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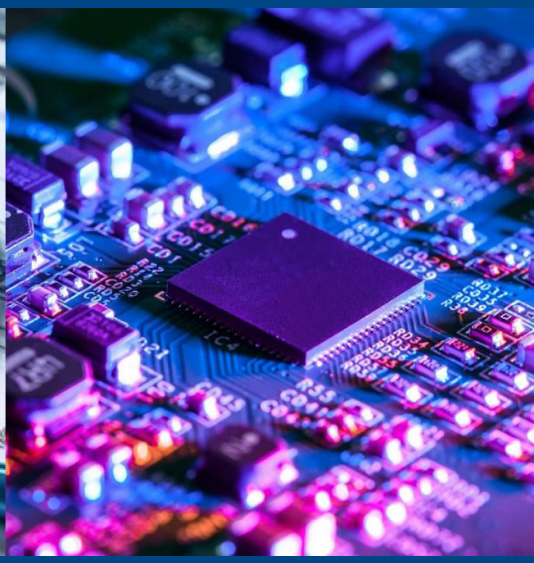

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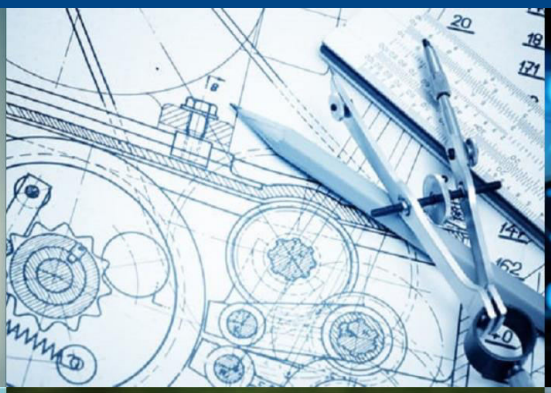

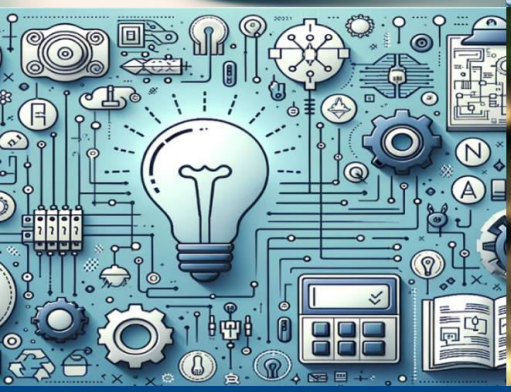

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Online Health Information Risk Perception and Verification Behavior: A Review Study

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ABSTRACT: With the deep integration of the Internet and social media into health communication contexts, channels for public access to health information have continuously expanded. However, issues such as uneven information quality and the widespread dissemination of misleading or false information have increasingly intensified, making online health information risk an important factor influencing individual health decision-making. From the perspective of health information behavior research, this study systematically reviews twenty relevant domestic studies and examines the formation mechanisms and behavioral response pathways of online health information verification behavior based on risk perception. The findings indicate that risk perception serves as a key antecedent triggering health information verification behavior. When confronted with conflicting or uncertain health information, individuals typically engage in multi-source searching, information comparison, and credibility evaluation to verify information, which subsequently leads to differentiated behavioral responses such as information adoption, continued information seeking, dissemination, or avoidance. In addition, emotional factors, health information literacy, and social relationship networks play significant moderating roles in the verification process. Based on these findings, this study proposes an analytical framework of "risk perception–verification behavior–behavioral response," aiming to provide theoretical support for online health information governance and future research on artificial intelligence–related health information risks

KEYWORDS: Online health information; Health information behavior; Risk perception; Information verification behavior; Health communication

I. INTRODUCTION

Online health information has become an important source through which the public acquires health knowledge and forms health-related decisions. However, the diversity of information sources, variability in information quality, and divergence of viewpoints have made information risk an unavoidable experience for users. A substantial body of research indicates that health information in online environments is often characterized by uneven quality, complex information types, and rapid dissemination. During information searching and exposure, users are frequently confronted with misinformation, information overload, and conflicting viewpoints, which increase uncertainty and risk perception and subsequently influence users' attitudes and behavioral choices [1–3]. Within the context of the infodemic, studies have demonstrated that the adoption intention of corrective health information is closely associated with cognitive processing modes (systematic versus heuristic processing) and risk-related variables such as perceived information overload and misinformation perception, suggesting that risk perception has become a critical entry point for understanding online health information behavior [1].

When perceived risk increases, information verification gradually emerges as an important coping-oriented information behavior. Verification behavior generally refers to users' efforts to search for, compare, and validate health claims through multiple information sources in order to reduce uncertainty and form more reliable judgments. Experimental studies have shown that users primarily rely on search engines when verifying online health information, employing keyword combinations, interrogative queries, and declarative expressions, while continuously adjusting search strategies through query reformulation and narrowing techniques. The evaluation of information credibility mainly depends on comprehensibility, consistency across information sources, and internal informational characteristics [4]. Meanwhile, exposure to conflicting health information can lead to conceptual ambiguity, increased confusion, and weakened health beliefs, thereby strengthening users' motivation to engage in verification and repeated searching

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behaviors [3]. Therefore, examining online health information behavior from the integrated perspective of risk perception–verification behavior provides an effective approach for understanding how users cope with uncertainty in digital health environments.

Furthermore, risk perception and verification behaviors do not occur in isolation but are embedded within broader behavioral chains involving attitude formation, information adoption, and continued information seeking. Research on online health communities suggests that users' health information attitudes consist of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral adoption components, in which cognitive evaluations—such as perceived information quality, utility value, and source credibility—together with emotional responses influence users' processing strategies and adoption tendencies [5]. In social media contexts, a transformation relationship exists between health information adoption and continued searching: perceived usefulness promotes adoption, satisfaction facilitates continued searching, whereas perceived risk tends to inhibit both processes indirectly, indicating that risk-related variables may play a central role in the behavioral chain linking adoption, re-searching, and verification [2]. Moreover, on strong-tie platforms such as WeChat, older adults' health information sharing and adoption behaviors exhibit a clear pattern of relational gatekeeping, whereby individuals share information with trusted social contacts to seek confirmation and reduce uncertainty, providing important insights into the socialized pathways of verification behavior [6].

Based on the above research foundation, this study conducts a narrative review and conceptual integration grounded in existing literature, focusing on risk perception and verification behavior in online health information environments. Specifically, this study seeks to address three research questions:
(1) What informational, individual, and contextual factors primarily trigger online health information risk perception [1,3]?
(2) What processes, strategies, and evaluative cues characterize verification behavior in online contexts [4]?
(3) How does risk perception facilitate or inhibit verification behavior and interact with attitude formation, information adoption, and continued searching behaviors [2]?
The contribution of this study lies in systematically synthesizing key concepts and research trajectories related to the "risk perception–verification behavior" relationship without conducting quantitative testing, and in proposing a preliminary theoretical support framework and intervention implications for subsequent research on risk identification and design intervention of algorithmic hallucinations in older adults' health information within multimodal environments [7].

II. CORE CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

To systematically understand users' risk perception and verification behavior in online health information environments, it is necessary to clarify key concepts and establish an analytical perspective grounded in existing health information behavior research. Although prior studies have examined information adoption, information seeking, and information dissemination from different perspectives, collectively they provide an important theoretical foundation for understanding the relationship between risk perception and verification behavior.

2.1 The Connotation of Online Health Information Risk Perception

Risk perception refers to individuals' subjective judgments regarding the potential misleading nature, uncertainty, or decision consequences of health information encountered during information exposure. Within online health information environments, risk originates not only from diseases themselves but increasingly from variations in information quality and cognitive uncertainty. Studies have shown that exposure to information overload or misinformation significantly increases users' perceived risk, thereby influencing their willingness to adopt health information [1].

From the perspective of formation mechanisms, online health information risk perception mainly manifests in three contextual forms. First, information quality risk, arising from insufficient source credibility or difficulty in assessing informational accuracy; second, information conflict risk, whereby inconsistent viewpoints across information sources lead to cognitive ambiguity and heightened confusion; and third, cognitive processing risk, resulting from limited information literacy that constrains users' ability to conduct effective evaluation [3]. Moreover, individuals experiencing health anxiety tend to demonstrate stronger information dependence and higher risk sensitivity under cognitive bias and emotional influence, often exhibiting repetitive searching and continuous verification behaviors [8].

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Therefore, risk perception can essentially be understood as a form of perceived uncertainty jointly shaped by the information environment and individual capability, functioning as a critical trigger for subsequent information behaviors.

2.2 Conceptualization and Process Characteristics of Verification Behavior

Verification behavior refers to the process by which individuals actively confirm the reliability of health information through information retrieval, multi-source comparison, and authenticity assessment when encountering doubtful or potentially risky information. Compared with general information seeking, verification behavior is characterized by an explicit validation orientation aimed at reducing cognitive uncertainty.

Experimental research indicates that users typically rely on search engines to conduct secondary searches during verification processes and continuously revise cognitive judgments through keyword adjustment, source expansion, and result comparison [4]. In practice, users tend to evaluate whether information is understandable, consistent with other sources, and logically coherent, suggesting that verification behavior fundamentally represents a process of credibility assessment [4].

Meanwhile, verification is not always achieved through technological means alone. Within social media environments, some users—particularly older adults—engage in relational verification by consulting family members or acquaintances, relying on social trust as a substitute for professional judgment to reduce decision-making risks [6]. Consequently, verification behavior encompasses both technical verification pathways and socially mediated verification pathways.

2.3 Theoretical Linkages Between Risk Perception and the Information Behavior Chain

Existing research generally conceptualizes health information behavior as a dynamic process rather than a single action, involving attitude formation, information adoption, and continued behavioral engagement. Studies on online health communities indicate that users' health information attitudes consist of three interconnected components—cognitive evaluation, emotional response, and behavioral intention—among which perceived credibility and utility directly influence adoption decisions [5].

Building upon this foundation, research in social media contexts demonstrates a clear transformation relationship between information adoption and continued searching: perceived usefulness promotes information adoption, whereas perceived risk indirectly suppresses both adoption and continued searching behaviors [2]. This suggests that when risk perception increases, individuals may adopt two divergent strategies: either strengthening information confirmation through verification or shifting toward information avoidance due to excessive cognitive burden [9].

Furthermore, the emergence of artificial intelligence–generated health information has intensified the significance of risk perception. Studies reveal that artificial intelligence literacy and health information literacy enhance users' rational adoption of AIGC-generated health information by improving perceived system quality and information quality—processes fundamentally dependent on multi-source verification and trust construction mechanisms [7].

In summary, risk perception can be regarded as a key mediating variable linking the information environment to behavioral responses, while verification behavior represents an essential pathway through which individuals reconstruct trust under conditions of uncertainty. Based on this perspective, subsequent sections further examine the formation mechanisms of online health information risk perception and their influence on verification behavior pathways.

III. FORMATION MECHANISMS OF ONLINE HEALTH INFORMATION RISK PERCEPTION

Within health information environments characterized by the deep integration of artificial intelligence and social media, the risks encountered by users do not originate from a single source but emerge through the combined influence of information characteristics, individual differences, and media contexts. Existing studies indicate that the formation of online health information risk perception demonstrates clear multi-factor coupling characteristics, which can be understood across three interrelated dimensions: the information level, the individual level, and the environmental level.

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3.1 Information Quality and Information Conflict as Driving Mechanisms

One of the most prominent features of online health information environments is the diversity of information sources accompanied by substantial variation in information quality. During health information seeking processes, users frequently encounter contradictory content or divergent explanatory perspectives. Such conflicting health information directly generates cognitive ambiguity and comprehension difficulties, thereby increasing perceived risk levels [3].

Research shows that exposure to conflicting health viewpoints reduces users' knowledge certainty, intensifies confusion, and may weaken previously established health beliefs [3]. Under conditions of an infodemic, the widespread circulation of unverified information further amplifies perceptions of information overload and misinformation, fostering public distrust toward health information [1].

Meanwhile, the growing proportion of user-generated content (UGC) on social media platforms has shifted the evaluation of information authenticity toward subjective user judgment. Information reputation characteristics and perceived knowledge consensus have become key determinants influencing health information adoption [10]. When information quality cannot be reliably assessed, individuals tend to develop risk perceptions first, subsequently initiating verification or avoidance behaviors.

Therefore, information quality uncertainty and informational conflict constitute direct antecedents of risk perception formation.

3.2 Individual Cognition and Health Information Literacy Mechanisms

Risk perception arises not only from informational characteristics but is also significantly shaped by individual cognitive capacity and levels of health information literacy. Studies indicate that health information literacy functions as a foundational variable influencing users' information behaviors, directly determining their ability to evaluate information reliability [9].

Individuals experiencing health anxiety, due to heightened sensitivity to potential health threats, are more prone to cognitive bias and often exhibit repetitive searching and excessive reliance on health information [8]. Such groups tend to amplify perceived risks during information processing, resulting in elevated levels of risk perception.

Furthermore, under different health risk contexts, users' information acquisition ability, comprehension difficulty, and modes of information presentation significantly affect risk judgment processes [11]. When information appears overly technical or difficult to understand, users are more likely to experience uncertainty and interpret such uncertainty as potential risk.

In environments involving artificial intelligence–generated content, AI literacy also plays a critical role. Users with higher levels of AI literacy are more inclined to evaluate content reliability through multi-source verification, thereby mitigating cognitive risks associated with algorithmically generated information [7].
Accordingly, individual capability differences largely determine the intensity of risk perception.

3.3 Social Media and Information Environmental Context Mechanisms

Online health information behaviors are typically embedded within specific social and media environments. Social media platforms have reshaped the structure of health information dissemination, rendering processes of information acquisition, sharing, and evaluation highly socialized.

Research suggests that users' health information behaviors are influenced by the structure of the "small world", composed of personal experience, interpersonal relationships, and living environments, all of which significantly affect information source selection and trust formation [12]. Within this framework, information dissemination no longer relies solely on professional authority but continuously spreads and is reinterpreted through social relationship networks.

Particularly among older adults, health information dissemination often manifests as sharing and verification behaviors grounded in strong social ties, where risk judgments depend heavily on feedback from family members or acquaintances [6][13]. Although such socially mediated cognitive pathways may reduce psychological uncertainty, they may simultaneously reinforce the collective spread of misinformation.

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Moreover, risk perception itself can further influence health information dissemination behaviors. Studies demonstrate that risk perception and problem recognition significantly promote information dissemination through situational motivation, encouraging individuals to actively participate in health information diffusion processes [14].

In summary, online health information risk perception represents a dynamic outcome jointly shaped by information quality uncertainty, individual cognitive differences, and social-media environments. Understanding these formation mechanisms provides an essential theoretical foundation for explaining subsequent verification behaviors and behavioral responses.

IV. MECHANISMS OF ONLINE HEALTH INFORMATION VERIFICATION BEHAVIOR

When individuals develop risk perception within online health information environments, they do not immediately make decisions regarding information adoption or rejection. Instead, they typically enter a stage of information reprocessing, in which uncertainty is reduced through verification behavior. Existing studies indicate that verification behavior functions as a crucial mediating link connecting risk perception and final behavioral responses, demonstrating a clear behavioral-chain mechanism.

4.1 The Triggering Effect of Risk Perception on Verification Behavior

Risk perception serves as the direct driver initiating verification behavior. When users recognize that health information may be misleading or unreliable, they tend to confirm its authenticity through repeated searching or comparison across multiple information sources.

Research shows that perceived risk significantly influences information adoption and continued information-seeking behaviors, while indirectly motivating users to conduct further verification activities [2]. Particularly under conditions involving conflicting information, heightened perceptions of uncertainty increase individuals' motivation to actively verify information [3].

In the context of an infodemic, when confronted with misinformation or corrective health information, the public often engages in systematic information processing, conducting multi-source verification to reduce potential health decision risks [1]. This process suggests that risk perception should not be viewed solely as a negative factor but rather as an important driver of rational information behavior.
Accordingly, risk perception can be regarded as the initiation mechanism of verification behavior.

4.2 Types and Implementation Pathways of Verification Behavior

Existing research indicates that online health information verification behavior is primarily realized through three major pathways.
(1) Re-search–based verification pathway
Users re-enter keywords into search engines to expand original information searches and verify content through query adjustment, cross-information comparison, and source filtering [4]. This pathway represents an advanced stage of traditional information retrieval behavior.
(2) Multi-source comparison verification pathway
Users evaluate information credibility by comparing consistency across different platforms or information sources. For example, individuals may compare medical websites, expert opinions, and community discussions to form comprehensive judgments [15].
(3) Social relationship–based verification pathway
Some users—particularly older adults—prefer to confirm information through consultation with family members or acquaintances. Studies show that older adults frequently share health information with strong-tie contacts on platforms such as WeChat to seek interpersonal gatekeeping and validation [6]. In this pathway, social trust substitutes for professional verification and demonstrates strong contextual dependency.
Together, these pathways constitute a multi-dimensional implementation model of online health information verification behavior.

4.3 The Influence of Verification Behavior on Information Adoption and Behavioral Decision-Making

Verification behavior not only affects judgments regarding information authenticity but also reshapes users' attitudes and behavioral decisions. Experimental studies indicate that approximately 70% of users experience directional attitude

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changes after completing health information verification tasks, demonstrating the significant cognitive correction function of verification processes [4].

Within online health communities, perceived information credibility acts as a key mediating factor influencing health information adoption, and verification behavior represents an essential pathway for trust formation [13]. Once users confirm information reliability through verification, their willingness to adopt information and continue searching increases significantly [2].

Conversely, when verification costs are excessively high or verification attempts fail, individuals may shift toward information avoidance behaviors in order to reduce cognitive burden [9]. Thus, verification behavior simultaneously carries the potential to promote information adoption or induce avoidance responses.

Overall, online health information behavior may be conceptualized as the following mechanism chain: Risk perception → Verification behavior → Trust construction → Information adoption or avoidance

This mechanism reveals the critical transformation process from cognitive response to behavioral decision-making within health information environments.

In summary, verification behavior represents an essential strategy through which individuals regulate perceived risks in complex information environments and constitutes a core component for understanding user behavioral responses in AI-driven health information ecosystems.

V. BEHAVIORAL RESPONSE PATTERNS TO ONLINE HEALTH INFORMATION RISKS AND INTERVENTION IMPLICATIONS

Within online health information environments, individuals do not passively accept informational risks; rather, they actively adapt through a series of behavioral responses. Existing studies indicate that once users develop risk perception and undergo verification processes, their ultimate responses generally manifest in distinct behavioral patterns. These responses not only reflect individuals' information decision-making logic but also provide important foundations for subsequent information intervention and health communication optimization.

5.1 Major Behavioral Response Types to Online Health Information Risks

Synthesizing existing research, users typically demonstrate three primary behavioral responses when confronted with health information risks.

(1) Information adoption behavior

When verification processes enhance perceived information credibility, users are more likely to adopt health information and translate it into practical action. Studies show that perceived usefulness and information credibility are key determinants driving health information adoption, while risk perception plays a moderating role in this process [2].

In social media environments, adoption decisions are often based on users' evaluations of informational value and perceived knowledge consensus [10].

(2) Information dissemination and sharing behavior

After confirming information reliability, some users further participate in information dissemination. Risk perception and problem recognition can promote health information dissemination through situational motivation, transforming individuals from information receivers into information disseminators [14].

Particularly on platforms such as WeChat, health information sharing frequently fulfills functions related to social support and relationship maintenance [16].

(3) Information avoidance behavior

When perceived risk becomes excessively high or verification costs increase, users may choose to avoid health information altogether. Research indicates that health information avoidance behavior is closely associated with perceived risk threats and emotional stress [9].

Although such behavior may temporarily reduce psychological burden, it may simultaneously weaken individuals' health decision-making capacity.

Therefore, online health information behavior does not follow a single linear pathway but instead exhibits a multi-path response structure characterized by adoption, dissemination, and avoidance.

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5.2 Distinct Behavioral Response Characteristics of Older Adults

Compared with general internet users, older adults demonstrate more pronounced differences in health information risk contexts.

First, older users rely more heavily on social relationship networks when evaluating information. Studies show that older adults commonly seek verification from family members or acquaintances during health information sharing to reduce decision uncertainty [6][13].

Second, due to disparities in digital literacy and health information literacy, older adults are more susceptible to influences from information presentation formats and perceived source credibility [11]. When information is complex or highly technical, their level of perceived risk increases significantly.

Moreover, older adults' health information behaviors often exhibit strong emotional orientations. Information sharing serves not only health decision-making purposes but also functions as a means of emotional communication and social connection [6]. This suggests that behavioral responses among older adults represent not merely cognitive outcomes but also socially embedded interaction processes.

5.3 Information Behavior Intervention Implications for Risk Governance

Existing research suggests that reliance solely on information provision is insufficient for effectively reducing health information risks; instead, systematic interventions should be implemented at the level of information behavior.

(1) Enhancing health information literacy and AI literacy

Artificial intelligence literacy and health information literacy significantly promote rational information adoption while reducing misjudgment risks [7]. Accordingly, improving users' evaluative capabilities through education and training constitutes an essential pathway for risk governance.

(2) Optimizing information presentation and platform design

Information accessibility, comprehensibility, and presentation formats directly influence levels of risk perception [11]. Platforms should reduce cognitive barriers through structured information presentation, visual cues, and credibility indicators.

(3) Establishing multi-source verification and correction mechanisms

Studies demonstrate that corrective health information can effectively enhance public risk-response capacity [1]. Developing cross-platform verification and feedback systems can strengthen users' verification behaviors.

(4) Strengthening information behavior intervention strategies

Experimental research confirms that interventions targeting information behavior can significantly promote positive health behavior change [17]. Consequently, information behavior should be incorporated into health governance systems rather than focusing exclusively on informational content.

In summary, effective governance of online health information risks requires a transition from information management toward behavioral guidance, promoting rational information decision-making through cognitive support and design optimization strategies.

VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

6.1 Research Conclusions

With the rapid development of the internet and social media, online health information has become a primary source through which the public acquires health knowledge. However, issues such as uneven information quality, the dissemination of misinformation, and cognitive bias have simultaneously intensified health information risks. Based on a systematic review of 20 relevant studies, this research examines the formation mechanisms and behavioral response patterns of online health information verification behavior from the perspective of risk perception.

The findings indicate that online health information behavior demonstrates a distinctly cognition-driven characteristic. After exposure to health information, individuals first develop perceptions of risk and uncertainty. Conflicting information and information overload significantly elevate perceived risk levels, thereby triggering verification behaviors [1][3]. During verification processes, users typically validate information through multi-source comparison, consistency evaluation, and credibility assessment [4].

Furthermore, risk perception does not represent the endpoint of behavior but rather serves as a crucial mediating variable driving the evolution of information behavior. Verification outcomes subsequently lead to differentiated behavioral responses, including information adoption, continued information seeking, information dissemination, and information avoidance [2][9][14]. This process reflects a dynamic cyclical mechanism of online health information behavior composed of information exposure → risk judgment → verification → behavioral decision-making.

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In addition, significant differences exist across user groups. Older adults rely more heavily on social relationship networks for information confirmation and exhibit pronounced emotional orientation and experiential dependence [6][13]. Social media contexts further strengthen the influence of social capital, trust mechanisms, and interpersonal interaction on health information behavior [18][19].

Overall, online health information risk should not be understood solely as an informational issue but rather as a behavioral phenomenon shaped jointly by cognition, situational context, and social interaction.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

The primary theoretical contributions of this study are reflected in three aspects.

First, this study integrates existing health information behavior research from a risk perception perspective, incorporating information seeking, verification, and adoption behaviors into a unified analytical framework, thereby extending the explanatory scope of health information behavior research.

Second, drawing upon prior studies, this research proposes an analytical logic of "risk perception–verification behavior–behavioral response," which helps reveal the dynamic evolutionary process of online health information behavior.

Third, by examining health information behavior within social media and digital communication environments, this study provides theoretical support for understanding public information decision-making mechanisms under the context of infodemics [12].

6.3 Future Research Directions

Future research on online health information behavior may be further advanced along several directions:

(1) Strengthening research on information behavior in AI-mediated environments

With the rapid expansion of AIGC-generated health information, the influence of artificial intelligence–generated content on risk perception and verification behavior will become an increasingly important research topic [7].

(2) Focusing on vulnerable and aging populations

Against the backdrop of population aging, further investigation is needed into how disparities in digital competence influence health information risk perception and behavioral decision-making mechanisms.

(3) Promoting multi-method integrated research paradigms

Future studies may combine log mining, experimental approaches, and behavioral data analytics to enable dynamic observation of real-world information behavior processes [20].

(4) Transitioning from behavioral governance to platform governance

Governance of online health information risks should evolve from improving individual capabilities toward incorporating platform responsibility and algorithm governance, thereby achieving systematic optimization of the information ecosystem.

In conclusion, research on online health information risk perception and verification behavior holds substantial theoretical significance while also offering practical implications for health communication practices and digital health governance.

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