**Leader Behaviors in Virtual Support Groups:** 

A Case Study of Israeli Support Groups on Facebook

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Summary

Online support groups allow people who struggle with certain problems, challenges or illnesses to

convene in an online space to share experiences, as well as seek, receive and provide information,

advice and emotional support. Recently published surveys, research and publications indicate a

systematic and ongoing increase in the use of Facebook groups, and a similar increase in the

number of informational searches conducted in groups, as opposed to other information channels.

Support groups for people struggling with various illnesses and challenges are a broad and

significant means for transmitting information. Group members, and various professionals, use

support groups to distribute, evaluate, create and use information, in a wide variety of ways. The

role of support group leaders is central and important: the leaders can prevent the information from

being distributed as they see fit, and their level of control over the information is near-absolute.

Despite current findings in the field indicating that Facebook support groups hold deep meaning

and great potential for their members, there is a clear lack of proven research-based knowledge on

the ways in which support groups are managed and led. There is limited research examining the

behaviors of leaders in Facebook groups, and even less research focusing on the leaders of support

groups on this platform.

To provide an in-depth exploration of leader behaviors on Facebook support groups, this research

will use the leader behavior model developed by Lieberman and others, following observations of

physical support group leaders, holding face-to-face meetings (Lieberman et al., 1973). The model

defines five categories of leader behaviors as observed by the researchers: (1) Meaning Attribution

- actions in which the leader explains, clarifies, interprets, compares and assists in constructing a

perspective and cognitive learning, (2) Support-Caring – when the leader helps, rewards, shields,

compliments, supports and offers compassion, friendship, love and affection, (3) Evoke-Stimulate

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– when the leader asks questions, reflects, invites, gets others to speak and produces responses, (4)

Executive-Management – actions in which the leaders guides the participants in how to work, how

to treat each other, managing discussions, setting rules and restrictions, and establishing goals or

directions of movement, and (5) Use of Self – when the leader focuses on themselves, revealing

emotions here and now, reflecting beliefs, qualities and components, compelling, participating as

a member of the group and involving themselves personally in the discussions (appendix 1).

Previous research confirms that the leader behavior model exists in online groups as well.

**Research Questions**. This research seeks to answer three questions: (1) How and in what way is

Leiberman et al's leader behavior model expressed in Facebook support groups, (2) what actions

do support group leaders carry out in each of the behavioral categories defined by Lieberman et

al, (3) what information-related actions do the leaders perform as part of their supervision of the

group?

Research Method. Twenty-one leaders of support groups participated in in-depth interviews

conducted online through the "Zoom" program. The interview guide was composed via translation

into Hebrew of Lieberman et al's leader behavior questionnaire, and included open questions

addressing various behaviors Lieberman et al identified in physical support groups (Lieberman et

al, 1973). The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then coded and analyzed using a

qualitative data analysis program, using qualitative analysis in a methodological pattern partly

focused on different criteria (Shkedi, 2012).

**Findings.** All group leaders participating in the interviews reported the use of at least one of the

leader behaviors documented by Lieberman et al (Lieberman et al, 1973). The most common

behaviors recurring in most of the interviews were management behavior and support behavior.

Meaning Attribution behavior was also very widespread and the leaders who used it described

many actions relating to information: organizing information, producing and distributing

information, monitoring and erasing information and more. Use of Self behavior and Evoke-

Stimulate behavior were the least common in interviews. Furthermore, it became apparent that

Evoke-Stimulate behavior is typical of new groups and leaders of veteran groups neglect them

over time, that Support-Caring behavior plays a central role in many groups, that Meaning

Attribution behavior is a central access in the transfer, organization and distribution of information,

that Executive-Management behavior requires uniform and methodical oversight and enforcement,

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and many other findings. Each of the behaviors contained different and various actions the leaders

take: some of these behaviors had documented in previous research, others were recorded here for

the first time.

**Conclusions.** It is clear that Lieberman et al's leader behavior model exists in online support

groups operating on Facebook, and it turned out to be an appropriate tool to describe, investigate

and interpret leader behaviors in groups. Furthermore, group leaders perform many actions relating

to and influencing information in the group, though often the leaders lack professional education

or established knowledge in the field. The overall conclusion of this research is that Facebook

support group leaders can use the leader behavior model established by Lieberman et al in order

to shape and characterize the groups they lead. Understanding leader behaviors and the various

actions attributed to each of them will aid leaders in expanding the repertoire of possibilities

available to them, and expose them to tools as well as the rationale behind them, as described by

the group leaders interviewed for this research.

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