



Lay Summary – Findings from the OBoE Study

What is this study?

The OBoE Study is a project that was carried out by researchers at the Universities of Warwick and Exeter. The study name is an acronym of 'The **O**nline **B**ooking **E**xperience **S**tudy'. The project researched the ways in which patients book their GP appointments and their views about booking via the internet.

Why was this research carried out?

The government want patients to use online services, including online booking for GP appointments, and they are investing public money in this area. So far not many people use, or know about, online booking for GP appointments. Also, little is known about how patients book appointments, whether this differs according to backgrounds, nor what they think about online booking.

It is important to find out about these unknown areas to make sure that online booking (and other online services) can be set up in a way that suits the public and provides fair access for everyone.

How was the research done?

There were two stages to the project. During the first stage, we looked at responses in 2019 from a survey that is sent to 2.3 million patients each year. The survey asked members of the public questions about their views, behaviours, and backgrounds. These survey responses were analysed to find out about public's awareness and use of online booking, and if this varied according to their backgrounds. During the second stage, we interviewed 44 people who had recently booked a GP appointment, to find out about the way they booked appointments and the reasons why they book in certain ways.

We examined the survey results, together with what people told us during the interviews. This allowed us to describe how people booked GP appointments according to their backgrounds and explain some of the reasons why.

What did The OBoE Study find out?

We found that the way people booked their GP appointments was associated with their backgrounds. Levels of awareness and use of online booking for GP appointments differed according to people's age, level of deprivation and ethnicity. We also found that having a long term condition and the practice where patients were registered impacted on how likely

they were to be aware of, and use, online booking. There is further information about these key findings below:-

Long term conditions

One of the biggest predictors of awareness and use of online booking for GP appointments, was whether or not a person had a long term condition. A long term condition is a condition that cannot be cured, but there may be medication and therapies to manage its symptoms. Patients who had a long term condition are more likely to be aware of and use online booking than patients without them. During the interviews, we found there were some clear reasons why. These are described below:

Already registered for repeat prescriptions:

People we interviewed with long term conditions talked about how they had registered an online account so they could order their repeat prescriptions. Whilst ordering their repeat prescriptions, they happened to notice that they could also book their appointments online too. Some tried it and found it suited them, others found it did not suit them. This was a very common experience in interviewees' accounts and provides some explanation behind why we see more awareness and use in those with long term conditions.

Pre-planned routine appointments:

The people interviewed who had tried booking their GP appointments online, often said that the appointments that were available were over a week away and they had to call the surgery if they wanted an appointment sooner. This meant that online booking was often more suitable for advance bookings rather than more urgent appointments. Some said that they were able to use online booking to book their routine appointments related to their long term condition weeks in advance.

Age

The survey told us that those aged between 25 and 64 had the highest rates of awareness, and use, of online booking for GP appointments. Those aged 75 and over had much lower levels of awareness and use, compared with all other age groups. Based on the interviews, there appears to be various reasons for these patterns of use associated with age. These are described below:

Additional responsibilities:

Younger and middle-aged interviewees talked about how additional responsibilities – such as work commitments, childcare, or caring responsibilities – made online booking particularly appealing for them. Calling on phone was less suitable because a) they had to call at a specific time and wait on phone, which was often inconvenient when they were busy, b) there was a lack of privacy when discussing a problem in a work environment, and c) people found being able to cross-reference their own diary with available slots much easier than trying to work out a suitable date over the phone with a receptionist.

IT Literacy:

The people we interviewed had different levels of confidence and experience in using online services and digital technology. Some of the older participants said they were reluctant to use online booking as they felt too old to learn new ways, some assumed there would be problems (due to lack of familiarity), and others simply did not use a device regularly, so it would be inconvenient to switch on a device, such as a computer. Many of the older interviewees were reliant on another family member or carer to, firstly arrange their appointment to suit them also, and secondly to access and use a device.

Modern method:

There was a view common in many of the interviews that online booking fits in with present day society. Some people we interviewed thought it ought to be an option because we do so much online nowadays. Many older participants were accepting of it, even if it did not suit them.

Deprivation

The survey showed that the likeliness of being aware of and using online booking for GP appointments is strongly linked to how deprived an individual is. Deprivation was based on lots of factors, including where people lived, their employment status, and whether they were homeowners. Those who are most deprived were much less likely to know about and use online booking for GP appointments, compared to those who are least deprived. Unfortunately, the interviews did not provide much explanation behind the reasons for this difference.

Ethnicity

According to the survey, there were complex patterns according to ethnicity. All minority ethnic groups are less likely to be *aware* of online booking than white patients. However, it was only black patients who were less likely to *use* online booking compared to white patients, and people who had mixed or Asian ethnicities were more likely to *use* online booking than white people. The reasons behind such patterns are likely to be complex and not much was revealed during the interviews to explain this.

Practice

The survey suggests that practices have a large impact on whether their patients are aware of and use online booking for GP appointments. The practices that had the **lowest** levels of *awareness* (bottom 10%) **less than 22%**, or 1 in 5, of their patients knew that they could book online. However, practices with **highest** levels of *awareness* (top 10%), **at least 64%** - so just over half - of their patients knew about online booking.

The survey results were very similar for levels of *use* too. In practices with lowest levels of *use* (bottom 10%), less than 5%, or 1 in 20, of their patients had tried using online booking. However, practices with highest levels of *use* (top 10%), at least 25%, or 1 in 4, of their patients had tried using online booking to book their appointments.

After looking at the interview accounts, we found some specific things that practices do that either help or hinder online booking for their patients. These are outlined below:

Availability of appointments

The availability of appointments that could be booked online varied a lot between the people we interviewed. Some said they could book on the same day, or within a week, whereas others found the nearest slots available to book online were over two weeks away. Many said the reason they did not book online was because they needed to see a doctor sooner than what was available, and so had to phone instead. However, those who found there were appointments slots within a week were able to book the appointment they required and were encouraged to continue using online booking for future appointments too. Practices may be able to increase uptake of online booking by making sure there are appointments slots within a week that can be booked online.

Registration process

One of the biggest barriers for booking online was the registration process. Many people we interviewed talked about how they had to take home a registration form, complete it and then return it to the surgery with two forms of ID. It was quite common that people did want to register but had not got around to going back to surgery with their ID and completed form. If they did not go very often, they found it easier just to call as and when they needed an appointment than to register for an online account. There appeared to be some differences in the registration process between practices, with some being more straightforward than others.

Promotion

Some of the people we spoke to were unaware that online booking was an option, (and in some cases they would have liked to use it). Many had seen no information about online booking from their surgery. However, others talked about how they found out about online booking from the practice. This was via adverts on noticeboards, text messages, letters or being told by practice staff.

Summary

Although uptake is rising, the OBoE study has shown that most patients (55%) are not aware of online booking for GP appointments, and only a small proportion (16%) of patients have used it. The likeliness that people know about and use online booking has been shown to vary according to ethnicity, deprivation, age and presence of long term conditions.

The interviews showed there were some clear reasons behind some of these patterns, but also some remain unknown. However, the *biggest* influence on patients' awareness and use of online booking is the practice that a patient is registered with. The interview accounts illustrated some ways in which practices can ensure online booking is appealing, suitable and accessible for their patients.



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