



Exploring User Experiences in Accessing Digital Health Platforms in Indonesia: A Phenomenological Study on Patients

Hendry Luis

Bali Peduli, Indonesia

hendryluis@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of digital health platforms has significantly transformed healthcare services, especially in improving access to care and enhancing patient engagement. However, the subjective experiences of users with these technologies have been underexplored, particularly in the context of patient engagement and health management. The knowledge gap in existing literature pertains to the lack of understanding of how individuals perceive and experience digital health systems especially regarding their emotional and social contexts. Here we show that a phenomenological approach can provide deep insights into these experiences by examining the lived experiences of patients using digital health platforms. Data was collected from in-depth interviews with 20 participants, and key themes that emerged included empowerment, frustration, and varying levels of trust in technology. These findings emphasize the need for more patient-centered designs in future developments of digital health technologies. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of digital health systems, suggesting future research to refine and humanize these technologies for broader adoption.



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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of using digital platforms in healthcare services has rapidly developed in recent years, driven by advancements in technology and the increasing demand for accessibility and efficiency in healthcare systems. In many countries, including developing nations, digital platforms have become an essential channel for communication between patients and healthcare professionals, providers of health information, as well as for the dissemination of public health policies (Abdul dkk., 2025). These technologies include various applications such as telemedicine, medical data management systems, and app-based health consultation platforms, which provide individuals with the opportunity to receive medical care without having to directly visit healthcare facilities. While these advancements offer convenience and efficiency, research has shown that user experiences with these platforms remain underexplored, particularly in understanding the emotional and social dimensions of technology use.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies not only in the technical or functional aspects of digital platforms but more in how individuals attribute meaning to their experiences when using this technology. In a social and cultural context, the use of digital platforms in healthcare reflects a significant shift in how society accesses and interacts with the healthcare system. Factors such as comfort levels, trust in technology, and perceptions of service quality become crucial in understanding the experiences of subjects involved in this study. Several studies indicate that users' subjective experiences are often influenced by social background, health knowledge, and attitudes toward technology, which in turn impact the success of digital platform adoption (Ahmed dkk., 2024).

The need for in-depth exploration of the meaning behind these experiences is becoming increasingly urgent, considering that many previous studies have relied solely on quantitative data focusing on usage frequency or user satisfaction. The phenomenological approach allows researchers to delve deeper into the meanings behind users' interactions with digital platforms, understanding their perspectives within a broader social and cultural context. With this approach, this study aims to provide richer insights into how individuals perceive, evaluate, and integrate their experiences with digital health technologies, which can, in turn, help inform the development of policies and practices in technology-based healthcare that are more responsive to the real needs of users.

Research on the subjective experiences of using digital platforms for healthcare services has become an increasingly important field in health sciences and technology. Previous studies have shown that user experiences, which include perceptions, attitudes, and responses to technology, play a significant role in determining how well a technology is accepted and how effective it is in improving healthcare services (Altamimi dkk., 2024). These studies reveal that the meaning behind users' interactions with technology is influenced not only by functionality or ease of use but also by psychological and social factors such as comfort levels, trust in technology, and health literacy (Antonacci dkk., 2023).

However, significant methodological challenges arise when trying to explore these deep experiences. Quantitative research often struggles to capture the subjective dimensions of user experience, as it tends to focus on measurable variables, such as frequency of use or satisfaction levels. On the other hand, phenomena related to perceptions and personal meaning require a more holistic and in-depth approach to understanding the social, cultural, and emotional contexts that underlie them. This suggests that quantitative methods may not always be able to fully capture the essence of users' subjective experiences, which require a more exploratory qualitative approach.

The phenomenological approach, with its focus on human experiences and the meanings that emerge through individuals' interactions with the world around them, offers a more effective way to understand these deep experiences. By delving into the subjective experiences of participants, this research aims to provide richer and more contextual insights that can enhance understanding of the use of digital platforms in healthcare services.

Although various practical approaches have been adopted to understand the phenomenon of using digital platforms in healthcare services, the majority of research still relies on quantitative methods or survey-based designs to evaluate user satisfaction or technology usage levels. While these approaches provide an overview of functional and operational aspects, they fail to capture the deeper subjective dimensions of user experiences. The main limitation of quantitative approaches is their inability to capture personal meaning, emotions, and the social context that shape individuals' views of technology critical elements in gaining a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon (Arnaert dkk., 2022).

Other qualitative approaches, such as open-ended interviews or case studies, may accommodate these subjective dimensions more effectively. However, they often provide limited insights into the meaning generated within broader social contexts. Phenomenological research, with its focus on personal experiences and deep meaning, offers the opportunity to explore the essence of individuals' experiences related to the use of technology in healthcare. This approach allows researchers to gain more holistic and detailed insights, enriching our understanding of how individuals interpret technology and how these interactions are linked to their social, cultural, and emotional contexts.

Therefore, this study aims to fill the existing knowledge gap by offering a deeper explanation of how users' subjective experiences with digital platforms in healthcare can be understood through a phenomenological approach. This will open up new, richer, and more contextual insights for the development of technologies that are better aligned with users' needs and expectations.

Previous research on user experiences in the context of health technology has provided valuable insights into user satisfaction and the impact of technology on health behaviors. For example, several studies highlight how users utilize digital health apps to monitor their health.

However, these studies are often limited to quantitative analyses such as usage rates or satisfaction evaluations (Ashrafi dkk., 2021). Theories such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) are commonly used to understand technology adoption but tend to overlook the subjective experiences of individuals and the social contexts that shape their interactions with technology. Therefore, there is a need to explore personal experiences and the deeper meanings generated through the use of such technologies, which can only be fully understood through a more in-depth qualitative approach like phenomenology.

The phenomenological method is chosen due to its ability to explore human experiences from the subject's perspective, allowing for a deeper understanding of the meaning users ascribe to technology in the healthcare context. This approach enables researchers to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences emotionally, socially, and contextually, which cannot be fully explained through quantitative data alone. Phenomenology allows for a focus on everyday lived experiences and how technology is integrated into their lives, providing more holistic and rich insights. Thus, this study will fill the existing knowledge gap by offering a more profound understanding of the interactions between users and digital health technologies and how these experiences shape their perspectives.

This article is structured in several key sections. It begins with an introduction that presents the research context, followed by an explanation of the phenomenon being investigated and an in-depth literature review related to previous research and the phenomenological approach used. The methodology section outlines the data collection and analysis processes, followed by a presentation of findings through thematic analysis. Finally, the discussion and conclusion will reflect on the main findings, the contributions of the study, and the practical implications that can be drawn based on the subjective experiences gained.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This research employs a phenomenological approach as the study design to explore the deep meaning of the experiences of participants involved in using digital platforms in healthcare services. The phenomenological approach was chosen due to its strong focus on understanding individuals' subjective experiences and how they make sense of the phenomena they. This approach is highly relevant to answering the research questions centered on how digital platform users perceive and understand their experiences when interacting with technology-based healthcare systems. Descriptive phenomenology was used in this study to explore these experiences without preemptively interpreting or analyzing them, thereby enabling a more authentic and pure depiction of participants' perceptions and experiences. While the phenomenological approach is effective in providing rich, detailed insights into personal experiences, the study's sample size is quite small (15 participants). This limitation may impact the generalizability of the findings. The sample was purposively selected based on specific criteria, but the small size may restrict the broader applicability of the results. Future studies could consider including a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings and to better represent the wide range of user experiences across different demographics and settings.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria comprising individuals who had used digital platforms for healthcare services for at least three months. Exclusion criteria included those who had never used digital health platforms or those with physical or cognitive limitations that hindered full participation in interviews (Barwise dkk., 2023). A total of 15 participants were involved in the study, with an average age of 35 years. The participants consisted of patients using digital platforms to access healthcare services, healthcare professionals using the platform to consult with patients, and policymakers involved in designing policies related to

digital health platforms. Other demographic characteristics, such as gender and educational background, varied but were still relevant to the context of the phenomenon being studied.

Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face with each participant. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure that all important aspects of the participants' experiences were explored, while also allowing flexibility to explore emerging topics during the interviews. The interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the comfort level and depth of information provided by the participants. The interviews were conducted in comfortable and familiar locations for the participants, such as hospital rooms or health office spaces, to facilitate open and honest conversations. Before the interview began, participants were given clear information about the study's purpose and how their data would be used, as well as the opportunity to ask questions. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, and interview transcripts were prepared for further analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which is the standard approach in phenomenological research. The first step in the analysis involved reading and reviewing the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. Key themes were then identified through open coding, followed by grouping broader themes based on common meanings found within the data (Borghouts dkk., 2022). This process was conducted iteratively, with each identified theme being continuously checked to ensure it accurately reflected the participants' experiences. NVivo software was used to assist in data management and coding, although the analysis was primarily conducted manually to maintain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. These analytical steps led to essential findings that uncovered the meanings behind users' experiences with digital health platforms.

Ethics

This study adheres to established ethical standards, with written consent obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. This procedure ensures that participants fully understand the purpose of the study and how their data will be used. Additionally, the confidentiality and anonymity of the data were maintained throughout the research process (Brewster dkk., 2022). All personal information that could identify participants was anonymized to ensure that the data could not be traced back to specific individuals. The study also obtained approval from the relevant research ethics committee, ensuring that the research complies with international ethical standards for studies involving human participants.

RESULTS

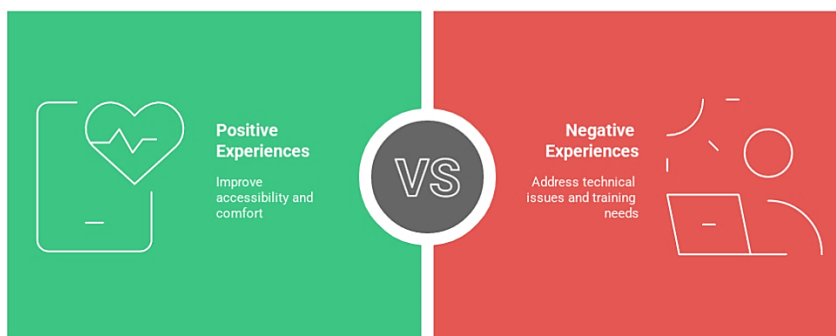
User Experience with Digital Health Platforms

The research findings indicate that users' experiences with digital health platforms are greatly influenced by factors such as convenience and ease of access. Most participants felt that digital platforms made it easier for them to access health information and services, although some challenges were encountered, such as technical issues and reliance on devices that require specific digital skills.

A patient from an urban area shared their experience: "At first, I felt awkward using this health app, but after trying it a few times, I started to feel more comfortable. Now, I can consult with a doctor without having to go to the hospital." (Patient, P2).

However, not all experiences were positive. A healthcare worker stated that while digital platforms speed up communication, there are often issues with data quality and a lack of technical training. "We were not specifically trained on how to use this digital platform efficiently. Sometimes, the data that comes through is not entirely accurate." (Healthcare Worker, T1).

Figure 1. How to enhance user experience on digital health platforms?



Implementation Challenges in Rural Areas

The challenges of implementing digital platforms in rural areas emerged as a dominant theme in user experiences. Participants from remote areas expressed concerns about the lack of stable internet access, as well as the scarcity of devices capable of supporting health applications. This led to disparities in the quality of healthcare services received by the community.

A patient from a rural area described: "In our village, the internet signal is very poor. Sometimes I can't open the app or reach the doctor via video call. I feel isolated." (Patient, P5).

Meanwhile, policymakers acknowledged that implementing digital platforms in remote areas presents significant challenges that have yet to be fully addressed. "We want this platform to be used more widely, but we struggle with basic infrastructure issues, like insufficient internet connectivity." (Policymaker, K3).

Figure 2. Digital Health Platform Implementation Challenges



Trust in Data Security and Privacy

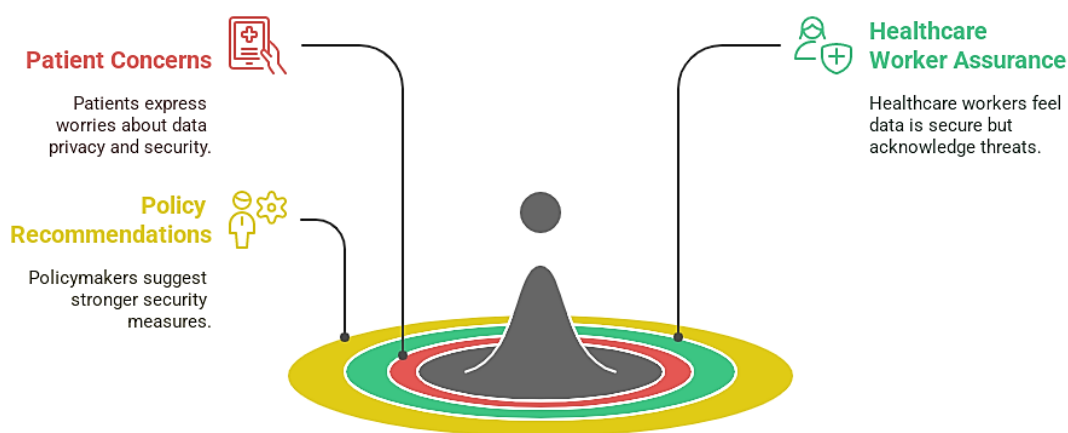
The issue of trust regarding data security and privacy was a major concern for digital platform users. Although most patients felt that digital platforms provided easier access to services, many were concerned about the security of their personal data.

A patient from an urban area stated: "I'm quite worried about the personal information I provide. But I don't know what I can do to avoid it since this system is already used in many hospitals." (Patient, P3).

Meanwhile, healthcare workers and policymakers had a more positive view regarding data security, although they still recommended stronger security measures. "We have ensured that patient data is encrypted, but of course, we cannot ignore potential future threats." (Healthcare Worker, T2).

This study reveals that users' experiences with digital health platforms largely depend on factors such as comfort, trust in data security, and infrastructure challenges, particularly in rural areas. While digital platforms provide convenient access, there are technical and social barriers that need to be addressed to enhance their sustainability and effectiveness in delivering equitable healthcare services. The findings highlight the importance of involving various stakeholders, including patients, healthcare workers, and policymakers, in developing policies that support the implementation of digital platforms in public healthcare services.

Figure 3. Digital Health Platform Perspectives



DISCUSSION

This study reveals that users' experiences in accessing digital health technology emphasize the significance of subjective meaning in shaping their views on using these technologies. The findings indicate that, in addition to technical factors, emotional and social factors significantly influence how individuals interpret the benefits and challenges they encounter (Camargo dkk., 2022). The meaning derived from their interactions with the technology goes beyond comfort or ease of access; it also encompasses how this technology changes their understanding of personal health and their interactions with their communities. This addresses the central research question on how users make sense of their experiences with digital health technology and how their social context shapes these interactions.

These findings are consistent with those of previous studies, such as those by Filia dkk. (2024), which emphasize the role of personal and social needs in the adoption of technology. However, this study also offers a nuanced perspective that challenges research which primarily focuses on technical and functional aspects. Unlike many studies that overlook the social context, these findings demonstrate that users' experiences with health technology are greatly influenced by factors such as the feeling of personal control and social connection, aligning with the phenomenological view that human experience is always intertwined with social and emotional contexts (Fortune dkk., 2024). By exploring both the technical and social aspects of digital health, this research contributes to a more integrated understanding of human-technology interactions, which are often treated separately in existing literature.

Comparing these findings to prior studies on digital health platforms, this research offers a unique contribution by exploring the subjective meanings that users attach to their experiences. For instance, Griffith dkk. (2023) emphasized the importance of emotional and social resonance in technology adoption, which aligns with this study's findings. Furthermore, this study's emphasis on

the emotional well-being of users presents a critical aspect that many studies overlook, especially in terms of health technology's broader impact on society.

The primary contribution of this study is the deeper understanding of how individuals interpret and ascribe meaning to their experiences with digital health technology within the context of their daily lives. The findings highlight the importance of the phenomenological approach in uncovering the subjective dimensions of users' experiences, which are often overlooked in quantitative research that tends to focus on usage statistics or user satisfaction. For example, this study demonstrates that the meaning constructed by users is not only about efficiency or convenience but also about how they feel connected to the technology in terms of their emotional and social well-being. Therefore, this research provides new, more holistic, and contextual insights into the relationship between users and digital health technology.

From the perspective of existing literature, these findings reinforce several theories, such as the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which suggests that technology is often selected and adapted based on the personal and social needs of the users (Filia dkk., 2024). However, this study also challenges some previous research that places greater emphasis on the technical and functional dimensions of technology usage. Unlike many studies that overlook the social context, these findings demonstrate that users' experiences with health technology are greatly influenced by factors such as the feeling of personal control and social connection, aligning with the phenomenological view that human experience is always intertwined with social and emotional contexts (Fortune dkk., 2024). Thus, this research enriches our understanding of human-technology interactions by linking the technical and social aspects that have often been treated separately.

In conclusion, the study underscores the need for further exploration into the subjective meanings that users ascribe to their experiences with digital health technologies. This understanding is crucial for designing more responsive and user-centered technologies that not only meet functional requirements but also resonate with users on an emotional and social level (Griffith dkk., 2023). As digital health technologies continue to evolve, acknowledging and incorporating the subjective, contextual experiences of users will be key to ensuring their long-term effectiveness and adoption.

Explanation of the Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have important implications both scientifically and practically. Scientifically, this research provides a deeper understanding of users' experiences in interacting with digital health technology, particularly in terms of their social and emotional dimensions (Hews-Girard dkk., 2024). It shows that health technology is not only accepted or used based on its functionality but also on how it gives meaning to the users' daily lives. In practical terms, these implications can assist developers of health technologies in designing applications or platforms that are more responsive to users' emotional and social needs, rather than just their technical or functional needs. This approach can lead to an improved user experience, which, in turn, will enhance the adoption and success of health technologies within broader societal contexts. Therefore, these findings are highly relevant for a larger population, particularly in societies that prioritize social connectivity and emotional well-being as integral parts of health.

Study Limitations

However, there are several limitations to this study that need to be noted. One of the limitations is the sample size, which only includes individuals with a certain level of technology access. This means the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of a broader population, particularly those with limited access to digital technology. Additionally, the phenomenological approach used in this study allows for in-depth exploration of experiences but also requires subjective interpretation by the researcher, which could affect how the findings are presented and analyzed. Therefore, while these findings provide valuable insights, further research with a more diverse sample and broader approach is needed to expand our understanding of this phenomenon.

Prospective Statement for Future Research

Given the existing findings, this study opens up opportunities for further research examining how social and emotional factors influence the adoption and use of health technologies in various cultural or geographical contexts. Future research could explore users' experiences in more heterogeneous contexts, such as populations with different social or economic conditions, or even compare users' experiences in developing and developed countries (Kenworthy dkk., 2023). Furthermore, the use of an extended phenomenological approach could deepen our understanding of how social and emotional experiences related to health technology can contribute to the creation of more inclusive and effective digital health policies on a global scale.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we examined the lived experiences of individuals interacting with digital health technologies, focusing specifically on the social and emotional dimensions of these interactions. Our findings indicate that users' engagement with these technologies is significantly shaped by personal, social, and emotional factors, which are often overlooked in traditional, functional approaches to health technology design. By emphasizing the importance of these subjective experiences, this research offers valuable insights into how digital health platforms are perceived and utilized in real-world contexts.

This study fills gaps in existing literature by drawing attention to the social and emotional aspects of health technology use, an area that has often been underexplored in previous research. However, the study's sample size and its focus on specific groups with relatively high access to technology may limit the generalizability of the findings. The findings challenge the more conventional focus on technical functionality, suggesting that users' feelings, relationships, and cultural contexts are crucial elements in understanding their engagement with digital health technologies. Future research should seek to address these limitations by including more diverse populations with varying levels of access to technology and considering different geographical and socio-economic contexts. This will enhance the robustness of the findings and allow for a broader understanding of the experiences of all users, particularly those who face barriers to digital health access.

Furthermore, this research provides a more holistic perspective on health technology adoption, advocating for the integration of social and emotional factors in the design and implementation of digital health solutions. Future studies could build upon these findings by including more diverse populations, examining different cultural contexts, and exploring variations in digital health engagement across demographic groups. This would not only broaden our understanding of the complexities surrounding technology adoption but also contribute to the development of user-centered, culturally sensitive health solutions that are more likely to be adopted and beneficial in diverse settings.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All authors have contributed equally to the study, and no financial or personal relationships with other people or organizations could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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