self-disclosure (network factor).

These findings demonstrate that both cognitive preparedness and environmental serendipity contribute to users' likelihood of encountering useful health information. Importantly, users tended to acquire information about minor or lifestyle-related health concerns—such as fitness, diet, and stress—from both authoritative institutional sources (e.g., government agencies, media, health professionals) and personal networks.

By identifying these key factors, this study provides actionable insights for the design of digital health information seeking strategies. Public health authorities and platform designers can leverage environments that balance personalization and unexpectedness to promote incidental learning and exposure to credible information. In doing so, they

can enhance public engagement with reliable health resources while mitigating misinformation risks. Overall, this study contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of how unintentional information behavior operates in social media contexts and offers practical directions for developing evidence-based, trust-oriented health communication practices.

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