



SEEKING HELP IN AN ONLINE SUPPORT GROUP: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract: The aim of the study is to gain qualitative insight into an online support group. In support groups, which is a form of online community members provide each other with various types of help, usually non-material and non-professional for a particular, shared, usually burdensome issue.

The objective was to understand how conversations flow in an online support group, to explore how identities are accomplished in an online community through use of nicknames and to examine the efficacy of the online support group.

The support group chosen for the purpose of this study is on Alcoholics in recovery. Alcoholism is a disease characterized by craving to drink, loss of control, physical dependence, withdrawal symptoms and tolerance. For the first objective, conversation analysis was adopted which has three underlying assumptions under its purview i.e. sequential positioning is considered as a resource for the production and understanding of utterances, checking for projection of relevance and lastly, for noticeable absence. For the second objective, sociological analysis was adopted and an effort was made to analyse nicknames that members use on the forum. This analysis was carried out keeping in mind Agha's (2007) concepts of emblem which involves three elements- a diacritic, a social persona and someone for whom it is an emblem. For the third objective thematic analysis was carried out for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. Through these themes we aimed to generate in-depth information of the support group and how its contents helped the members share their experiences & develop new identities for themselves.

Results of the thematic analysis generated a variety of themes ranging from positive recovery, dear of relapse, seeking validation to empowering as well as negative thoughts to sharing of information and knowledge. Lastly, with the use of sociological analysis it was found that members had made use of various kinds of nicknames which could be categorized under novel formations, adjectives (acting as symbols representing the person or aspect of one's identity), verb forms, group specific names (member's identity was tied to the group) and exclamations. This gave us insight into how various nicknames explore parts of these individual's identities & act as self-esteem enhancers & coping mechanisms in itself.

Overall analysis showed that online support groups are beneficial, helpful and necessary for sufferers. They provide anonymity, emotional support, decrease chances of relapse, foster formation of better equipped and adaptive identities, positive emotionality & help members quit.

Keywords: alcoholism, conversation analysis, online support group, sociological analysis, thematic analysis,

I. AIM

The aim of the study is to gain qualitative insight into an online support group. In support groups, which is a form of online community members provide each other with various types of help, usually non-material and non-professional for a particular, shared, usually burdensome issue.

II. OBJECTIVES

1. To understand how conversations flow in an online support group,
2. to explore how identities are accomplished in an online community through use of nicknames, and
3. to examine the efficacy of the online support group.

A virtual community is a community of people sharing common interests, ideas and feelings over the internet or on other collaborative networks. One of its first proponents was Howard Rheingold who defined virtual communities as social aggregations that emerge from the internet when enough people carry on public discussions long enough and with sufficient human feeling to form web of personal relationships in cyberspace.

Kimberly S. Young of University of Pittsburg breaks down the needs that internet communities can meet into the following categories:

1. Social Support: Herein, a deep sense of intimacy can be created easily because of the immediacy of information. It also fulfills needs in people whose real lives are interpersonally impoverished and people feel free to express their opinions without fear of rejection, judgment or any confrontation.
2. Unlocked personalities: This gives people a chance to see what it would be to someone else with a different age, gender, role etc. The mind is allowed to take a mental vacation from



demands of the roles we play in real life and the stresses along with it.

3. Creating a persona: Virtual communities are an outlet for people to experiment or 'unlock' different aspects of their personality. It can act as an emotional release where an individual can act out destructive behaviors without negative consequences.
4. Sexual fulfillment: Exploring different interests and venting out feelings is another platform that the virtual community offers.
5. Recognition & Power: An individual tends to have a higher self esteem based on their virtual personality and accomplishments.

In online support groups, members with the same issues can come together for sharing coping strategies, to feel more empowered and form a sense of community. Since 1982, internet has provided a venue for support groups. According to Rappaport (1995) support groups have five distinct features:

1. Focal concern: A problem, life crisis or issue affecting all members.
2. Reciprocity of helping: Each member receives as well as provides help.
3. Peer relationships: These exist rather than or in addition to a professional-client relationship.
4. Experiential knowledge: It aids coping for novices.
5. Community narrative: Embodies the experiences of its members.

Diverse remote networking formats have allowed the development of both synchronous groups, where individuals can exchange messages in real time and asynchronous groups, where members who are not necessarily simultaneously connected to a network can read and exchange messages. A convenient aspect of online support groups is round the clock availability to its members. Research on potential beneficial effects of the internet as a source of social support and health information is increasing rapidly (Laskar et al, 2005). Health related searches have become one of the top three uses of the internet (Brann & Anderson 2002) and the leading source of information is from support groups that link people with common problems together (Cotton & Gupts, 2004).

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. A study conducted by Griffiths KM, Malkinson, Christensen, Bennet and Farren (2012) sought to observe the effectiveness of an online support group for members of the community with depression. Results showed that there was an increase in efficacy and greater reduction in

depressive symptoms at 6-12 months follow up than the control group.

2. A study conducted by Carlson & Buchanan (2007) arrived to explore self-reported effectiveness of an existing dental anxiety support groups in terms of perceived level of anxiety since accessing the group. The results showed that most individuals in the sample considered that, since assessing the online group, they experienced reduction in dental anxiety.
3. A study conducted by Susannah Fox & Kristen Purcell found that 8% of internet users living with chronic disease participate in an online support group

IV. DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of the study, the support group was chosen from www.dailystrengths.org on Alcoholics. Alcoholism is a disease characterized by craving to drink, loss of control, physical dependence, withdrawal symptoms and tolerance. For the aforementioned objectives, three tools of study were used to analyse 30 threads. For the first objective, conversation analysis was adopted which has three underlying assumptions under its purview i.e. sequential positioning is considered as a resource for the production and understanding of utterances, checking for projection of relevance and lastly, for noticeable absence.

For the second objective, sociological analysis was adopted and an effort was made to analyse nicknames that members use on the forum. This analysis was carried out keeping in mind, Agha's (2007) concepts of emblem which involves three elements- a diacritic, a social persona and someone for whom it is an emblem. For the third objective thematic analysis was carried out for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. Through these themes we aimed to generate in-depth information of the support group and how its contents helped the members share their experiences & develop new identities for themselves.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For accomplishing the purpose of the study, trajectory of the conversation was understood using conversation analysis, sociological analysis of nicknames was done and efficacy was evaluated through thematic analysis. After analyzing the posts using conversation analysis it was found that most threads on the group contained detailed life experiences, were high on emotionality, and very well understood and members were able to relate to it easily. Also, language was simple with high relevance. Therefore, we were able to verify that sequential positioning which is understood in terms of production and understanding of utterances was satisfied. The posts received adequate and context appropriate replies which verified the assumption of projection of relevance that states that current



actions ordinarily project the relevance of the next actions to be done and the assumption that next action of a subsequent speaker shows understanding of a prior action.

Further, results of the thematic analysis generated a variety of themes such as of positive recovery wherein numerous threads underlying a sense of relief were found. Most of the posters seemed relieved that they sought help and quit when they did. Another theme was fear of relapse wherein several members have written in detail about this fear and show how it is always on their mind and has contributed to their relapse. Seeking validation was another strong theme that evolved during the course of the conversations. Herein, members were seeking approval of others on the group as a means of reinforcement to calm their fear of relapse and continue on their path to sobriety. Another major theme uncovered was empowerment as well as negative thoughts wherein members have described at length how empowered they felt since embracing sobriety but a few of them described in detail their withdrawal symptoms and the times when they felt overpowered by negative thoughts threatening their sobriety. Sharing of information and knowledge was another theme wherein extensive information flow was observed.

Lastly, with the use of sociological analysis to uncover how identities are accomplished through nicknames found that members had made use of various kinds of nicknames which could be categorized under novel formations, adjectives(acting as symbols representing the person or aspect of one's identity), verb forms, group specific names(member's identity was tied to the group) and exclamations. This gave us insight into how various nicknames explore parts of these individual's identities & act as self esteem enhancers & coping mechanisms in it. It also enabled them to externalize their illness and see it as something that doesn't wholly define them subsequently giving them strength to overcome it.

TABLE I. TRAJECTORY OF CONVERSATIONS IN SUPPORT GROUPS

Post	Trajectory of posts
My 2 months free	The thread has been written in a simple language, it is slightly long and has received 27 responses, all of which relevant to the group.
Choices in the movement	The thread is extremely long and the poster used complicated language, hence received only 5 replies.
Merry go-round	The post is short, written in a simple language but is irrelevant to the support group. Received 13 responses.
1 day sober	The post is long, not comprehensible. It has received 9 responses.
I'm new here	The thread is short, used simple language. It received 14 responses, some to the post and a few to the replies.
Sobriety gratitude	The post is short, complex language. Received 4 responses.
Sober & Depression	The post is long, written using simple language. It received 21 responses most by the poster itself.
Another victim of this horrible disease	The post is long and descriptive. It has received 15 responses, indicating the thread is relevant.

Who's got	The post is extremely sort, to the point. Hence, received 21 responses.
Am I or am I not?	The post is long, seemingly irrelevant. Received 3 responses.
1 year sober	The post is too long, used simple language. Received 27 indicating relevance.
Parent(s) who were alcoholics?	The post is long and detailed, hence received 21 responses which were more of a debate.
Sabotage? Is it me?	The thread is long with an undercurrent of self-criticism. Received only 9 responses. The thread ended with the poster thanking everybody
Procrastination juice	The post is long and confusing, received 7 responses. There is evident gap in understanding due to language.

TABLE II. NICKNAMES

Sno.	Nicknames	
1.	Novel formations	Paddywest, you are my forever, justsemefree, morning flower, pattern skies, island dream, springsprout, fairyish
2.	Adjectives	Peaceful warrior, small wonder, happy2, lostgirl99, runnergirl106, trustthebull
3.	Verb Forms	Secretlydamaged, burningman, speeding1033
4.	Exclamations	Twoyearsclean☺, fivespinner☺, soulman☺, wispy☺, weather☺, aimless☺
5.	Group Specific Names	1is2many, needtohelpmequit, dadslasthope, twoyearsobser☺, eyewanttostop

TABLE III. THEMES OF POSTS AND REPLIES

Themes of Posts	Themes of Replies
Positive Recovery	Celebratory
Sharing Experiences	Sharing Experiences
Sharing Experiences	
1. Medical information	Supportive
2. Life lessons	
Seeking Validation	Motivational
Negative Thoughts	Informative
Chance of Relapse	Emphathetic
Fear	Discouraging
Empowering	Positive Feedback

VI. CONCLUSION

Overall analysis showed that online support groups are beneficial, helpful and necessary for sufferers. They provide anonymity, emotional support, decrease chances of relapse, foster formation of better equipped and adaptive identities, positive emotionality & help members quit.

Index Terms: online support group, alcoholism, conversation analysis, thematic analysis, sociological analysis.



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