Promoting Patient Empowerment Via The Internet: An Analysis Of Discussion Forums For Patients With Chronic Conditions

Marina Beléndez  Raquel Suriá
Dpt. Communication & Social Psychology
University of Alicante, SPAIN
Corresponding author: marina.belendez@ua.es

Background and aims

- Empowerment emphasizes attributes such as self-determination, social engagement, and a sense of personal competence (Dickerson, 1998).
- Internet support groups and online discussion boards have emerged as a resource that may be helpful to patients with chronic illnesses as an aid to promote personal empowerment (Barak, Bondel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008).
- Previous studies have found that the main empowering processes that took place within the online support groups were: exchanging of information (Braithwaite et al., 1999), encountering emotional support, finding recognition, expressing emotions (Lieberman & Goldstein, 2006) or helping others (van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008).

Background and aims

- Most of these previous works have nearly always focused on analysing the content of the messages exchanged in online discussion boards for one specific illness.
- Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine the empowering processes that take place within several online discussion boards concerning four different illness conditions: diabetes, fibromyalgia, multiple sclerosis and asthma.

Research Questions

- Which empowering processes are more frequent communicated at several online discussion boards concerning four different chronic conditions?
- Are there differences in the communication of empowerment processes across messages posted by patients suffering from different chronic conditions?

Method

- A total of 794 postings of participants (61.3% of the posts were from female) in four Spanish-speaking internet bulletin boards were analyzed:
  - diabetes (n=254)
  - fibromyalgia (n=218)
  - asthma (n=132)
  - sclerosis (n=190)
- The number of contributions or postings in total over a two-months period were counted. The unit of analysis was the posting or message allowing to assess the overall meaning. Each message could receive multiple codes.
- Each posting was analyzed for the presence or absence of 16 coding categories (see table 1) subsumed under four broad categories (social support, illness and treatment issues, social processes and expression of emotions). Message were analyzed by two independent coders (Cohen's kappa = .85).

Coding Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Giving/Seeking informational support</th>
<th>Giving/Seeking emotional support</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illness &amp; Treatment Issues</td>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>Physical symptoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Processes</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Him/Herself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of Emotions</td>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>Sadness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Most frequently discussed topics were:
- Treatment issues (75.9%)
- Giving informational support (55.4%)
- Symptoms (51%)
- Giving instrumental support (31.7%)

Least discussed topics dealt with:
- Family issues (14.5%)
- Seeking emotional support (12.1%)
- Seeking instrumental support (11.2%)
- Sadness (11.7%)

Postings regarding giving informational support and instrumental support were more frequent at diabetes discussion board (see figure 1).
In addition, messages containing seeking informational support were more frequent at asthma group (see figure 2).
Expressions of positive emotions (optimism and gratitude) was predominately found on fibromyalgia boards (see figure 3).
Fibromyalgia discussion board also had the highest percentage of messages related to him/herself (see figure 4 for social processes).

Giving Support

Seeking Support

Expression of Emotions

Social Processes

Conclusions

Analysis found two main topics being discussed on these bulletin boards: treatment/symptoms issues and giving informational/tangible support.
This preliminary exploratory work shows some interesting differences in the communication of empowerment processes by disease.

References