
Emotional and Psychological Safety in Digital Transformation of Healthcare



The digital transformation of healthcare is reshaping the way health services are delivered, improving access, diagnostics, and treatment. Digital technologies (DTs) enhance autonomy and participation in care, offering significant benefits to healthcare providers and recipients. However, a crucial aspect that influences the effectiveness of this transformation is perceived safety, i.e. how safe individuals feel when interacting with these digital systems. A recent review published in *BMJ Health & Care Informatics* explores the factors influencing perceived safety in the context of healthcare digitisation, the role of digital literacy, and the broader impact of DT on the healthcare ecosystem over the next five years. It aims to identify key considerations for policymakers, educators, and healthcare practitioners to facilitate an equitable and psychologically safe transition to digital healthcare.

Key Factors Influencing Digital Transformation in Healthcare

Perceived safety in healthcare's digital transformation is a complex construct, influenced by various factors at individual, organisational, and system levels. Trust, transparency, accessibility, and autonomy are critical determinants that affect how users perceive the safety of digital technologies. For instance, when healthcare digital tools are user-friendly and tailored to specific needs, they facilitate a feeling of safety and empowerment. However, a lack of tailored features or complex interfaces can create apprehension and hinder perceived safety.

Ethical considerations and data security are also pivotal. Ethical standards regarding the use of DTs must be maintained to ensure data privacy and protection against cyberattacks, as failures in these areas can diminish trust. The potential for a digital gap between different demographic groups due to digital literacy disparities also presents a challenge. Ensuring that diverse user needs are addressed and that no group is marginalised in access to digital health resources is vital for maintaining perceived safety.

Impact of Digital Literacy on Perceived Safety

Digital literacy, encompassing the ability to use, understand, and interact with digital technologies, is fundamental to perceived safety. Higher digital literacy contributes to greater trust in DTs, enhanced self-confidence in using them, and better recognition of their benefits. Promoting digital health literacy throughout society is critical for fostering an environment where users feel safe and supported when engaging with DTs.

However, the generational digital gap is a concern, with digitally literate users (often termed "digital natives") experiencing greater ease in adopting DTs than those less familiar. Moreover, as the complexity of DTs evolves, continuous education and support for all users are necessary. Professionalism in designing DTs and the availability of human support play a significant role in perceived safety; users must feel confident in their ability to navigate digital health services without fear of exclusion or error.

Healthcare professionals must be equipped with adequate digital skills to support patients effectively. The need for comprehensible communication and user-friendly DT interfaces cannot be understated, as clarity and simplicity foster emotional and psychological safety. Overcoming these digital literacy challenges ensures that DTs enhance rather than hinder the overall healthcare experience.

Consequences of Digital Transformation Scenarios

The future scenarios of DTR encompass both positive and negative projections. The best-case scenario (BS) anticipates improved equity, autonomy, and the inclusion of reliable, transparent, and user-centred DTs. Here, digital literacy across the population would lead to high acceptance and perceived safety, fostering an environment where DTs are integrated seamlessly into healthcare delivery.

In contrast, the worst-case scenario (WS) suggests a further digital divide, with limited access and growing mistrust towards DTs. This could arise from insufficient knowledge, lack of support, and inadequate handling of ethical considerations. The resulting consequences would be

increased feelings of exclusion among certain groups, reduced effectiveness of healthcare services, and potential harm to patient safety. In such a scenario, the lack of perceived safety could ultimately compromise healthcare outcomes, further highlighting the need for responsible and inclusive DTR.

The trend scenario (TS) falls between the two extremes, where perceived safety has a mixed impact, depending on personal digital competencies and systemic changes. Although some improvements are expected, such as growing digital literacy and improved DTs, the challenge remains to provide equal access and ensure DTs are suitable for everyday use in healthcare.

The digital transformation of healthcare holds great promise for improving health outcomes and accessibility. However, perceived safety is pivotal in ensuring DTs' successful adoption and use. Influencing factors such as trust, transparency, accessibility, and digital literacy must be addressed to promote emotional and psychological safety for all users. Without proper attention to these aspects, DTR could exacerbate inequalities and hinder healthcare delivery. It is crucial for policymakers, healthcare professionals, and educators to take proactive steps to enhance digital literacy, ensure ethical use, and provide accessible, user-centred digital solutions. By doing so, the potential benefits of healthcare digitisation can be fully realised, ensuring a safe, inclusive, and effective transformation for the future.

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