

DOCTORAL THESIS

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

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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.

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