Disclosure of Stigmatized Sexual Health Issues in Online Support Communities

Emergent Research Forum (ERF)

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Abstract

Discussing sexual health issues (e.g., erectile dysfunction and STDs) may be more stigmatized than other types of health issues. This might be especially true for men as such issues may be perceived as physical weaknesses. Online support communities (OSC) may provide men a comfortable environment where they can discuss and seek help about such intimate issues. Guided by social exchange theory, we propose a cost-benefit framework that could capture the mechanism of sexual health information disclosure in OSC. We examine men’s subjective evaluation of costs (privacy concerns and social disapproval) and benefits (online social support and reciprocity) associated with disclosing sexual health issues. Additionally, we examine how technological affordances (text-based communication and anonymity) influence this cost-benefit analysis. We hope to advance the understanding on men’s online self-disclosure behavior as well as influential factors that predict disclosure of sexual health issues in OSC.

Keywords

Disclosure, sexual health information, online support communities, social exchange theory, Reddit.

Introduction

Online support communities (OSC) for health and wellness carry the purpose of helping individuals who are interested in both providing and seeking information on various health issues. Such online platforms give users a sense of community and provide them a supportive environment where they can connect with others who have experienced similar health problems. As opposed to offline settings, where self-disclosure can be used as a strategy to achieve social goals, online self-disclosure is usually found to be associated with risks affiliated with individuals’ privacy due to potential threats, and generally discouraged to protect individuals’ privacy (Fire et al. 2014). However, seeking help in OSC requires self-disclosure to a certain extent as it is required for the recipients to understand the issue and provide appropriate advice to the information seeker. Therefore, self-disclosure should be encouraged as it may help information seekers to get better support and understand their health problems.

It can be challenging for men to discuss stigmatized sexual health issues, such as erectile dysfunction and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), via face-to-face communication. Thus, OSC may serve as an alternative source of information. However, it may still be challenging for users to reveal their sexual health issues online as they may perceive negative judgment and stigmatization. Therefore, to be able to provide a safe and comfortable online platforms for men to seek help and achieve a positive well-being, it is important to identify the factors that influence men’s online self-disclosure behavior.

Deriving from the social exchange theory, we propose a model that incorporates factors based on a cost-benefit framework. Additionally, certain technological affordances of OSC may affect men’s cost-benefit analysis on online self-disclosure and subsequently facilitate or inhibit it. In particular, our proposed conceptual model includes text-based communication and anonymity to test how these two technology affordances interact with cost-benefit analysis and influence disclosure of sexual health information in OSC. We aim to answer following two research questions:

RQ1: Do privacy concerns and social disapproval (costs), and online social support and reciprocity (benefits) associated with disclosing sexual health information influence men’s self-disclosure in OSC?
**RQ2:** Do text-based communication and anonymity of OSC influence men’s self-disclosure about sexual health issues?

**Literature Review**

Social exchange theory (SET) posits that individuals perform social behaviors (e.g., relationship building) based on a subjective cost-benefit analysis (Emerson 1976). Perceived costs and benefits are the negative or positive outcomes of the behavior performed, and can be in both material (e.g., money) and non-material forms (e.g., emotions and information). SET assumes that this subjective cost-benefit analysis drives individuals’ decision-making processes. Individuals engage behaviors in which the benefits outweigh the costs (Thibaut and Kelley 1959). Value of a particular outcome varies as various external (e.g., social norms) and internal (e.g., experience) factors affect perceived value of the benefits and the costs (Meeker 1971). SET provides the foundation of our study. Specifically, we use the cost-benefit framework to identify factors affecting disclosure of sexual health information in OSC.

**Benefits of Self-Disclosure in Online Support Communities**

Self-disclosure refers to the process of revealing information about oneself to others (Posey et al. 2010). Self-disclosure carries benefits one gets in exchange of information, such as relationship development (Altman and Taylor 1973) and obtaining information to improve health (Greenberg and Stone 1992).

**Informational and Emotional Support**

Social support has been found to be associated with positive outcomes for individuals facing various life strains and health issues, such as mental illnesses (Albrecht and Goldsmith 2003). With the advent of web 2.0, online platforms that are based on user-generated content have created opportunities for individuals to engage in supportive communication with a network composed of people who have the same or similar health concerns (Wright et al. 2003). Such online platforms allow the exchange of support in various forms, such as informational and emotional support (Cohen 2004).

Informational support involves the exchange of advice and feedback on one’s behavior, whereas emotional support refers to improving one’s feelings by providing empathy and encouragement (Cutrona and Suhr 1992). De Choudhury and De (2014) found that social media (e.g., Reddit) provides users informational support for stigmatized-illnesses, such as mental health issues. Mo and Coulson (2008) found that informational support, such as suggestions on illness management, was the primary support that was being exchanged in online HIV support groups. This is followed by emotional support, which helped users feel less stressful about HIV-related stigmatization. Thus, we argue that informational and emotional supports are the main benefits that users receive by disclosing their sexual health issues in OSC:

**H1:** Informational support will have a positive direct effect on disclosure of sexual health information in OSC.

**H2:** Emotional support will have a positive direct effect on disclosure of sexual health information in OSC.

**Reciprocity**

Reciprocity refers to “the tendency for recipients to match the level of intimacy in the disclosure they return with the level of intimacy in the disclosure they receive” (Derlega et al. 1993, p.33). In other words, individuals are more likely to disclose information if the receiver reciprocate by disclosing information. Reciprocity may strengthen relationships and enhance understanding between communication partners. The ongoing exchange of health information may form a relationship and escalate the extend individuals disclose about themselves, which may lead to more intimate conversations (Liu et al. 2016).

**H3:** Reciprocity will have a positive direct effect on disclosure of sexual health information in OSC.

**Costs of Self-Disclosure in online Support Communities**

**Privacy Concerns**

Online self-disclosure carries risks, such as losing control over the information disclosed, information misuse, and unauthorized access (Hu et al. 2015). Such risks increase users concerns about their privacy.
Hu et al. (2015) found that users’ perception of information risks had a negative effect on the use of Facebook. Therefore, privacy concerns can be the cost that users need to overcome before disclosing personal information in OSC. Thus we hypothesize:

**H4:** Privacy concerns will have a negative direct effect on disclosure of sexual health information in OSC.

**Social Disapproval**

Compared to women, men are less likely to seek help for a variety of health issues, such as mental health issues and physical disabilities (Galdas et al. 2005). Men are also less likely to see physicians for check-ups (Rafuse 1993). This may put men at a high risk of suffering chronic diseases and reduce well-being. Courtenay (2000) proposed that masculinity might be one of the reasons that could explain this behavioral pattern. Previous research also indicated that men experience more social pressure than women as they desire to be independent and strong (Martin 1995). However, health issues may lead men to doubt about their masculinity. Thus, masculinity may refrain men from admitting their problems as it may lead to social disapproval. Thus we hypothesize:

**H5:** Social disapproval will have a negative direct effect on disclosure of sexual health information in OSC.

**Affordances of Online Support Communities**

The outcome of supportive communication depends on the provider, message, recipient, and medium of the interactional context where the support is being exchange (Burleson 2009). Thus, certain affordances of OSC may facilitate disclosing sexual health issues and maximize the benefits associated with it.

**Text-Based Communication**

Text-based communication assists individuals to narrate their health issues in a more understandable and coherent way (Tanis 2008). Therefore, the typing process may lead to cognitive evaluation of the self-disclosure. Such cognitive evaluation can influence the extent of disclosure as it allows users to weight the costs and benefits associated with the disclosure. Additionally, text-based communication may influence the type of support the users could receive. For example, if a given issue is articulated in a comprehensive way that can be easily understood by others, it would allow recipients to give more accurate information (i.e., informational support), and better comfort (i.e., emotional support). Moreover, lack of nonverbal cues can also help those who are health stigmatized to feel safer as they may not experience prejudice they may face in person (i.e., social disapproval). Thus we hypothesize:

**H6:** Text-based communication will have a positive direct effect on the benefits of disclosure of sexual health information in OSC.

**H7:** Text-based communication will have a negative direct effect on the costs of disclosure of sexual health information in OSC.

**Anonymity**

The value of the affordances provided by OSC vary across the different health conditions. For example, individuals who have stigmatized health conditions or feel they are being socially judged may value anonymity more (Tanis 2008). Using nicknames or pseudonym on anonymous online platforms provides individuals confidentiality, which enables them to disclose more without social anxiety or concern, and helps them overcome fear of social judgement (Galegher et al. 1998). Thus we hypothesize:

**H8:** Anonymity will have a negative direct effect on the costs of disclosure of sexual health information in OSC.

Under the protective cloak of anonymity people may have lower feelings of accountability and role obligation (Albrecht and Adelman 2003). In close relationships, people may feel obligated to provide support (Walther and Boyd 2002). However, this burden does not exist in online communities. The less role obligations resulted from anonymity may lead to higher level of self-disclosure. Thus we hypothesize:

**H9:** Anonymity will have a positive direct effect on the benefits of disclosure of sexual health information in OSC.

The relationships between the study constructs are presented in the conceptual model in Figure 1.
Methodology

Procedure

Participants will be recruited from Reddit, a social news aggregation and discussion website that allows users to submit content, rate existing content by up vote and down vote, and comment anonymously. An invitation to the online survey will be posted on subreddits, online forums dedicated to a particular topic on Reddit, for health and wellness. Considering the context of this study, we selected three particular subreddits (menshealth, sexualhealth, and sex) that are specifically designed for users to discuss about sexual health issues. To encourage users to participate in our study, each participant will be given a five-dollar Starbucks e-gift card. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, each participant will receive a randomly generated survey completion code in the end of the survey and be asked to email the code to the principal investigator. Participants whose codes match will receive the e-gift cards.

Measurement and Analyses

Previously-validated scales from the literature will be utilize to measure the study constructs. For example, privacy concern scale will be adapted from Ragins et al. (2007). Sample items include “if I disclosed my sexual health issues I would be harassed” and “if I disclosed my sexual health issues I would be socially ostracized.” Anonymity scale will be adapted from Ayyagari et al. (2011). Sample items include “it is difficult for others to identify my use of online support communities” and “I can remain anonymous when using online support communities.” We will run exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to explicate dimensions for each construct. Amos 23.0 will be utilized to estimate path coefficients and test the hypotheses. We will follow the basic four steps suggested by Kline (2005).

Conclusion

This study attempts to better understand men’s self-disclosure of sexual health issues in OSC. We argue that individuals’ disclosure behavior is influenced by both cognitive evaluation of costs and benefits associated with the disclosure as well as technological affordances of the online platform where the disclosure takes place. This study will have both practical and theoretical contributions. Practically, this study will inform health professionals about the influential factors that can predict men’s online self-disclosure, and provide suggestions on how to design a more effective OSC for users to seek help for stigmatized health issues. Theoretically, this study extends cost-benefit framework by including two technological affordances as antecedents, namely text-based communication and anonymity. This study will give scholars crucial insight into online self-disclosure from the perspective of cost-benefit as well as the effects of affordances that are provided by the online platform.
REFERENCES


