

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### Communicating social support in online self-help groups for anxiety and depression: a mixed methods discourse analysis

Yip, Wai Chi

*Date of Award:*  
2020

[Link to publication](#)

#### General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent URL assigned to the publication

## ABSTRACT

Most studies on online self-help groups for healthcare contexts have explored the content of social support. However, very little research has shed light on the communicative behaviors and language use of participants in online self-help groups for mental illness. This thesis studies the communication of social support in online self-help groups for anxiety and depression (OSGADs) to reveal their characteristics as communities of practice (CofPs) and how the predominant communicative acts of the participants contribute to social support communication.

The data of the present study is a self-compiled corpus of 120 threads collected from six selected OSGADs. Mixed methods discourse analysis (MMDA) is used as a research method to conduct three empirical studies (i.e., Chapters 4, 5, and 6), in which both qualitative and quantitative approaches of discourse analysis are utilized, including content analysis, textual analysis, and interaction analysis. Different analytical frameworks are employed in the analyses. The data analysis begins by investigating the main communicative patterns of the interactions (Chapter 5) and then examines two predominant communicative acts (Chapters 5 and 6). Issues closely related to the analysis are also discussed in each of the analytical chapters.

Using conversation analysis (Jefferson & Lee, 1992) and Social Support Behavior Code (Coulson, 2005), Chapter 4 reveals the sequential structures and main content of the interactions. The results show that self-disclosure and advice-giving are the most predominant communicative acts in the interactions. This chapter argues that the optimal matching theory (Cutrona & Russell, 1990) is probably inadequate to elucidate that the support proffered by respondents aids the support seekers. Chapter 5 investigates the multiple functions of self-disclosure in personal, textual, and interactional layers. The functions are examined through textual analysis and interaction analysis in tandem with frameworks including cognitive discourse analysis (Tenbrink, 2015) and rhetorical structure theory (Mann & Thompson, 2009). The findings show that self-disclosure enables support providers to distance themselves from problems, release their emotions, and increase reliability/persuasiveness. Self-disclosure facilitates the disclosure of other participants and support recipients may perceive it as advice, mitigation, and normalization. Chapter 6 conceptualizes the politeness of advice messages. Viewing advice as a speech event, textual analysis is conducted to explore the discursive moves and relational strategies (Locher, 2006) in advice messages, and shows that the advice messages contain many emphatic moves and relational strategies, including sharing own experience, empathizing, and assessment. The notions of

contextualization (Gumperz, 1987) and relational work (Watts, 2003) are used to argue that empathy is a contextualization cue to make the advice messages appropriate and politic.

Based on the three empirical studies, this thesis suggests three main characteristics of OSGADs as CofPs, including an emphasis on supportiveness, participants' performance of multiple identities, and frequent self-disclosure and advice. This thesis argues that self-disclosure is particularly crucial in the social support communication due to its multi-functionality. Self-disclosure is also an act that contextualizes an empathetic interactional context wherein advice is often politic and appropriate. This thesis concludes by discussing implications for interpersonal communication and online support groups in Hong Kong.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION .....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
LIST OF TABLES .....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES .....	x
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background information .....	1
1.1.1 Definition of social support.....	1
1.1.2 Anxiety and depression worldwide .....	2
1.1.3 Social support and anxiety/depression .....	3
1.1.4 Computer-mediated communication (CMC) in health contexts .....	4
1.1.5 Online self-help groups for mental health.....	8
1.1.6 Language and communication of online social support.....	10
1.1.7 Section summary .....	12
1.2 Lead-in .....	12
1.2.1 Research motivation.....	12
1.2.2 Research objective and research question.....	14
1.2.3 Outline of the thesis .....	15
<b>Chapter 2 Literature Review.....</b>	<b>18</b>
2.1 Social constructionism .....	18
2.2 Language and discourse analysis (DA).....	20
2.3 Mixed-methods discourse analysis (MMDA) .....	22
2.3.1 Computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) .....	22
2.3.2 Mixed methods analysis.....	23
2.3.3 Discourse analysis (DA) .....	24
2.3.4 The operation of mixed-methods discourse analysis (MMDA).....	26
2.3.5 Section summary .....	28
2.4 Prior research on social support in online self-help groups .....	28

2.5 Communities of practice (CofPs).....	31
2.5.1 Modes of belonging in CofPs.....	34
2.5.2 Previous studies of CofPs.....	36
2.5.3 Linguistic studies of CofPs .....	36
2.5.4 Studies of online CofPs in healthcare contexts .....	37
2.6 Research objectives.....	39
2.7 Research significance.....	39
2.8 Chapter summary .....	41
<b>Chapter 3 Research Methodology.....</b>	<b>44</b>
3.1 Rationale and criteria of selections .....	44
3.2 The selected forums .....	45
3.2.1 Daily Strength .....	45
3.2.2 Anxiety Central .....	45
3.2.3 Psych Central .....	46
3.2.4 Mental Health Forum .....	46
3.2.5 No More Panic .....	47
3.2.6 Beyond Blue.....	47
3.3 Data collection .....	48
3.3.1 Ethical consideration.....	48
3.3.2 Corpus of OSGADs.....	49
3.4 Data Analysis .....	51
3.4.1 Chapter 4: Conversation analysis and content analysis.....	51
3.4.2 Chapter 5: Textual analysis and interaction analysis .....	56
3.4.3 Chapter 6: Textual analysis and interaction analysis .....	60
3.5 Rationale behind the application of MMDA.....	66
3.6 Chapter summary .....	67
<b>Chapter 4 Structure and Content of the Online Communication of Social Support ....</b>	<b>68</b>
4.1 Chapter introduction .....	68
4.2 Online social support and its helpfulness.....	69
4.3 Findings.....	72

4.3.1 Sequential structure.....	72
4.3.2 Content of social support .....	80
4.4 Communicative attributes in OSGADs.....	84
4.5 Inapplicability of optimal matching theory.....	86
4.6 Chapter summary .....	87
<b>Chapter 5 Giving Support through Multifunctional Self-disclosure.....</b>	<b>89</b>
5.1 Chapter introduction .....	89
5.2 Self-disclosure and social relationship.....	90
5.3 Self-disclosure in online self-help groups.....	91
5.4 Linguistic research on functions of self-disclosure.....	92
5.5 Personal layer.....	94
5.5.1 Distancing from problems.....	94
5.5.2 Releasing emotions .....	95
5.6 Textual layer .....	96
5.6.1 Increasing reliability/persuasion .....	96
5.7 Interactional layer .....	99
5.7.1 Enhancing self-disclosure .....	99
5.7.2 Mitigating.....	101
5.7.3 Advising.....	103
5.7.4 Normalizing .....	104
5.8 Multi-functions of self-disclosure in OSGADs.....	105
5.9 Chapter summary .....	108
<b>Chapter 6 Conceptualizing Politeness in Advice Messages.....</b>	<b>110</b>
6.1 Chapter introduction .....	110
6.2 Advice and social relationship .....	111
6.3 Studies on advice and politeness.....	112
6.4 Discursive moves in advice messages.....	114
6.4.1 Own experience.....	114
6.4.2 Advice .....	115
6.4.3 Assessment.....	119

6.5 Relational strategies .....	120
6.5.1 Empathizing .....	120
6.5.2 Boosting .....	121
6.5.3 Bonding .....	122
6.6 Empathy as contextualization cue .....	123
6.7 Conceptualizing politeness of advice messages .....	124
6.8 Chapter summary .....	129
<b>Chapter 7 Conclusion</b> .....	129
7.1 How self-disclosure and advice contribute to the communication of social support ..	130
7.2 Methodological and theoretical contributions .....	132
7.3 Characteristics of OSGADs as CofPs .....	134
7.3.1 Modes of belonging in OSGADs .....	137
7.4 Research implications .....	138
7.4.1 Implications for online communication of social support .....	138
7.4.2 Implications for interpersonal communication .....	139
7.4.3 Implications for developing online self-help groups in Hong Kong .....	139
7.5 Limitations and future research .....	141
References .....	144
CURRICULUM VITAE .....	167