

The effects of literacy on health in Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (GRT): A systematic review and narrative synthesis

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Introduction

“THE MOST DISADVANTAGED MINORITY GROUPS IN EUROPE, HAVING THE POOREST HEALTH OUTCOMES.”

McFadden et al. 2018

“AMONG THE MOST DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE IN THE COUNTRY AND HAVE POOR OUTCOMES IN KEY AREAS SUCH AS HEALTH AND EDUCATION”

Women and Equalities Committee - UK Parliament

Health literacy

Depends on

Functional literacy

Standardised Mortality Ratio of Irish Travellers **3.5x higher** than general population in ROI

Life expectancy **10 years less** than general population in EU



Friends, Families & Travellers reports that **40% of their beneficiaries report low or no literacy**



In the **general population** in OECD countries, individuals with low literacy are **1.5 to 4 times as likely to experience a given poor health outcome**

Methods

A systematic review of 5 databases

1266 papers screened

Thematic analysis + Narrative synthesis of 17 papers

Mixed methods data

1. The context of culturally inadequate healthcare systems

Logistical

- Low literacy limits understanding of registration systems and referral pathways
- Inappropriate information formats delay care provision and missed appointments
- Low literacy linked with poor medication compliance and overdose
- Improving literacy may reduce vaccine hesitancy

Interpersonal

- Low literacy diminishes ability to self-advocate
- Low literacy impairs patient understanding, especially when medical jargon is used
- Patients have to rely on relatives - privacy concerns

4. Considerations for health information resources for GRT patients with limited literacy

Format and content

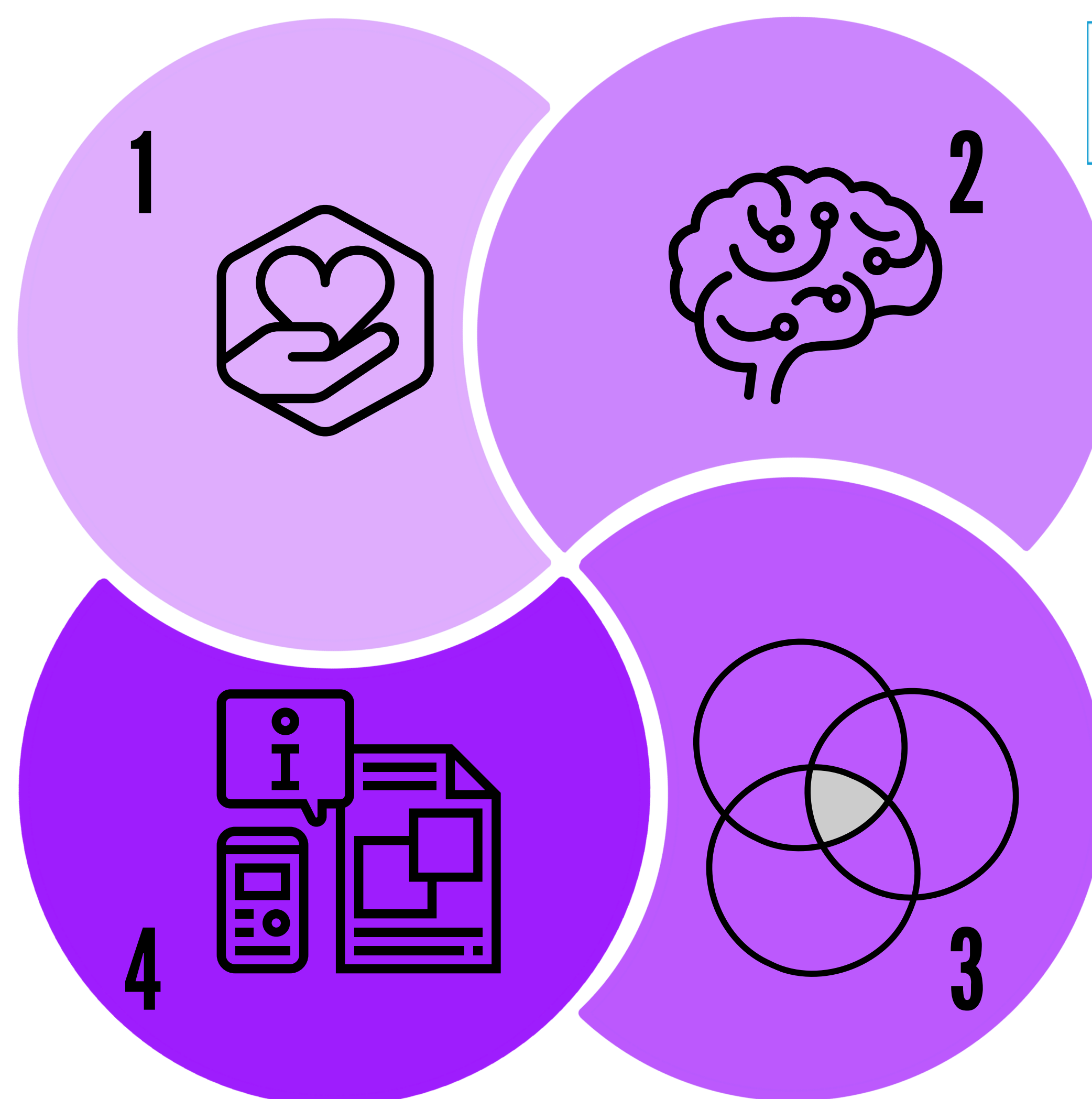
- Patients with low literacy cannot be expected to comprehend lengthy, jargon-filled letters
- Audiovisual information and text-to-speech technology may be helpful
- Different framing of messages may be useful for those with different concepts of health

Sharing health information

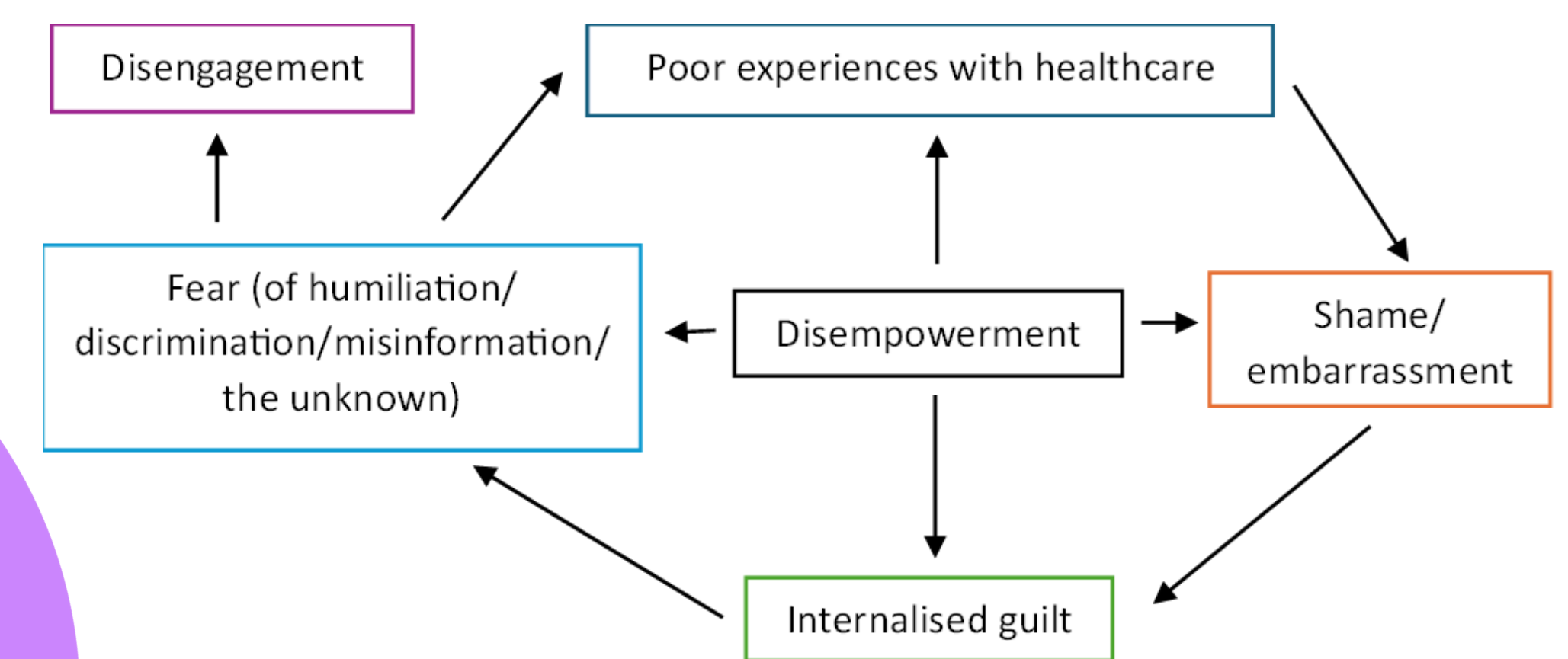
- Social media may play a useful role in health promotion
- Appointment reminders may be useful for patients with differing concepts of time (see Theme 3)

Results

Four Themes



2. Psychological impact and disempowerment



“COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS, FEAR IN AN ALIENATING ENVIRONMENT, EMBARRASSMENT AT NOT UNDERSTANDING, HEALTH PROFESSIONAL (...) LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OR SYMPATHY, OR, PERCEIVED LACK OF INTEREST (OR DISCRIMINATION) ALSO MEANT THAT TRAVELLERS PRAGMATICALLY RESORT TO INFORMAL HEALING OPTIONS.”

All Ireland Traveller Health Study (AITHS): Our Geels, 2010

3. Intersectional, contextual factors and the unique needs of GRT

Sociocultural

- Co-existing ‘oral culture’ and different concepts of time may confound or compound the effects of low literacy

Educational

- Low functional literacy leads to poor health literacy
- Poor school attendance is multifactorial, including bullying and familial reliance on children to provide support/translation in healthcare encounters

Age-related

- Unclear whether poor literacy is familial

Discussion

Implications for practice/policy

- Need for health information resources in a wide range of formats
- Opportunity to trial use of QR code and text-to-speech technology
- Need to train dedicated ‘Accessibility Champions’ in the NHS
- Need for greater allocation of funds to groups offering literacy support and classes to GRT
- Appropriate use of illiteracy and ethnicity coding is crucial:
 - For flagging patients with low literacy so that different information formats can be offered
 - For improved data collection on the health of these disadvantaged individuals

Implications for future research

- Research assessing the efficacy of measures to improve school attendance
- Exploratory qualitative research of interventions to improve adult literacy that aim to gain GRT perspectives on what interventions are culturally appropriate
- Quantitative research comparing health outcomes of literate vs. illiterate GRT (to reduce confounding effects of comparisons with general population)
- **Research assessing the effect of improving literacy on health outcomes to verify the results of this study**

Conclusion

- The detrimental effects of low literacy on health are compounded by a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural factors
- These factors, combined with low literacy, broadly worsen the physical and mental health
- National intervention is urgently needed to improve the literacy of GRT children and adults
- An intensified commitment to existing accessible information standards is required.
- Healthcare professionals must be sensitive to the unique needs of GRT (incl. literacy) to support improvements in their health.
- **Above all, literacy must be recognised as a significant social determinant of health.**

Full Paper

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(Awaiting print at time of poster creation)
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