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Social Support Exchanges in Facebook Social Support Group

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Abstract

Much research has been carried out looking into the psychological effects of Facebook usage. Research reveals that Facebook use can influence subjective wellbeing, either positively or negatively. Few studies have investigated the use of Facebook for online social support groups, but none has yet looked into social support group for parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) particularly in Asian context. The aim of this preliminary study was to examine the types of support being exchanged on Facebook and the frequency of the postings. Using the deductive thematic analysis, 320 Facebook postings made by members of an online social support group were analysed during a two weeks period. The results show that sharing of personal experience is the purpose of common postings, accompanied with other themes on social support. Facebook social support group can provide great avenue for these parents and can also be extended to cater for other groups.

1. Introduction

The development of support groups can be traced back to the 1980's clinical trial when Dr. Spiegel's showed that the group of women with metastatic breast cancer who took part in supportive group therapy reduced the signs of fatigue, depression, confusion and tension and lived 18 months longer than women who did not (Spiegel, Bloom, Kraemer & Gottheil, 1989). At that time, the support group was comprised of both the medical officers (doctors, nurses, therapists) and the patients. This type of support group incurred a financial cost and, as it developed and was received well, patients and those involved with patients (parents, siblings, carers) began to look into other alternatives in providing support. That was when social support group started to flourish which mostly set up by

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sufferers of medical condition or people related to the sufferers (King & Moreggi, 2007).

1.1 Social Support Group

Social support groups were initially face-to-face meetings among sufferers of medical conditions or face-to-face meetings of people related to the sufferers. The main objective of meeting people with similar experiences was not only to help themselves but to help others at the same time (Alemi et al., 1996; King & Moreggi, 2007). The emergence of this type of self- help groups offered alternative source of social support and knowledge (Kelleher, 1994), emotional support (Huws, Jones, & Ingledew, 2001; Solomon, Pistrang, & Barker, 2001) social and informational supports (Douma, Dekker, & Koot, 2006; MacIntosh, Myers, & Goin-Kochel, 2005) and was reported to result in decreased negative mood and stress (Beaudoin & Tao, 2007; Kerr & McIntosh, 2000; Preyde & Ardal, 2003 ; Stevens & Duttlinger, 1998).

1.2 Computer-mediated Social Support Group

The rapid spread of Internet access provided opportunities for a new wave of social support groups as the shift from face-to-face groups developed into computer-mediated social support groups. A range of computer-mediated social support groups are developed to deal with various conditions including self-injury (Haberstroh & Moyer, 2012), Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis which is a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord (Loanea & D'Alessandroa, 2013), suicidal individuals (Gilat, Tobin & Shahar, 2011), metastatic breast cancer (Vilhauer, McClintock & Matthews, 2010), issues related to membership of a stepfamily (Christian, 2005), and male infertility (Malik & Coulson, 2008). The benefits of computer-mediated social support groups are not only to accommodate the individuals suffering the illness/conditions but also the parents, family and carers.

1.3 Facebook Social Support Group

The rise of social media, particularly Facebook in 2004, has given a new perspective to computer-mediated social support group. Facebook is a social media platform that has been positively received around the world. The easy accessibility of Facebook has resulted in high usage levels as more people log into it as part of their daily routine. This ease of access and the popularity of Facebook have created opportunities for a new phase in the evolution of social support groups. Indeed, Facebook has become an increasingly common means by which groups have organised social support. The difference that Facebook offers in comparison to other forms of computer-mediated social support group (e-mails, chatrooms and bulletin boards) is the features for both synchronous and asynchronous communication to take place. Other features such as the options to engage in behaviour to 'Like', 'Comment', 'Share' with others can be undertaken with just a click of a mouse. In addition, more private communication is possible using private message (pm) and free call.

1.4 Facebook social support groups for parents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) children

Doing a search on social support group in Facebook garnered a long list of groups set up specifically to cater for different needs, such as disabilities, addiction and medical conditions. Most of these Facebook social support groups accommodate those who suffer from those conditions themselves, but a further search resulted in social support groups for parents/carers for those sufferers. These groups are mostly initiated by the parents themselves as a platform for them to share experiences in managing the situations that they face with their children. It also acts as a place for them to support each other. Parents of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have set up a Facebook social support group where parents and carers join and share experiences. In Australia, for example, the Facebook groups for parents of ASD children are initiated in more general terms; *Support Group Australia-Parents of Special Needs Children, Support Group for moms with kids with ADHD (Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), ADD (Attention deficit disorder), Autism and behaviour issues and Tasmanian Parents Support Group.* While in Malaysia, there is one Facebook social support group that was initiated specifically for parents of ASD children which is *Autisme*

Malaysia.

2. Research Aim and Methodology

Computer-mediated social support group may have the potential to be an alternative source of support for parents of ASD children. However, the research studying this area is minimal and there is little research involving support groups utilising Facebook. There is yet any or little empirical study exploring how Facebook support group functions and how supports are exchanged between individuals who become member of such group. Such studies may exist in the Western settings, but it appears that this type of research is yet to be carried out in the Asian settings. Thus, this study investigated the use of Facebook support group for parents of children with ASD in Malaysia.

The investigator has been a member of Autisme Malaysia (AM) Facebook group for almost a year with the role of an observer rather than active participant. After consent was obtained, the investigator conducted participant-observation in which all postings made within two weeks were collected and included in the study. A total of 320 postings were made by the participants to the AM Facebook social support group wall.

The participants were members who posted to the Autisme Malaysia(AM) Facebook support group wall during the study period. Individuals can be identified as most of them were using their real name with pictures of themselves. Socio-demographic information such as age and location can be obtained by clicking their profile name and the former will be available if the individuals chose to disclose these types of details. However, for the purpose of this study, such socio-demographic information was not included. Majority of the participants were females and were mothers of children with ASD (about 90%).

A deductive thematic analysis of postings made on the AM Facebook support group wall was carried out to identify, 1) the types of support, 2) the frequency of the support, and 3) the frequency of 'Likes' for each posting. A coding manual was designed based on types of social support mechanisms (Barrera, 1986; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983; Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991). Although MOS Social Support Survey (Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991) combined both emotional and informational supports under the same category, for this study both were treated as separate entity. The term 'positive social interaction' (Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991) and 'positive feedback' (Barrera, 1986) are further divided into 'encouragement', 'prayer' and 'thanks'(Klemm, Reppert, & Visich, 1998). Self-esteem support (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983) was put under the theme 'encouragement'. All messages were categorised into 10 themes as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes on social support

Themes on social support	Sources
Informational	Sherbourne & Stewart (1991);
Emotional	Sherbourne & Stewart (1991);
	Barrera,(1986); Sarason et al (1991)
Tangible	Sherbourne & Stewart (1991); Barrera,(1986);
	Sarason et al (1991); Cohen & Hoberman (1983)
Affectionate	Sherbourne & Stewart (1991);
Personal experience	Klemm et al (1998);
Quotes/Sayings	McCormack & Coulson (2009);
Encouragement	Klemm et al (1998);
	Cohen & Hoberman (1983)
Prayer	Klemm et al (1998)
Thanks	Klemm et al (1998)
Social Strain	Barrera (1986)

3. Results and Discussion

A total of 320 postings were made to the Autisme Malaysia (AM) Facebook social support group wall. The demographic data (age, location) was not taken into account although it could be easily accessed by clicking on their profile name as the investigator is a member of AM Facebook social support group. The gender of the participants was easily identifiable as almost all the members were using their real picture and not avatars as a profile picture. Thus, based on the two weeks' participant observation, more than 90% of the participants who posted to AM Facebook wall were mothers of ASD children.

The first stage of deductive analysis shows that participants logged into and posted to AM Facebook wall for various purposes. The majority of the postings contained more than one theme of social support. Table 2 shows the number of postings against the themes. Sharing of personal experience was the most common theme followed by informational and emotional supports. It is important to highlight, however, that most of the sharing of experience is accompanied with other social support themes. Tangible support and affectionate support are the least shared theme.

Table 2. Number of postings against themes

Themes on social support	Number of postings (N=)
Personal experience	96
Informational	88
Emotional	72
Thanks	48
Encouragement	40
Quotes/Sayings	32
Prayer	24
Social Strain	16
Tangible	8
Affectionate	8

Note: The total number of postings does not equal to the add up of numbers in individual themes as some postings belong to more than one theme.

3.1 Personal Experience

On the AM Facebook wall, the sharing of personal experience was the most common type of posting among parents of ASD children and was frequently written in a form of a narrative describing what the children did. Most of these postings described their child's achievement in completing a task and was accompanied with other themes of social support, such as expressing prayers and positive emotions (satisfaction). The following excerpt is an example of this type of posting:

"Thank you God! After coming back from OT this week, Amanda has improved compared to last week. The teacher was also impressed!"   (Shereen)

Participants also shared personal experiences related to diagnosis, treatment, relationships with family members and relatives, and coping methods. Participants frequently started their narratives by describing the child.

"The support from other family members such as grandparent, aunts and uncles, and cousins really help us parents with autism child. Sam was able to go through 4 days without tantrums! All of them engage him with activities around the house."   (Nor)

3.2 Informational Support

Informational support was evident both in requesting and giving. Participants frequently asked for information directly from other members. Most of the information that the members seek evolve around the ASD child especially the diagnosis, treatment which includes speech therapy and occupational therapy and the types of school (special, integration or mainstream). Below is an example of a member seeking informational support.

"I realised that my eldest child is different from his other siblings. How do I know whether he is autistic? Where can I get more information?" (Wani)

This type of posting received more than 60 responses from other members. Most of them would share and offer what they know (knowledge) and what they have gone through (experience) so that it will be useful for others. The prompt reply from other members was one of the benefits of computer-mediated social support groups and on-line support groups that use Facebook are able to provide valuable support because it is immediate and personalised.

3.3 Emotional Support

This theme captured the third most common type of support in the postings. Most of the postings narrating the child's behaviour would include expression of emotions. However, it was not only limited to child's behaviour as participants poured emotions on people around them and the environment which was less aware of ASD children.

"It was sad that most TV dramas locally would portray disabled children as being a punishment of a sin committed by the parents. This however does not happen in western TV dramas as they are usually inspiring." (Lina)

This in turn usually tempted other members to offer or give emotional support.

"Be patient and pray that one day your family would accept the child is special." (Alia)

As the results showed, personal experience is the most common theme shared by the participants. It ranges from their encounter with the child's ASD diagnosis, treatment and coping strategies to things happening around them in school and other public places. It is worth highlighting that most of these shared personal experiences are 'layered' with requesting for a support. Sometimes it is obviously stated and at times it could be embedded. The ability to read between the lines is vital in offering support in this computer-mediated social support group. As the individual's facial expression is not present (to indicate the emotions of the speaker), the only thing to rely on is the words on the screen. As the number of words in endless when using posting to a Facebook wall, participants could 'pour their heart out' before others provide support through understanding and the response from a compassionate network of support group members (Yager, 2001) in the Facebook social support group.

Another feature of Facebook that was fully utilised by the participants is the 'Like' button. The number of 'Likes' can reach up to 174 for a posting on a participant who expressed her emotions of gratitude that God has given her an ASD child despite difficulty having to deal with her. Perhaps the 'Like' serves as an indication of support for these participants especially when you have no words of comfort to offer. Facebook users who are likely feeling negative emotions tend to seek support from friends by liking other users' updates and hoping it would reciprocate by supporting them (Bachrach et al., 2012). Although most of time the number of 'Likes' would reach more than 100 for this type of narration, there was also a social strain posting that received the same response. This would be a good area to be investigated in the future as what determines members of Facebook social support group to 'Like' a post.

3.4 Conclusion

It can be concluded that membership of the AM Facebook social support group provided a range of benefits for its members as they were able to utilise it as a platform to share experiences with each other and most importantly to exchange social support which is crucial in parenting a child with ASD. These findings could be further expanded to other social support groups so that the potential of Facebook as a platform for social support groups can be fully exploited.

Acknowledgements

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