Patient choice of a primary care physician versus a specialist:
A randomized controlled experiment examining online physician ratings
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Abstract

Background

Physician review websites have greatly empowered patients by allowing them to acquire information about physicians prior to their health decision making. Technical and interpersonal skills are key rating categories of physician care on these websites. However, research has rarely examined the impact of different rating categories on patients’ choice of physicians. In addition, little is known about whether patients weigh technical and interpersonal skills differently in their selection of different types of physicians.

Objective

This experiment aimed to examine 1) how online ratings about physicians’ technical and interpersonal skills may affect patients’ willingness to choose physicians, and 2) whether patients’ preferences for technical or interpersonal skills differ in their selection of primary care physicians versus specialists.

Methods

A 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects experiment was conducted. Over six hundred participants were recruited through a crowdsourcing website and randomly assigned to view a mockup physician review web page which contained basic information about a physician and numerical ratings from patients. Physician type as well as ratings on a physician's technical and interpersonal skills were manipulated. After reviewing the web page, participants were asked to complete a survey on their perceptions of the physician and willingness to seek health care from the physician.

Results
The results showed that participants were more willing to choose a physician with higher ratings on technical skills than on interpersonal skills compared to a physician with higher ratings on interpersonal skills than on technical skills, $t(416.94) = 21.997$, $p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 1.12$. In selection of different types of physicians, patients were more likely to choose a specialist with higher ratings on technical skills than on interpersonal skills, compared to a primary care physician with the same ratings, $F(1, 561) = 4.85$, $p = .028$.

**Conclusion**

The findings suggest that people place more weight on technical skills than interpersonal skills in their selection of a physician based on online ratings. People are more likely to make a compromise on interpersonal skills in their choice of a specialist compared to a primary care physician. This study emphasizes the importance of examining online physician ratings in a more nuanced way in relation to the selection of different types of physicians.

**Keywords:** technical skills, interpersonal skills, physician review websites, physician selection
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Introduction

The role of patients in health care is undergoing a remarkable transition. While traditional patients took a passive role in their health care, modern patients are actively involved in health decision-making [1, 2]. For instance, patients are increasingly turning to online physician review websites (PRWs) to learn information about their physicians [3, 4]. Indeed, a national survey suggests that more than half of the respondents consider PRWs an important source for information when choosing a physician [3]. These websites not only provide information about a physician’s basic information and qualifications, but also present peer-to-peer consumer reviews of the physician. Based on the reviews, health consumers are able to learn about other patients’ experiences, concerns, and levels of satisfaction about a specific physician.

With the growing interest on PRWs, researchers have recently begun to examine the role of these websites in people’s health decision-making [5-8]. The scholarship on PRWs covers a wide range of topics, including but not limited to demographics of website users, structures of the portals, patterns of website usage, and content of reviews [9-11]. Technical skills and interpersonal skills reside at the core of a physician’s qualifications and are commonly rated on PRWs [12, 13]. However, little is known about how ratings on these different aspects of a physician may affect patients’ choice differently. Prior research presents mixed results on how people set the priority of technical and interpersonal skills in physician selection [14, 15]. Therefore, the first goal of this study is to examine how patients prioritize technical and interpersonal skills in their physician selection based on ratings on PRWs.
The second objective of this study is to examine whether and how people’s choice of a primary care physician versus a specialist is affected differently by online ratings. In the U.S., patients are allowed greater autonomy to choose their primary care physicians compared to specialists. As a result, significantly more research focuses on people’s selection of primary care physicians than physicians of other types [15-17]. Nowadays, however, patients are more involved in choice of specialists in part due to the easy access of health information online. Given that primary care physicians and specialists take on different roles in health care, patients may apply different criteria to select different types of physicians [3]. In this study, we specifically examine how ratings on a physician’s technical and interpersonal skills may affect patients’ choice of primary care physicians and specialists differently.

**Technical vs. Interpersonal Skills**

In the era of health consumerism, people tend to evaluate a wide array of factors in their selection of physicians. Research on physician selection criteria has shown that people not only consider the factors pertaining to a physician (e.g., sex, age, race, qualification), but also evaluate many other contextual and economic factors, such as office location and insurance coverage [12, 15, 17]. Despite a large collection of factors to consider, technical skills and interpersonal skills are central to the evaluation of a physician’s qualifications [12, 13]. Technical skills concern medical knowledge and expertise in a physician’s area. Overall, patients prefer a physician who is skilled and knowledgeable in his/her domain of expertise with the ability to provide accurate diagnosis and treatment [12]. Interpersonal skills center on the communication style of a physician [18]. Especially with the recent push for patient-centered care, physicians of all types are reevaluating their approach to communicating with patients [19, 20]. Patients, in general,
prefer a physician who is easy to talk to and willing to listen [21]. Physicians with a caring and friendly style lead to high levels of patient satisfaction [22].

Although both technical and interpersonal skills are important considerations in patients’ choice of physicians, it is unclear how patients set the priority of the two factors. Research has presented inconsistent findings regarding patients’ selection criteria of a physician [14, 15, 23, 24]. A body of literature focusing on primary care physicians found that people expressed a clear preference for technical skills over interpersonal skills [12, 25]. However, other studies show that communication skills are the most important determinant in patients’ choice of a primary care physician [14, 15, 21]. Various aspects of interpersonal skills, such as a caring attitude and responsiveness, are found to be preferred over technical skills in people’s choice of a primary care physician [15, 26].

Similarly, research on patients’ selection of specialists has generated mixed findings on patients’ preferences on technical skills versus interpersonal skills [13, 23, 24]. Hoerger and Howard [24] found that women rated medical expertise as the leading reason for choice of a prenatal care physician. Contrarily, Dunlea and Lenert [23] surveyed people over their preference of a specialist with a hypothetical referral of an asymptomatic condition and concluded that communication skills and shared decision-making style were considered more important than medical expertise in their choice.

PRWs provide prospective patients valuable information regarding physicians. The valence of online reviews tends to affect people’s perceptions of physicians and their intention to choose the physicians [10]. The decision is even more complicated when people are exposed to reviews with opposite valence in different skills. For example, physicians may receive positive feedback on their technical competence but negative or neutral reviews on their interpersonal
skills (or vice versa). Under such circumstances, patients may need to make tradeoffs between a physician’s technical and interpersonal skills. Because prior research presented conflicting findings on patients’ preference over a physician’s technical skills versus interpersonal skills, the following research question was raised.

**RQ1: Are people more willing to choose a physician with higher ratings on technical skills than on interpersonal skills, or a physician with higher ratings on interpersonal skills than on technical skills?**

**Physician Types and Skills**

Extant literature has demonstrated the importance of technical skills and interpersonal skills in people’s consideration of a physician, regardless of specialty [13]. However, the relative importance of technical and interpersonal skills might be weighted differently in people’s selection of a primary care physician versus a specialist as the two differ in their primary responsibilities. Patients visit primary care physicians mainly for comprehensive care at the point of first contact; whereas they count on specialists for more specialized and advanced care. Because of the distinct services provided by physicians and specialists, patients’ expectations for the technical skills of their physicians may vary between the types. Technical skills are likely to be of more importance of the assessment of specialists compared to primary care physicians.

In addition to the distinct responsibilities in health care, primary care physicians differ in their relationships with patients. Long-term relationships are typically expected with primary care physicians whereas specialist-patient relationships are largely bounded by specific health problems and in most cases are short-lived [13, 27]. Because sophisticated interpersonal skills (i.e., being kind and caring) are more important for building long-term relationships [28],
patients may place more weight on interpersonal skills in their selection of a primary care physician versus a specialist.

A limited body of literature has compared the relative importance of technical and interpersonal skills in people’s choice of primary care physicians and specialists. Hanna, Shoenbachler, and Gordon [29] found that communication skills were the leading factor in the selection of a primary care physician; whereas medical expertise was the key determinant in the choice of a specialist. In addition, a study on female patients’ selection of a primary care physician versus a specialist showed that people rated medical expertise a more important determinant in selection of a surgeon compared to a primary care physician [13]. Although we know little about the comparison between primary care physicians and specialists based on their skills, the sparse research evidence indicates that technical skills are likely to be more valued in selection of specialists and interpersonal skills more in selection of primary care physicians.

When physicians receive online ratings that indicate different qualities of their technical and interpersonal skills, patients may need to make a tradeoff. It is expected that patients are more willing to sacrifice interpersonal skills for technical skills in their selection of a specialist compared to a primary care physician. In contrast, patients are more likely to make a compromise on technical skills than interpersonal skills in their selection of a primary care physician versus a specialist. The following hypotheses are proposed:

*H1: People are more willing to choose a specialist who has higher ratings on technical skills than on interpersonal skills, compared to a primary care physician with the same ratings.*
**H2**: People are more willing to choose a primary care physician who has higher ratings on interpersonal skills than on technical skills, compared to a specialist who has the same ratings.

**Methods**

**Ethical Approval**

The Institutional Review Board at the Ohio State University approved all study procedures.

**Sample**

A total of 608 participants completed the online experiment. Participants were recruited via the crowdsourcing website Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (mTurk) and compensated for their time. We excluded people who failed the attention checks or did not spend any time on the stimulus page (n = 27). Of the 581 valid cases, 329 (56.6%) were male and 251 (43.2%) were female, with an average age of 35.28 (SD = 11.27) years old. The majority of the participants indicated that they were Caucasian (74.6%), followed by Asian/Asian American (10.9%), African American (6.2%), and Hispanic/Latino (5.9%). Most participants were college educated (75.4%). Demographics are provided in Table 1.3.2.

**Research Design**

To investigate the proposed research question and hypotheses, a 2 (ratings on communication skills: high vs. moderate) x 2 (ratings on technical skills: high vs. moderate) x 2 (physician specialty: primary care physician vs. specialist) x 2 (order of ratings: interpersonal skill first vs. technical skills first) between-subjects factorial design was employed. Participants were randomly assigned to one of 16 experimental conditions and instructed to read through a cover story describing a medical condition in which they need to find a new physician. They
were then asked to view a mockup physician review page and complete a questionnaire about their perceptions of the reviewed physician and their willingness to choose the physician.

Stimulus Materials

Following consent, participants were presented a cover story to read. Based on the type of physician that they were assigned to, participants were asked to imagine themselves in a situation looking for either a primary care physician or a surgeon. The vignette about a primary care physician depicted a situation that the participant recently moved to a new city and was in need of a new primary care physician. In the lack of information from family members and friends, they decided to search for primary care physicians on PRWs. The vignette about a surgeon described a situation in which the participant had lasting back pains. The primary care physician suspected that the patient may need a spinal surgery and provided a list of surgeons to choose from. The participant decided to search for the recommended surgeons on PRWs. After reading through the scenario and imaging themselves in the described situation, each participant was directed to a physician review page to learn about the physician.

A total of 16 physician review pages were developed for this study (See Figure 1). The top part of each page listed basic information about a physician, including the physician’s name (Dr. J. Smith), the specialty (family medicine or surgeon), and information on new patient acceptance (accepting new patients). To manipulate the type of a physician, half of the web pages listed the physician’s specialty as family medicine and the other half described the physician as a surgeon.

Each page contained four aggregated rating categories about Dr. Smith, including two items on technical skills (“My doctor accurately diagnosed my problem” and “My doctor effectively treated my problem”) and two on interpersonal skills (“My doctor was caring” and
“My doctor spent enough time with me”). To manipulate the valence of physician ratings, these rating categories were assigned different star ratings. Each rating category was presented in the form of aggregated ratings. In the conditions where a physician received high ratings on technical skills, the two items pertaining to technical skills were given 5/5 star ratings. In the conditions of moderate ratings on technical skills, the same items were assigned 3/5 star ratings. We chose to examine moderate instead low ratings in this study because research suggests that low rating are relatively uncommon on PWRs (Emmert, Sander, & Pisch, 2013). The valence of a physician’s interpersonal skills was manipulated in the same way. Further, the rating categories were presented to participants in counterbalanced order to control for the impact of rating order effects. In half of the experimental conditions, the two rating categories on technical skills were displayed prior to the two categories on interpersonal skills. In the other half, ratings on technical skills were presented beneath the ratings on interpersonal skills.

Measures

Willingness to choose a physician. A participant’s intention to choose the reviewed physician was assessed with three items on a seven-point scale (1 = would definitely not choose /definitely unwilling; 7 = would definitely choose/definitely willing). The three items are “How likely is it that you would choose someone like Dr. Smith to be your primary care doctor/surgeon?” “How willing would you be to go to a doctor like Dr. Smith for your medical care?” and “How willing would you to be recommend a doctor like Dr. Smith to your family member and friends if they have the need?” The items were averaged to create a composite variable ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.77$, $\alpha = .97$).

Manipulation Checks
Perceptions of a physician’s technical skills. To determine whether or not the manipulation of a physician’s technical skills was successful, seven items were used to assess participants’ perceptions of this aspect (e.g., “knowledgeable,” “competent,” and “skilled”). Participants were asked how well each of the seven items described Dr. Smith on a 7-point scale (1 = very poorly, 7 = very well). The items were averaged \((M = 5.38, SD = 1.33, \alpha = .98)\). As predicted, participants assigned to conditions of high technical skills \((M = 6.32, SD = 0.82)\) perceived the physician to be more skilled technically compared to those assigned to conditions of moderate technical skills \((M = 4.44, SD = 1.01)\), \(t(288) = 22.72, p < .001\).

Perceptions of a physician’ interpersonal skills. Another set of seven items was used to measure participants’ perceptions of Dr. Smith’s interpersonal skills (e.g., “Kind,” “Friendly,” and “Easy to talk to”) on a 7-point scale (1 = very poorly, 7 = very well; \(M = 5.23, SD = 1.24, \alpha = .96\)). As predicted, participants assigned to conditions of high interpersonal skills \((M = 5.64, SD = 1.14)\) perceived physicians to be more skilled interpersonally compared to those assigned to conditions of moderate interpersonal skills \((M = 4.41, SD = 0.94)\), \(t(288) = 14.12, p < .001\).

Control Variables

Currently searching for a physician. Participants were asked two questions to determine whether they were currently searching or recently intend to search for a primary care physician or back surgeon, dependent on the condition they were assigned to (e.g., “How likely are you to try and find a new primary care physician/back surgeon in the next twelve months?”). They answered the questions on a 7-point scale (1 = will definitely not; 7 = will definitely; \(M = 2.90, SD = 1.59\)).

Past experience with a physician. Participants were also asked two questions about their past experiences about looking for or having a primary care physician or back surgeon (e.g.,
“Have you ever had a primary care physician/back surgeon?” “Have you ever searched for a primary care physician/back surgeon?”). Participants answered either yes (1) or no (2) to both questions ($M = 1.60$, $SD = 0.45$).

Perceived reliability of ratings. Prior research has suggested that people may perceive the reliability of online ratings differently [3, 30], which in turn may affect their willingness to choose a physician. To control for the variation, participants were asked one question to assess the extent to which they consider the online ratings reliable (i.e., “To what extent do you consider the patient ratings are reliable measures of Dr. Smith’s quality?”). The item was rated on a 7-point scale with the anchors (1) = not reliable at all and (7) = completely reliable ($M = 5.11$; $SD = 1.07$).

Data Analysis

We first conducted a four-way (valence of technical skills x valence of interpersonal skills x physician type x orders of ratings) ANCOVA on people’s willingness to choose a physician, controlling for current searching for a physician, past experience with a physician, and perceived reliability of online ratings. Because the order of ratings did not affect people’s willingness to choose a physician, $F (1, 561) = .002$, $p = .965$, this factor was not examined further in subsequent analyses. After conducting the ANCOVA, a test of planned contrasts was conducted to examine the research question on whether people place more weight on technical or interpersonal skills when select a physician. H1 and H2 were tested with tests of simple main effects. All analysis were ran using SPSS Statistics version 25.

Results

Selection of a Physician in General
The research question concerns people’s willingness to choose a physician with higher ratings on one aspect than the other. The ANCOVA test suggests that the two-way interaction between ratings of technical skills and ratings of interpersonal skills significantly affected people’s willingness to choose a physician, \( F(1, 561) = 30.88, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .05 \). A test of planned contrasts was then conducted. The condition of high ratings on both skills was assigned a weight of 2; the condition of moderate ratings on both skills was assigned a weight of -2; the condition of high ratings on technical skills and moderate ratings on interpersonal skills was assigned a weight of 1; the condition of high ratings on interpersonal skills and moderate ratings on technical skills was assigned a weight of -1. The results suggested that people were significantly more likely to choose a physician with higher ratings on technical skills than on interpersonal skills \( (M = 4.73, SD = 1.30) \) compared to a physician with higher ratings on interpersonal skills than on technical skills \( (M = 3.13, SD = 1.54) \), \( t(416.94) = 21.997, p < .001, \) Cohen’s \( d = 1.12 \).

**Importance of Technical vs. Interpersonal skills in Selection of Different Types of Physicians**

The first hypothesis predicted that people had higher intention to choose a specialist who has higher ratings on technical skills than on interpersonal skills, compared to a primary care physician with the same ratings. The three-way interaction among ratings of technical skills, ratings of interpersonal skills, and physician type was significant, \( F(1, 561) = 5.27, p = .022, \eta_p^2 = .01 \). A post hoc analysis was conducted to test the simple main effects of physician types within the interaction of technical and interpersonal skills. As predicted, participants were more willing to choose a specialist with higher ratings on technical skills than on interpersonal skills \( (M = 4.94, SD = 1.33) \) compared to a primary care physician with the same ratings \( (M = 4.51, SD = \)
1.24), $F(1, 561) = 4.85, p = .028$. H1 was supported. Table 2 presents means and standard deviations of the measured variable for all conditions.

The second hypothesis proposed that people were more willing to choose a primary care physician who has higher ratings on interpersonal skills than on technical skills, compared to a specialist with the same ratings. Contradictory to the prediction, the test of simple main effects suggested that people did not differ in their willingness to select a primary care physician and a specialist when the physician had higher ratings on interpersonal skills than on technical skills, $F(1, 561) = 0.006, p = .936$. Therefore, H2 was not supported.

**Discussion**

*Principal Findings*

Patients are increasingly empowered in this rapidly changing health care landscape. With the access to physician reviews online, patients take a more active role in their selection of physicians. Physicians and patients have different attitudes toward reviews provided on PRWs [6]. Physicians tend to question the accuracy of online reviews and view them as a threat to their reputations [4]; whereas patients generally have a favorable attitude and would consult these reviews in their choice of physicians [3]. It is thus imperative to understand how online reviews affect patients’ perceptions and choice of physicians, which may help patients and health professionals have a better understanding of the role of PRWs in health consumerism. Specifically, the current study took the initiative to examine if online physician ratings affect patients’ selection of primary care physicians and specialists differently. We investigated how online reviews focusing on physicians’ technical and interpersonal skills affect people’s intention to select different types of physicians. The results showed that people were more willing to choose a physician with higher ratings on technical skills than on interpersonal skills compared
to a physician with higher ratings on interpersonal skills than on technical skills. Further, people perceived technical skills more importantly and were more willing to make a compromise on interpersonal skills in their choice of a specialist compared to a primary care physician.

This study provides insight into understanding the impact of online ratings on people’s physician selection. Beyond valence of online reviews examined in prior research [10], this study investigated how ratings of different domains could affect people’s choice of physicians. The results suggested that patients tend to place more weight on technical skills than interpersonal skills when they choose physicians, regardless of physician types. Although prior research presented mixed findings on the relative importance of technical and interpersonal skills in people’s physician selection [12, 14, 15], this study found strong support for the greater importance of technical skills over interpersonal skills. It appears that sophisticated interpersonal skills cannot make up for the lack of medical competence. Having strong interpersonal skills, albeit important, does not make a physician more competitive in the health market unless the physician is also technically competent. In fact, a post-hoc analysis provided further evidence by showing that people did not differ in their willingness to choose a physician with high or moderate ratings on interpersonal skills, if the physician has mediocre ratings on technical skills. Physicians who are confident with their technical skills should try to highlight this aspect in their online presence. For instance, quite a few medical sites allow physicians to include self-descriptions or video biographies, which can serve as important venues to promote physicians’ technical skills [31].

Although technical skills, in general, are more valued than interpersonal skills in patients’ choice of physicians, the relative importance of these two skills may differ as a function of physician types [3]. There is a paucity of research that exploring how patients value physician
skills differently based on physician types. This study employed a controlled experiment to investigate this matter in the context of PRWs. Because a primary care physician usually serves as the first check-up point prior to patients’ visit to a specialist who diagnoses and treats more complex problems, patients tend to expect more technical skills from a specialist compared to a primary care physician. Consistent with this prediction, when people were asked to make tradeoffs between a physician’s technical and interpersonal skills, they were more willing to compromise on interpersonal skills in their selection of a specialist compared with a primary care physician. Contradictory to our prediction, patients did not seem to value interpersonal skills more in their selection of primary care physicians versus specialists. Although many patients want to establish long-term relationships with their primary care physicians and value interpersonal rapport, they may set up high standards for primary care physicians’ technical skills as well. Interpersonal skills, to a certain extent, might be secondary to technical skills when people choose primary care physicians. It is likely that patients would take into account a primary care physician’ interpersonal competence only if this physician meets the high standards for technical skills.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that point to directions for future research. First, because prior research suggests that only a small proportion of reviews on PWRs are negative [7, 32]. Although we deliberately excluded negative ratings to represent the reality of PRWs, it would still be worthwhile to learn how negative ratings may affect people’s choice of physicians. In particular, negativity effects may take place such that patients are more impacted by negative ratings than positive ones on their selection of physicians. Under such circumstances, people
may not be willing to choose a technically skilled physician who receives very negative feedback on interpersonal skills.

Second, this study examined the impact of numerical ratings, but not narrative comments, on patients’ willingness to choose physicians. Although patients’ evaluations are primarily displayed in the format of aggregated numerical ratings on PRWs, many portals also allow patients to leave narrative comments to detail their satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Aggregated numerical ratings tend to provide patients a holistic view of physicians and the services that they provide. Narrative comments, on the other hand, can capture more detailed and nuanced feedback that is not reflected in structured rating systems [8]. A direction for future research is to investigate how numerical ratings and narrative comments work together to affect people’s willingness to choose a physician, especially if two sources present contradictory information.

Third, this study focused on rating categories pertaining to a physician’s technical and interpersonal skills. In selection of a physician, patients take into account many considerations beyond a physician’s qualifications. For example, prior research has found that management practices such as punctuality and staff quality are also considered in patients’ choice of physicians [29, 33]. Besides review a physician’s qualifications, many PRWs also include rating categories on management practices. Future research should look into these aspects in addition to a physician’s skills. Last, despite a wide range of specialties, this study operationalized the specialist to be a back surgeon. However, it is likely that patients use different selection criteria for specialists of different types. Future research thus needs to examine whether online ratings may exert different influences on patients’ selection of physicians with different specialties.

Conclusion
Patients increasingly seek information online when look for health care providers. The recent growth of PRWs has resulted in efforts to investigate how these platforms affect patients’ health decision-making. This study sheds light on this matter by examining how online ratings on a physician’s technical and interpersonal skills may affect people’s willingness to choose a primary care physician versus a specialist in different ways. The results suggest that patients value physicians’ technical skills more than their interpersonal skills when they select physicians. Patients are more willing to make a compromise on a physician’s interpersonal skills than technical skills in their choice of specialists compared to primary care physicians.

**Abbreviation**

PRWs: physician review websites
References


Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 581)

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<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>46</td>
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Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Willingness to Choose a Physician (N = 580)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Interpersonal skills</th>
<th>Primary care physician</th>
<th>Specialist</th>
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<td>High ratings on</td>
<td>Moderate ratings on</td>
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<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
<td>technical skills</td>
<td>technical skills</td>
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<td>Willingness to choose a physician</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.85)</td>
<td>(1.24)</td>
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*Note: Standard deviations are in the parentheses*
Figure 1. Example of Physician Review Page

Dr. J Smith, MD

Leave a Review

Family Medicine

Accepting New Patients

Address and phone number masked to protect privacy

KEY SURVEY INSIGHTS

- My doctor was caring. ★★★★★ (32)
- My doctor spent enough time with me. ★★★★★ (32)
- My doctor accurately diagnosed my problem. ★★★★☆☆ (32)
- My doctor effectively treated my problem. ★★★★☆☆ (32)