



A mediated discourse analysis of self-disclosure in online self-help groups for anxiety and depression

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Abstract

Loneliness has emerged as a significant precursor to anxiety and depression, prompting a growing interest in the role of self-disclosure as a potential mitigating factor. Previous research has suggested that self-disclosure may play a critical role in reducing feelings of loneliness, thereby alleviating symptoms associated with these mental health conditions. Studies have highlighted self-disclosure as a prevalent social practice within online support groups, indicating its potential to foster the development of relationships through participant interaction. However, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the interplay between self-disclosure and the discursive and complex context of online self-help groups. The nuanced effects of self-disclosure are often overlooked. This study sought to address this gap by employing mediated discourse analysis (MDA) to investigate the ramifications of self-disclosure in post messages within online self-help groups for anxiety and depression (OSGADs). Specifically, it views self-disclosure as a social action, elucidating its interrelationship with OSGADs. The findings reveal several key effects of self-disclosure in post messages, including distancing of individuals from their problems, enhancement of self-disclosure exchange, receiving and expressing empathy and understanding, and normalisation of experiences. The results suggest that the digital environment of OSGADs facilitates self-disclosure, and the effects of self-disclosure contribute to the continuum of social support exchange. This study concludes by offering implications for the application of MDA in studies of online discourse and the role of OSGADs in alleviating anxiety and depression.

Keywords: anxiety and depression; discourse analysis; self-disclosure; social support; online self-help group

Introduction

Self-disclosure, as articulated by Cozby (1972), refers to the voluntary sharing of personal information. It entails a communicative process through which an individual intentionally reveals aspects of their identity to another interlocutor (Pearce & Sharp, 1973). This phenomenon encompasses a range of personally relevant details, including individual experiences, thoughts, and emotions (Derlega et al., 1993; Wheelless & Grotz, 1977). Self-narratives are a significant element of self-disclosure, which often provide rich information into an individual's life through retrospective accounts and flashbacks. In online support groups, posts that contain personal disclosures—such as past actions, familial relationships, personal beliefs, and emotional states—constitute the essence of self-disclosure. This communicative act is particularly pronounced within online self-help communities, where evidence suggests that self-disclosure occurs more frequently than in traditional face-to-face interactions (Nguyen et al., 2012). Participants in these online forums articulate their challenges to help fellow members—potential sources of social support—achieve a nuanced understanding of their situations, thereby facilitating the provision of needed support (Pan et al., 2018).

Research indicates that self-disclosure can have therapeutic benefits for individuals experiencing psychological distress, especially in the contexts of anxiety and depression. To fully understand this relationship, it is essential to examine the underlying factors contributing to these mental health conditions. Loneliness has been identified as a significant precursor to both anxiety and depression (Horgan et al., 2013). When an individual feels alienated from societal, familial, or peer support systems, their mental well-being may decline further, exacerbated by societal labelling as being “mentally disordered” and the associated stereotypes of incompetence, unpredictability, and potential dangerousness (Leach, 2015). The detrimental effects of loneliness extend to a heightened risk of various cognitive and mental health challenges (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010), suggesting that interventions aimed at alleviating loneliness could subsequently mitigate the related symptoms. In this context, researchers have identified self-disclosure as a communicative act that is conducive to reducing feelings of loneliness (Stiles, 1987; Young, 1982). This underscores the importance of examining self-disclosure within the framework of interactions among individuals grappling with anxiety and depression.

Previous studies have revealed that self-disclosure is one of the most predominant communicative acts in online exchange of social support for individuals with mental health problems (Coulson, 2005; Teng, 2024; Yip, 2024). Scholarly attention has increasingly focused on the effects of self-disclosure in interpersonal communication in online settings. The primary function of self-disclosure online is to foster intimacy and enhance the development of social relationships (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Laurenceau & Kleinman, 2006; Misoch, 2015). Other studies have also suggested that online self-disclosure is likely to facilitate the development of social relationships, reduce the sense of loneliness, and subsequently alleviate anxiety and depression (Greiner et al., 2017; Yip, 2018). However, the existing literature has predominantly highlighted a correlational relationship between self-disclosure and the advancement of social relationships, revealing a significant gap in understanding how self-disclosure operates in a digital environment where non-verbal communication is absent and where contextual constraints exist. This study adopted mediated discourse analysis (MDA) to investigate the effects of self-disclosure in the messages exchanged within online self-help groups for anxiety and depression (OSGADs). The findings illuminate how self-disclosure contributes to the exchange of social support in OSGADs and the interplay between self-disclosure and the digital communicative setting.

Self-Disclosure and Mental Health

Loneliness has been shown to increase the risk of various cognitive and mental health issues, including anxiety and depression (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). It is defined as a distressing emotional state arising from an individual's perception that their social needs are inadequately met, either in terms of the quantity or, more critically, the quality of their social relationships (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001). The inability to cultivate intimate social connections can lead to feelings of loneliness, which may subsequently precipitate depression and anxiety (Harrison & Barlow, 2009). Consequently, alleviating loneliness has the potential to moderate symptoms of anxiety and depression. Self-disclosure may serve as a mechanism for reducing loneliness (Ignatius & Kokkonen, 2007). Although empirical studies specifically examining the relationship between self-disclosure and loneliness remain limited, this association has been frequently referenced in the literature. For example, Rogers (1970) found that self-disclosure, when met with a caring and accepting response from another, can diminish feelings of loneliness. Similarly, Young (1982) posited that self-disclosure is integral to nurturing intimate relationships, which, in turn, can alleviate loneliness. Stiles (1987) introduced a framework for understanding self-disclosure that includes two primary tenets: first, individuals experiencing psychological distress are more likely to engage in self-disclosure than those who are not; second, such disclosure can alleviate psychological distress either directly or indirectly. This framework has received empirical support from research conducted by Stiles et al. (1992), who demonstrated that university students with high and moderate levels of trait anxiety were more inclined to disclose personal information when discussing anxiety-provoking topics. These studies collectively underscore the role of self-disclosure as a mechanism through which loneliness can be alleviated, thereby reducing anxiety and depression among the affected individuals. Given this context, it is essential to explore the effects of self-disclosure within interactions among individuals displaying depressive symptoms. Nonetheless, recent empirical investigations into the specific processes by which self-disclosure mitigates loneliness through interaction remain inadequately addressed.

Self-disclosure is a fundamental aspect of interpersonal communication, playing a critical role in the development of relationships (Misoch, 2015). Through sharing personal information, individuals build trust and mutual understanding, making themselves vulnerable in the process (Mesch & Beker, 2010). This process is characterised as reciprocal, where individuals progressively share more personal information in a "tit-for-tat" exchange (Collins & Miller, 1994). This reciprocal nature significantly influences the trajectory and transformation of meaning within relationships (Keyes, 1998). The social functions of self-disclosure, particularly in relation to enhanced interpersonal relationships, can be understood through social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). According to the theory, increasing both the quantity and depth of self-disclosure over time fosters relational intimacy and satisfaction. Intimacy is conceptualised as a personal and subjective sense of connectedness between the partners engaged in a reciprocal process of self-disclosure (Greene et al., 2006). Empirical research has indicated that receiving a higher degree of disclosure leads to more positive impressions and a greater sense of familiarity in interpersonal interactions (Sprecher et al., 2013), with familiarity being a crucial component of intimacy (Laurenceau & Kleinman, 2006). Recently, there has been growing interest in the effects of self-disclosure in the context of online social relationships. For example, Park et al. (2011) demonstrated that both the volume and positivity of self-disclosure greatly facilitated connections and fostered intimacy among users on Facebook. Their study highlighted the significant role of self-disclosure in the development of relationships within social networking sites. Furthermore, enhanced

social relationships may contribute to the extent to which self-disclosure alleviates feelings of loneliness. However, prior research appears to highlight the correlation between self-disclosure and the establishment of social relationships, overlooking the interrelationship between self-disclosure and its mediated discourse, especially when self-disclosure is performed in an online context, as such settings significantly influence the actions of the interlocutors.

Self-Disclosure in Online Self-Help Groups

Self-disclosure is observed to occur more frequently in online communication than in face-to-face interactions. Barak and Gluck-Ofri (2007) suggest that online communication accelerates the process of self-disclosure, as such interactions can evoke feelings of relief and mutual support due to the increased certainty associated with virtual exchanges. Participants in online environments can readily access information regarding others' backgrounds, personal values, and circumstances, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of each another. Furthermore, individuals are able to retrieve user-generated information—such as messages and personal profiles—to enhance their knowledge of their fellow participants. Research indicates that the information individuals willingly disclose in online contexts is often not shared in face-to-face settings (Bonebrake, 2002). In the initial stages of face-to-face communication, exchanges tend to revolve around superficial information, with more personal details typically revealed over time (Rosen et al., 2008). In contrast, individuals are inclined to share larger quantities of personal information through online communication (Tidwell & Walther, 2002), and online messages are associated with a higher likelihood of self-disclosure compared with in-person interactions (Leung, 2002). A significant factor contributing to the prevalence of self-disclosure in online contexts is anonymity. Research has further highlighted that self-disclosure is particularly prominent in online self-help groups within healthcare settings. For instance, Coulson and Greenwood (2012) examined two discussion boards focused on childhood cancer, and found that participants exhibited high levels of self-disclosure. Similarly, Greiner et al. (2017) investigated three online self-help forums for cannabis addiction, noting that a substantial proportion of the exchanged messages involved self-disclosure, such as descriptions of symptoms. In these settings, support seekers often initiate self-disclosing interactions, while support givers reciprocate with empathetic responses and personal disclosure (Coulson, 2005). This phenomenon of reciprocity, or the “dyadic effect,” elucidates the prevalence of self-disclosure in online self-help groups, wherein the disclosure by one participant prompts or is followed by disclosure from others (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007). Exploring the structural patterns and content of social support exchange in OSGADs, Yip (2020, 2024) identified that showing empathy and understanding was the most predominant type of social support in the exchange, and it heavily involved the act of self-disclosure, through which the support providers explained why they could empathise. Self-disclosure is often activated in the form of narrative, which is viewed as potentially therapeutic from the perspective of narrative therapy (Yip, 2018, 2024). Through tracing and gauging the narrative development of support seekers in OSGADs, Yip (2018) suggested that self-disclosing narratives can be indicators of the support seekers' psychological status and level of resilience to anxiety and depression. The study showed that most of the support seekers experienced a modest degree of healing effect at the beginning of social support exchanges. To summarise, the therapeutic effect of self-disclosure in digital communication appears analogous to that in face-to-face interactions. However, the questions of how self-disclosure contributes to the social support exchange that is potentially therapeutic in

online contexts remains unexplored. Employing MDA, this study aimed to examine the action of self-disclosure in OSGADs and how self-disclosure helps us make sense of the conversations in OSGADs, which are deemed to be discursive and complex in the exchange of social support.

Theoretical Framework: MDA

This study employed the theoretical framework of MDA as articulated by Scollon (1998), focusing on the intersection of social practices, in which discourse functions as a mechanism for identity construction and the formulation of claims (Jones & Norris, 2005). From the perspective of MDA, language is viewed as a set of mediated tools used to fulfil specific social functions, positioning discourse as an integral aspect of social action. This perspective aligns with Halliday's assertion that "language is as it is because of its function in social structure" (Halliday, 1973, p. 65). Within the MDA framework, the relationship between discourse and action is dynamic and contingent, situated within broader social practices, identities, and goals. The MDA approach typically raises two critical questions: "What is/are the action/s that is/are being taken here?" and, subsequently, "What is the role of discourse in this/those action/s?" (Scollon, 2001, p. 9). Jones (2014) proposed two main analytical tools of MDA that help us to make sense of the discursive complexity of discourse through focusing on social actions, namely mediated action and sites of engagement. *Mediated action* refers to the action which utilises verbal and non-verbal elements, including words, sentences, images, gestures, or sounds, to be done. An action cannot be achieved without the use of these elements and other cultural tools which are associated with objects and materials, such as machines, furniture, and coins, in social practices. *A sites of engagement* refers to a "window that is opened up through the intersection of social practices and mediational means (cultural tools) that make that action the focal point of attention of the relevant participants" (2001, p. 4). Sites of engagement are constructed through the intersection of three factors: (1) a person's habitus or a group's homologous habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), (2) the interaction order (Goffman, 1981), and (3) discourses in place (Jones, 2005; Scollon, 2001; Scollon & Scollon, 2004). This concept give importance to the attention or engagement of the relevant participants in an action. Specifically, *habitus* refers to a durable and transposable set of dispositions, attitudes, and behaviours that individuals acquire over time through their personal experiences and interactions within various social contexts (Bourdieu, 1990). This concept reflects the interplay between personal history and social environment. *Interaction order* refers to the positioning of an individual, which can be different when interacting with different people in different situations or when alone or in groups (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). *Discourse in place* refers to the material space or physical environment in which social actions are performed, based on the configuration and layout of the place, the available mediated means, and the social and cultural histories of the people (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Every mediated action (also understood as social action) can be seen as being enmeshed in a discourse cycle that involves the concepts mentioned above (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). The applicability of MDA in digital social practice has been recognised. To understand the way people use and integrate the internet into their daily life, it is important to take account of both what they do and what they say or type online (Larsen & Raudaskoski, 2020). MDA is a helpful framework that enables us to study this through focusing on people's actions and sayings in an internet-mediated environment (Schatzki, 2012). Drawing upon MDA, this study conducted discourse analysis to investigate the effects of self-disclosure, the social action considered here, in threaded conversations to further explain the interrelationship between social actions and sites of engagement in mediated discourse.

Research Methodology

Data for this study were collected from six OSGADs. The selection of these groups was based on two primary criteria: popularity and member activity. Popularity was defined by the presence of a large and steadily increasing number of registered members, while member activity was assessed by regularly monitoring the dates of the most recent postings within each group. To facilitate participant interaction, threads were chosen that contained approximately eight posts, ensuring sufficient dialogue among the members. The endpoint for the conversations in the selected threads was determined by the timing of the last post, with the final contributions having been made at least six months prior to the extraction date of 25 February 2017. The groups selected for this study utilised English as the medium of communication and were based in the United States, Britain, and Australia, reflecting the widespread nature of online self-help groups in these countries. In total, 60 discussion threads were compiled, encompassing 1018 posts and approximately 110,000 words. An equal number of threads was collected from each forum (10 threads per group) to prevent any disproportionate influence of data from a single forum on the results of the analysis. Most of the collected threads contained four to six posts. Although the dataset is relatively modest in size, it provides an adequate foundation for conducting an in-depth qualitative discourse analysis.

Ethical guidelines concerning privacy in internet research were meticulously adhered to in order to protect the participants' personal identities (Buchanan & Zimmer, 2012). All names of the online self-help groups and the usernames were anonymised to ensure confidentiality. The data were exclusively drawn from publicly accessible posts, which could be viewed by any internet user without the need for registration or login credentials. A limited selection of messages from the corpus has been presented as examples in this article to illustrate the key findings while safeguarding the participants' anonymity.

Drawing upon MDA, this study views the interactions among participants in OSGADs not only as being shaped by the individual identities of the participants or the content of their messages but also being significantly influenced by the characteristics of the OSGADs themselves, the culture of support exchange, and the communication tools available—primarily typed language. When participants engage in conversations about their experiences with anxiety and/or depression, the discourse is mediated by several factors, including the interface, rules, and technological features (e.g., threads and word limits) of the OSGADs. Given that OSGADs are often text-based with very limited multimodal elements, this MDA focused on the language and content of the participants' messages, as well as the mediating factors at play. For instance, the study explored how support seekers perform self-disclosure in relation to the development of social relationships and the improvement of their psychological well-being, which reflects their identities within the support groups. Moreover, the MDA considered the role of OSGADs in shaping the dynamics of social support exchange. Participants may strategically craft their messages to elicit responses from others by adapting their language to the conventional practices of the support groups, such as initiating threads and responding to others' contributions. To summarise, this study emphasised the participants' mediated actions of self-disclosure and employed MDA to examine the interrelationships among self-disclosure, the social practices among the participants, and OSGADs as mediating tools. Through the lens of MDA, the study reveals how self-disclosure facilitates the provision and receipt of social support, alleviates anxiety and depression, and fosters interpersonal relationships that mitigate feelings of loneliness.

The analytical process was structured as follows. The online ethnographic observation was conducted prior to analysing the textual data to understand the social practices, the contextual settings of the OSGADs, and the interaction patterns of the participants within the discourse.

This initial step is vital, as it enhances data interpretation and elucidates the participants' communicative behaviours. This ethnographic observation lasted for one year, during which I browsed the six OSGADs twice a week, explored their different functions, read the instructions and messages from the forum moderators, and rigorously took observation notes that recorded the structural and interactional features of the communication among participants. The data analysis focused on the threads involving the mediated action of self-disclosure. It was found that 97% ($n = 58$) of the collected threads contained instances of self-disclosure and were subsequently examined. This aligns with the findings of prior research suggesting that self-disclosure is prevalent in online self-help groups (Greiner et al., 2017). The threads were analysed manually and iteratively, one by one. In the analysis, particular attention was directed to the means through which participants engaged in self-disclosure, the types of social support they received from the respondents, and how this exchange interacted with the sides of engagement in OSGADs. Through this process, the effects of self-disclosure in the threaded conversations were categorised into four predominant categories: (1) distancing oneself from problems, (2) receiving empathy and understanding, (3) enhancing self-disclosure exchange, and (4) being normalised. It should be noted that it is possible for a threaded conversation to involve more than one of the above categories. The identified effects of self-disclosure are then discussed and elucidated in relation to the sites of engagement in OSGADs, considering the mediation of OSGADs.

Findings

Distancing Oneself from Problems

Self-disclosure is an act used by disclosers to distance themselves from their problems, enabling them to recall and (re)arrange their experiences from an outsider's perspective. This effect was most apparent when the respondents described their experiences in detail, as illustrated in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 1

Support seeker: Hi all, this my first post. Hoping to gain some relief from persistent intrusive thoughts that have taken hold and taken control of my life. I am having troubles dislodging them. I feel if I confess the thoughts I might gain some relief but I also feel I can't tell anyone because I fear their judgement and the consequences of my confession. I feel hopeless and have little joy in my life. I have started to catastrophise about my life and career and my future. I am at a loss as what to do. I want to feel 'normal', happy and optimistic again.

Respondent: I've been battling that same over sense of responsibility for my actions/possible mistakes. I've been dealing with this plus general anxiety since I was a kid. Yesterday something happened at work which triggered me again into what I think are panic attacks! I couldn't eat all day, have been completely obsessing about the issue, unable to concentrate and unable to talk to anyone about it. I've made an appointment to see my GP to get a referral to see someone which I half started a few months ago.

Support seeker: Thanks, XXXX. It is good to know that others experience the same thing. You tend to feel very alone in this awful journey. I really do need to visit my GP again. I have some good says some not so good. I have triggers also and often have to disconnect from the world. Makes it hard to maintain a job! Good luck with it all.

Narrating past events through self-disclosure allowed the narrators to distance themselves from the immediacy of recalled events (Bruner, 2002). The passages in Excerpt 1 demonstrate self-disclosure involving narrative. The respondent used the metaphorical expressions “I’ve been battling” and “I’ve been dealing with this...” to describe their confrontation with illness. This metaphor of battle indicated a separation between the discloser and their illness, which represented the discloser’s opponent. The frequent use of the first-person pronoun “I” served as an exclusive marker separating the discloser from their illness. The use of narrative in self-disclosure enabled the narrator to evaluate (or re-evaluate) and suggest alternative interpretations of past events (Ladegaard, 2012). In this case, the respondent was experiencing panic attacks and recognised a need to address their illness by visiting a general practitioner. The interlocutors appeared to understand that they were waging a similar war against anxiety, as the support seeker told the respondent that the support seeker tended to feel alone in their harrowing journey. This pattern is in line with work by Yip (2018), who revealed that participants in online support groups created distance from their anxiety and/or depression through self-narratives.

Being Normalised

As Giles and Newbold (2013) contended, validation is an important function in online self-help groups for mental illness because it leads to a sense of “normality” for support seekers. In OSGADs, where people who share mutual problems provide support to each other, the participants are likely to perceive normality after learning about others’ conditions. In fact, Excerpt 1 has already exhibited an example of normalisation, though this excerpt was used to illustrate how the participants distance themselves from the mental illness. Specifically, the support seeker expressed his/her desire to “feel ‘normal’” at the end of the first posting and this was answered by the self-disclosure of the respondent. What indicated that the self-disclosure made the support seeker feel normal was realised in his/her response to the respondent that “It is good to know that others experience the same thing.” Excerpt 2 also displays that self-disclosure is a medium used to convey normality in OSGADs.

Excerpt 2

Support seeker: I have anxiety attacks all the time. It’s consuming my life. I have health anxiety and every little wrong thing I feel in my body, I panic. I think I’m going to die all the time for no reason. Does anyone else feel this way?

Respondent: Hi, I have had anxiety for over 5 years now. I have come a long way but I am still struggling a lot with health anxiety. I have been in the doctor’s office at least 12 times in the last 6 months. So if you want to share more of your concerns I am here for you.

Support seeker: Yes, I would also love to hear the things you have struggled with. I would like to hear your fears about your health and the things you feel that makes you worried. I think that would make me feel normal.

Excerpt 2 showed that the support seeker shared his or her morbid thoughts and anxious feelings. The question “Does anyone else feel this way?” was a speech act that requested the respondents to share the same experiences, through which the support seeker could be normalised. It was in an interrogative form, but it seems to serve as a speech act of a request to share similar experiences and feelings. This want is validated in another post message of the support seeker, who said, “I would also love to hear the things you have struggled with.” The support seeker also

explained the their wish to hear about the struggles of others by saying that “I think that would make me feel normal” after the respondent described a similar experience of having health anxiety. A non-signalled discourse relation that indicates the causal relationship between these two quotes can be identified in the posting. The conversation showed that the participants in OSGADs can obtain a sense of normality from others through self-disclosing messages.

Receiving and Showing Empathy or Understanding

According to Cutrona and Shur (1992), people express understanding and empathy by sharing personal experiences. Conveying understanding or empathy is one of the most prevalent forms of social support in online self-help groups related to healthcare (Atwood et al., 2017; Coulson and Greenwood, 2012; Horgan et al., 2013; Prescott et al., 2017). This type of social support is also the most predominant in OSGADs (Yip, 2020). Excerpt 3 is an exemplar of how the participants convey understanding and empathy to each other.

Excerpt 3

Support seeker: I have had depression for a few years now. 2 years ago my life changed for the worse something I don't want to talk about as it really upsets me.

I feel so alone I have no family no Friends I feel being alive is pointless I struggle to get out of bed most days I don't want to feel like this anymore I feel best way to stop these feelings is to take my life.

I have tried once before and it didn't work. I want to go asleep and never wake up.

Respondent: I am in the same predicament, I feel. I won't ask you what has happened, but I do want you to know that there are people who are willing to be there for you and are not at all judgmental.

Our lives has value and sometimes we all lose sight of that. I think your lack of family and friends has problem helped blind you to this truth. I think that there are people out there (and on this forum) who are willing to befriend you and be there for you as we are all in this together.

Support seeker: Thank You.

Excerpt 3 began with the disclosure of the support seeker who had depression and felt despair and lonely in their life. The support seeker capitalised the word “Friends”, appearing to emphasise the issue of social isolation. This self-disclosure primarily described the support seekers' feelings and thoughts, since the mental process verb “feel” and the first-person pronoun “I” were often used repeatedly in the post messages. The respondent responded to the support seeker by saying “I am in the same predicament, I feel” and “we are all in this together” to indicate the connection with the support seeker. The inclusive pronouns “we” and “our” were used to show that the respondent and support seeker were in the same boat. The respondent seemed to have paid attention to the problem the support seeker faced, reminding him/her that “there are people out there (and on this forum) who are willing to befriend you.” This showed that when showing empathy or understanding to the support seeker, the respondent gave importance to her/her psychological needs.

Self-Disclosure Exchange

The facilitation of self-information exchange is a predominant function of self-disclosure. Once a respondent answered a support seeker's post by self-disclosing, the support seeker

also disclosed more detailed information. This continuous process allows the interlocutors to become acquainted with each other. One exemplar is the following.

Excerpt 4

Support seeker: My sense of guilt makes me anxious and my anxiety only nurtures my sense of guilt. It's killing me. I'd like to hear your stories/personal experiences with strong sense of guilt. It's always been a big, big problem for me since I was a child. I'd like to feel less like I'm all alone in this...

Respondent: I feel the same, I hate myself and have a lot of regret and remorse over things I've done in life, I really do hate myself and it defo [definitely] flairs up my anxiety. I even feel guilt over things I didn't do... It's like a vicious circle and its never ending tbh [to be honest]

Support seeker: Hi, thank you for your reply. Yes, I agree, it is... And the thing about feeling guilt about stuff I didn't even do – gosh I'm happy someone can understand me. That's... excruciating. I always feel like I'm not doing enough, with anything. School, parents, siblings, friends, cleaning, hobbies. Everything makes me anxious... This in turn makes me unable to stand criticism from others, even when done with kindness and good intentions. I already criticise myself so much and I already feel I'm not doing enough 24/7. So if anyone adds even the tiniest bit to that I just cannot bear it. I don't know if you've ever experienced the same thing.

Respondent: My thing is that I often criticize myself a lot more than others do, totally get what you mean, I'm on the same boat too.

Excerpt 4 showed the dyadic effect of self-disclosure interactions, such that the disclosure of an individual that is caused or followed by that of others (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007). This effect is also consistent with Collins and Miller's (1994) suggestion that self-disclosure is a reciprocal process in which individuals gradually disclose more information about themselves in a "tit-for-tat" exchange. In the excerpt, the support seeker shared his or her anxious feelings and sense of guilt, producing a directive speech act to elicit the respondents' sharing of their similar experience and feelings by saying "I'd like to hear your stories/personal experiences with [a] strong sense of guilt," which signalled the support seeker's desire for understanding and empathy. This speech act seemed to have successfully elicited the respondents' self-disclosure. For instance, the respondent responded to the support seeker by sharing their feelings of self-hatred and anxiety. The respondent's disclosure message triggered more specific and deeper disclosure by the support seeker, who had excessive self-criticism and was incapable of standing criticism. This depressive circumstance was then echoed by the respondent. These two participants were becoming acquainted with one another, as more detailed personal information was exchanged in the course of interaction through self-disclosure.

Discussion

Drawing upon MDA, this article investigates how self-disclosure is intertwined with the social practices and discourse of OSGADs. I argue that the complex and discursive interactions among participants in OSGADs can be better understood by examining self-disclosure as a social action within these groups. Given that the primary goal of OSGADs is to provide a platform that allows

individuals with anxiety and/or depression to exchange social support, thereby achieving a certain level of emotional alleviation and obtaining psychological comfort (Yip, 2018, 2024), it is uncertain whether all participants suffer or have ever suffered from mental illness. The thread initiators are often assumed to be the sufferers, as they initiate the thread to start conversations aimed at obtaining social support (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Yip, 2018). Self-disclosure is a mediated action that indicates the results of the participants' journeys of suffering from anxiety and/or depression. Some may be at the beginning of their journeys, while others may have been fighting the illness for a long time. The participants' accumulated experiences with anxiety and/or depression enable them to disclose themselves in OSGADs. This mediated action is also attributed to the communicative habitus of the participants, who claim their membership in the groups by complying with social practices that involve the extensive use of self-disclosure. OSGADs serve as a cultural tool that the participants can utilise to perform the mediated action of self-disclosure by typing to compile posts within a thread. Using this cultural tool, the participants are provided with the opportunities, time, and space needed to reflect on their experiences in dealing with and distancing themselves from mental illness during the process of compiling self-disclosure postings.

Apart from distancing the participants from their problems, self-disclosure may initiate and sustain the exchange of social support through a "tit-for-tat" interaction (Arminen, 2004; Collins & Miller, 1994), where individuals gradually reveal more detailed personal information (Altman & Taylor, 1973). I argue that OSGADs are crucial in maintaining this exchange. OSGADs provide a virtual space where participants can obtain a sense of security and certainty, enabling them to disclose themselves (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007), facilitated by contextual factors such as anonymity, invisibility, the neutralisation of status, and lack of eye contact. These features enhance the willingness of individuals to share intimate information, contributing to their subjective experiences in cyberspace (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007). The participants can access information about fellow users, such as messages and personal profiles, fostering familiarity. This virtual space creates an environment where online users are more willing to disclose information that they might not share in face-to-face interactions (Bonebrake, 2002) and where online messages are more likely to lead to greater self-disclosure than face-to-face communication (Leung, 2002). As users engage in this exchange, self-disclosure in OSGADs becomes a durable social practice that reflects the participants' attitudes towards their membership in self-help groups. Meanwhile, the pervasive nature of self-disclosure within the exchange can create an interaction order in which the participants possess equivalent social power and status without hierarchy, as OSGADs often filter out participants' demographic information that could be associated with social discrepancies, such as age, gender, education level, and occupation, in threaded conversations. Self-disclosure also contributes to the equal positioning of participants, as support seekers are often normalised by respondents who share their experiences with anxiety and/or depression. This normalisation function minimises hierarchy and social distance between the support seekers and respondents. Moreover, support seekers may also receive social support in the form of empathy and understanding from other participants, which has been found to be one of the most predominant categories of social support in OSGADs (Yip, 2020; 2024). The participants who deliver this social support can construct the identity of "people in the same boat" (Coulson, 2005), which places them in an equal position in this context. This interaction order is thus sustained through social interactions that strongly involve self-disclosure.

Whereas MDA emphasises how material entities constitute a social action in discourse (Scollon & Scollon, 2004), it seems to overlook the impacts of mediated action on the configuration of the sides of engagement, which includes the habitus, interaction order, and

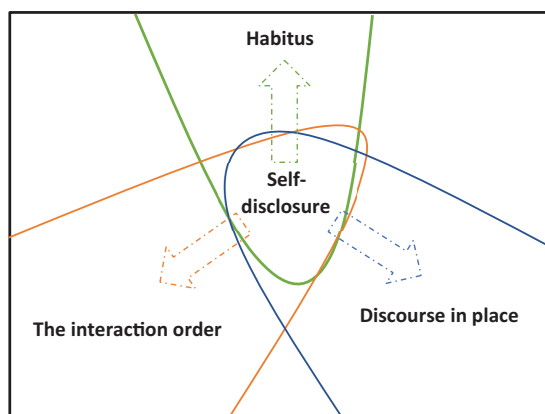


Figure 1 *Discourse cycle of self-disclosure in OSGADs.*

discourse in place. By examining the effect of self-disclosure as a social action in the discourse of threaded conversations, this study reveals that such social action is likely to contribute to the sides of engagement. As shown in Figure 1, self-disclosure can facilitate the self-disclosure of others, assisting in the establishment and maintenance of the habitus in OSGADs, where self-disclosure is viewed as a durable social practice in social support exchange. Self-disclosure also contributes to the formation of interaction order, as the participants are often normalised by others' postings that involve self-disclosure. Participants are positioned equally, and this equal positioning benefits the practice of self-disclosure. The social practice of self-disclosure helps shape the layout of conversations in OSGADs and influences the experiences of participants who utilise this mediated means. Together with the influence of the sides of engagement, the effects of self-disclosure constitute a discourse cycle that demonstrates a sustainable system for social support exchange in a digital setting.

Implications and Concluding Remarks

Compared with other approaches to discourse analysis, such as critical discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and corpus linguistics, MDA appears to be less commonly applied. However, MDA can be useful for exploring discourse and specific social practices in online communication, as it considers both the spatial and temporal factors affecting social actions, providing a comprehensive framework for discourse analysts to investigate online discourse. Instead of concentrating solely on the interrelationship between the text and the context, MDA enhances in-depth and traceable discussions that highlight the role of discourse in influencing social actions. This study has demonstrated the applicability of MDA to the investigation of OSGADs, where the contextual settings, modes of communication, language use, participants' experiences, their social power and positioning, and conventional social behaviours were observed, examined, and explicated. Nonetheless, the discourse cycle proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2004) seems to present a linear and causal relationship between the three components—namely, the habitus, interaction order, and discourse in place—and social actions, with less emphasis on the interplay among them. This study suggests that this interplay can be revealed by analysing how specific social actions function in online discourse from a cognitive–pragmatic perspective. For example, exploring speech acts, implicatures, and metaphors in relevant conversations can provide insights into how social actions are interrelated with the

sides of engagement. This study shows that self-disclosure in OSGADs is a social action triggered by the sides of engagement, but it also contributes to the formation, operation, and maintenance of these sides of engagement. While MDA is usually viewed as a subtype of discourse analysis and focuses on an analysis of the units of action, discourse analysts inevitably concentrate on textual and/or multimodal data when researching online discourse. Analysing the language use of the interlocutors in online interactions becomes more important, as it offers linguistic evidence that elucidates the practice of social actions.

In addition, this study offers an elaboration of how OSGADs can achieve therapeutic effects via self-disclosure. Building upon the positive correlation between self-disclosure and reduced feelings of loneliness as well as alleviating anxiety and depression (Stiles et al., 1992), the findings seemingly suggest that self-disclosure in OSGADs can contribute to a healing effect through its functions of facilitating the self-disclosure of participants, normalising newcomers, showing understanding and empathy, and allowing disclosers to distance themselves from their problems. However, we should not oversimplify the complexity of treating these conditions in online contexts. An overreliance on support from online support groups (as opposed to clinicians) might lead to adverse consequences. Numerous factors affect the extent of one's self-disclosure, such as gender, individual characteristics, and the severity of anxiety and depression (Ignatius & Kokkonen, 2007). The reactions from those receiving disclosures may also influence the impact of self-disclosure on the disclosers. Therefore, participating in OSGADs does not guarantee a healing effect, and indulgence in online social networking sites could negatively affect participants' mental health. The role of online self-help groups for mental health should remain complementary to professional psychotherapy and counselling services.

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