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10-30-2021

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Recommended Citation

Liu, Yuqian, "Investigating Users' Social Participation Behaviors in An Online COVID-19 Support Community" (2021). *NEAIS 2021 Proceedings*. 7.

<https://aisel.aisnet.org/neais2021/7>

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Investigating Users' Social Participation Behaviors in An Online COVID-19 Support Community

Research-in-Progress

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ABSTRACT

Forced quarantine situations cause emotional distress and some people turn to online support communities for help. Are people who seek emotional support from online community users able to address their problems effectively? Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, A person (an original poster, OP) requests support through a post in an online community. Other people (responders) can provide help with their replies in this post. I examined how online community responders' participation behaviors (informational, emotional support and companionship behaviors) affect original posters' emotions regarding their emotional issues. And whether these behaviors are related to the overall effectiveness of user participation in the online community. To answer these questions, I developed a conceptual framework with four hypotheses based on the affect theory of social exchange. On one hand, this conceptual framework indicates the positive relationship between online community users' informational, emotional support and companionship behaviors and an OP's positive emotions. On the other hand, it predicts a positive relationship between an OP's positive emotions and the overall effectiveness of user participation behaviors in online support communities.

Users' participation data were collected from one subreddit (r/Covid19_support), including date and content of the comments. Text mining techniques were applied to generate measures of the constructs in the model. Due to the limitation of Reddit's official Python API wrapper "PRAW", most "hot", "top" and "new" posts from March 2020 to March 2021 were collected to represent the distribution of posts in this subreddit. In summary, 813 posts and 15,480 associated comments were collected. In the text mining phase, participants' comments were classified into different categories and used to generate measures of social participation behaviors. OPs' original questions and follow up replies to responders were analyzed integrally and used to understand whether the OPs' emotional issues were addressed in the subsequent conversations. The hypotheses were tested with logistic regression and correlation tests. The preliminary results indicate that online users' emotional support and information support behaviors can help to alleviate OPs' emotional issues during the pandemic. The hypothesized positive relationship between companionship behavior and an OP's positive emotion is not supported from analysis results. With both individual level and community level measures, I found that the OPs' positive emotions are positively related to the effectiveness of user participation behaviors in the online support community. These findings enhance our understanding about the value of user participation and its overall effectiveness in online support communities. It also brings more insights to examine online communities' social value in the context of social crisis.

Keywords

Online support community, social participation behaviors, text mining, social crisis