

Motivation for self-disclosure and disclosing personal information in public and private Facebook groups of people with mental illnesses

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Abstract

From the dawn of history, mental illnesses have involved difficulties in functioning and a stigma towards people with mental illnesses that make it difficult for them to become integrated in society. Thus, people with mental illnesses find themselves pushed to the margins of social discourse and their voice is hardly heard. However, today with rapid changes in technology and the emergence of social media channels, new opportunities arise for people with mental illnesses to make their voice heard. People with mental illnesses use online channels of communication to post testimonies and disclose themselves in a way not formerly seen in other communication channels.

No online social network in the world is bigger than Facebook. In Israel too, Facebook is the biggest social network, according to current studies as of 2020. One of Facebook's most popular applications is Facebook Groups. Online communities are created in the application – these are gatherings of people who communicate on common fields of interest; discourse occurs mostly in the virtual and interactive space, where it takes place according to shared norms, rules and language. In the Facebook Groups application, it is possible to define whether the group will be open with discourse for all social network participants or whether the discussions will be closed, and open only for members of the group who have been approved for participation in the group by the group's administrators. People with mental illnesses utilize these community spaces for social advancement that is not fulfilled in other ways.

During this study we examined the motivations that encourage people with mental illnesses to disclose themselves in discourse that takes place in public and private groups of people with mental illnesses in Facebook. The study was carried out using a mixed method and consisted of three separate sub-studies. Sub-study 1 examined the level of self-disclosure in Facebook groups,

and for this purpose qualitative-quantitative analysis of the content of the messages exchanged in the groups was carried out. Sub-study 2 examined the causes of motivation for disclosing personal knowledge and information, by means of semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants from the groups. The interviews were then analyzed according to the means-end approach. In Sub-study 3, an online questionnaire was distributed in order to examine the validity and reliability of the findings in the second part. According to the research literature, a combination of interviews and a structured questionnaire is the best way to answer the research questions and examine its hypotheses, and also to mitigate the disadvantages of each method

The aim of Sub-study 1 was to examine the hypothesis that self-disclosure exists in public and private Facebook groups of people with mental illnesses. An additional aim was to examine whether there are differences in the nature of disclosure between public groups and closed ones or between opening posts and comments.

For this purpose, we retrieved the content of 615 messages published in private and public Facebook groups. For each message the number of words, words in the first person, and expressions of emotion were counted – parameters that indicate the level of self-disclosure. The messages were then classified according to a scale of self-disclosure by two independent judges who were blind to the aims of the study. A disclosure score was given in three parameters: disclosure of information, emotions and thoughts. The study found that in all kinds of disclosure, the average disclosure in opening posts was significantly higher than the average disclosure in comments.

People who write in public groups write longer messages but expose their personal emotions less, their writing is more general and its aim is personal advancement or advancing the entire group; whereas people who write in private groups write messages that are shorter, but focus on the emotions and thoughts of the writer. Their messages are much more revealing and their aim is to reveal their personal emotions to the readers.

Sub-study 2 is a qualitative part, in which 30 people with mental illnesses who are active in public and private Facebook groups for people with mental illnesses were interviewed in semi-structured

interviews that were carried out and analyzed according to the means-end approach's rules of interviews and analyses.

During each interview we tried to understand the means-end chains that create the interviewees' motivation to share information and disclose themselves in a group. The aim was to identify the perception of the group participants of characteristics, consequences and values, which enable them to disclose themselves in the groups. Two maps of hierarchical connections were built from the analysis of the interviews, one for activity in public groups and the other for activity in private groups, showing the connections that emerged in the interviews between the characteristics of the medium, the aims for which purpose people with mental illnesses choose to disclose themselves in the groups and the values on which their motivation for self-disclosure and sharing personal information in the groups are based.

The maps of connections showed different characteristics, aims and values for activity in public groups and private groups. In public groups the leading value was social change. According to the interviewees, participation in public groups is the way people with mental illnesses can be heard by large audiences in Israeli society – in this way they can talk with the Israeli public directly, without needing the mediation of professionals who speak on their behalf. Not many people with mental illnesses feel sufficiently strong to disclose themselves in this way, but those who do feel a sense of a mission, and they are prepared to relinquish their anonymity and enable the use of their personal story in order to advance the needs of all people with mental illnesses in Israel.

Belonging emerged as the value that leads motivation for self-disclosure in private groups. Whereas in public groups the value of belonging symbolizes a desire for a relationship with the healthy population, in private groups belonging is an internal value that expresses a wish to belong to the peer group. Social media makes it possible to realize this value by gathering many people with mental illnesses for discourse in a shared space that is protected and unique to them.

In Sub-Study 3, we wanted to add a dimension to the interview findings and widen the group of participants in the study in order to examine more precisely the influence of the motivations we identified. Therefore, this part of the study was based on questionnaires that were distributed in Facebook groups for people with mental illnesses, and we used them to examine connections

between different factors that we found to be related to self-disclosure in Sub-study 2. By analyzing the 123 full and valid questionnaires received in the study we confirmed the findings discussed in Sub-study 2. The questionnaires that we distributed related to examining the connections between the eight independent variables that emerged as main themes in the qualitative interviews – self-value, coping with difficulties, a feeling of belonging to the group, political advancement, expressing a social opinion, advancing personal aims, social advancement and self-disclosure.

Sub-study 3 confirmed the importance that participants in the group attribute to the feeling of belonging to a group. For this variable, significant correlations with all the other variables in the study were found. When a high feeling of belonging is created in the group, the participants are prepared to be more involved, express personal opinions and help others in the group, and their motivation for self-disclosure increases.

Theoretically, the manner of disclosure in the groups can be described as a circle with the following characteristics: the characteristics of the medium, values and the desired results of disclosure. In our opinion, if one of the parts of this circle does not exist, self-disclosure will not occur. Self-disclosure requires the following components: people with mental illnesses have to feel that their self-disclosure is important, whether it takes place for their personal benefit or contributes to others, they have to feel that the tools offered by the social network create a comfortable space for them, that is suitable for disclosure in the light of their personal preferences and sensitivities, and they have to feel that the consequences of disclosure achieve the aims for which they decided to disclose themselves.

It seems that the new technologies do indeed open up for people with mental illnesses the possibility of communicating with one another and with the healthy population in ways previously unknown. However, there is still a need to adapt the tools offered by the social networks as a way of conducting social discourse to suit a wide variety of people for whom discourse in groups is significant, but who choose not to speak out in the virtual space.

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