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Intrapersonal Groupthink and Online Disclosure: A Thematic Analysis of Reddit's r/SuicideWatch

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Abstract

This paper examined the anonymous r/SuicideWatch subreddit, a part of the popular anonymous message board, Reddit, to better understand disclosure in anonymous online spaces.

r/SuicideWatch takes an ambiguous stance on suicide, neither condoning nor condemning it, thus creating a space where users are often affirmed in pro-suicide beliefs. This study utilized a thematic analysis to consider the semantic, latent, and cultural themes of r/SuicideWatch to better understand what was taking place on the website as users processed ideas that are often culturally taboo. Analysis of dialogue that included phrases like “does anyone else” or “me too” suggests that users seek a shared human experience among other users to discuss suicide.

However, the presence of groupthink (Janis, 1972) may indicate that users do not seek real dialogue but rather that they may utilize r/SuicideWatch as a safe space to explore these challenging ideas and engage in fantasy exploration where they will be validated. Also notable was the heavy presence of intrapersonal communication as posters failed to interact with one another even as they replied to posts; the dialogue they shared lacked interaction with other users and appeared to be primarily for their own benefit. This may suggest that users utilize r/SuicideWatch as a means to process their own experiences and ideas rather than to interact with the ideas of others. This in-depth look at r/SuicideWatch is an important part of a much larger conversation about anonymous online communication and the interaction that takes place there.

Keywords: Suicide, Reddit, Computer Mediated Communication, Disclosure

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Anonymous digital media, including platforms like Reddit, continues to grow in popularity. With this widespread growth comes new avenues of usage and exploration. Online anonymity has created a safe place for users who may be struggling with physical or mental health concerns to seek support and connect with others, specifically about topics that may be taboo. Digital anonymity offers users a place where they can share their concerns with the perception of lower stakes. r/SuicideWatch is a prime example of a place where the “taboo” has become the norm.

r/SuicideWatch bills itself as “a place of support.” With over one hundred and twenty-five thousand subscribers, the suicide-centered subreddit is a popular place among Reddit's vast readership. Although users are forbidden from sharing specific suicide methods, posts are filled with declarations of support for suicide and even plans of suicide with users affirming one another. While the subreddit moderators themselves neither advocate for suicide nor discourage it, subreddit rules allow advocating for and affirmation of suicide-positive beliefs. Additionally, users are asked to be “non-judgmental” and discouraged from advising other users against suicide. The attitudes encompassed on r/SuicideWatch are arguably unhealthy and the advocating of them, arguably dangerous. Yet, its popularity raises some questions about the utilization of Reddit for social support.

The host of r/SuicideWatch, Reddit, is a social media platform that offers a birds-eye view of anonymous interactions between people from every walk of life and interest area. Established in 2005 by college roommates, Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, the anonymous website has been on an uphill trajectory since its inception. This is notable because its lifespan

makes it almost ancient by social media standards, and in that lifespan, the website design and concept have changed very little. Reddit relies on content rather than eye-catching graphics or flashy design; however, its creators and management have very little to do with the website's actual content. Reddit relies almost entirely on the individual users to create its unique experience.

Reddit offers users autonomy over what is posted, the topics being discussed, and how it is moderated. The website is comprised of millions of subreddits, centered around a topic of the creator of each subreddit's choosing and used by others who have chosen to post or read there. Individual users can repost pictures, videos, news articles, and also create unique content of their own. In response, that content is sorted by user "upvotes" and "downvotes." While official moderators of specific subreddits often have specific rules that heavily influence subreddit culture, the norms and rules are enforced by the users themselves. This system of self-moderation brings popular content to the top and most visible spots on the website and pushes less popular content to the bottom where few will see it. The result of this is a community-centered experience where users connect over shared interests and who are invested in their Reddit community. Moreover, Reddit management practices very little moderation outside of a blanket ban on illegal content. Even this ban on illegal content contains some gray area as users can reference and discuss illegal activity but not actually utilize Reddit to commit an illegal act.

r/SuicideWatch is an example of this gray area. While a discussion of suicide is not illegal, the normalization and propagation of suicide are morally ambiguous. Additionally, actively encouraging someone to commit suicide is considered illegal as evidenced by the 2018 trial of Michelle Carter who was held liable for the death of her boyfriend, Conrad Roy, as she encouraged his suicide via text message. She was charged with involuntary manslaughter and

fifteen months in jail (Moriarty, 2019). Notably, r/SuicideWatch does not encourage suicide, or at least it is not listed among the subreddit aims; however, the subreddit also does not discourage it. Similarly, websites like r/weed face this type of ambiguity. While users can talk about drug use and share tips with one another, the subreddit bans users from buying or selling through the subreddit.

Reddit distinguishes itself as a viable vehicle to those seeking to understand anonymous communication because, unlike many of the websites on the internet where anonymity is optional, it is foundational to Reddit. Users are not required to list any identifying information in order to register. Anonymity is engrained in the Reddit culture and understood and even protected by users. This understanding starts at the very top of the organizational level as Reddit lists “respect anonymity and privacy” in their bylaws. Despite this and the stigmas often associated with anonymity, the website was the fifth most popular website in the United States at the time of this writing (About Reddit, 2018).

Digital anonymity offers users a place where they can share their concerns with the perception of lower stakes. There is a level of detachment from other users who are nameless and faceless. In turn, users are often more willing to offer an uninhibited view of taboo topics, like suicide, which can sometimes allow them the freedom of an authentic and honest discussion of their struggles. Here, they can ask questions, voice concerns, or find validation in their struggles. The result is that this taboo is broken. Users are able to connect over their shared ideas and experiences and engage in a supportive community. Yet, what happens when that support may invalidate unhealthy behaviors and attitudes? r/SuicideWatch may be an example of a subreddit where this is taking place.

Understanding how Reddit is being used to discuss suicide and the disclosure that takes place there offers insight into anonymous online communities, a much larger and timely conversation. An analysis of this unique community offers insights about online anonymity and the different ways that it is being utilized.

The Hyper-personal and Online Disclosure

The way that we understand hyper-personal communication is an important part of how we understand human communication as a whole. Joseph Walther (1994, 1996) introduced the idea of the “hyperpersonal” as part of computer mediated communication as he recognized that “there are times when less interpersonal or socioemotional communication is beneficial” (1996, p. 6). He suggested that in the hyperpersonal aspect of communication in online spaces, users experience both a connection to the “other” with whom they interact as a result of shared identity and a disconnect created by cyberspace despite the fact that they may not recognize it. While users might believe that they are participating in an interpersonal community, in reality, many mediated spaces are often more intrapersonal in nature (Walther, 1996). Many users use terms like “they” and “it” to describe these spaces and dehumanize the generalized “other” with whom they interact, even if those with whom they interact are known outside of the online space.

In *the Second Media Age*, Poster (1995) explained, “the internet creates a place where people connect with strangers without much of the social baggage that divides and alienates” (p. 71). In a contemporary society where political differences have created a cultural divide, the possibilities of these online spaces create an interesting example or maybe even the key to moving past these political factions. According to Poster, the interactions that take place there are free from the commonly practiced social stigmas. Interactions take place without certain knowledge of gender, race, sexual preference, socioeconomic status, among other things. While

a user may share these things, there is no way to validate their claims, yet Reddit's communities hardly seem hindered by this limitation as disclosure is central to many of its subreddits, including r/SuicideWatch.

Suler's (2005) "disinhibition effect" validates this idea but also gets to the heart of the motivational factors that influence it. Disinhibition is an important element of any discussion of online disclosure. It offers the foundation for how and why users communicate differently in these spaces. Suler explains: "When people have the opportunity to separate their actions on-line from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting out" (p. 322). Given this, it would seem that online anonymity exists in a state of anarchy but this is not entirely the case. Bergstrom (2011) and Bernstein, Monroy-Hernandez, et. al. (2011) suggest that community standards are often important to the structure of anonymous online communities and how disclosure takes place there. But how does this disinhibition impact mediated communication?

Correa, Mondal, and Gummadi's (2015) study of anonymity sought answers to this question, looking for specific trends about when users chose a platform like Reddit versus a less anonymous one like Facebook for particular content, but it focused primarily on how demographics like age and gender influence these choices. Similarly, Gray and Huang's (2015) ethnographic study of the social aspect of anonymous communication in gaming addressed these questions but found socialization and dialogue to be the only consistent answers. Scholars have offered many different vantage points regarding disinhibition but with few consistent conclusions. In this case of Gray and Huang, their answers were similar to those that have been found by other researchers of anonymity with similar unanswered questions; no data truly

emerges that separates these answers from the ones that are found of other social media platforms. This makes this an important area of research.

Van der Nagel, E. and Firth, J., (2015) asked similar questions in their study of r/GoneWild, a subreddit dedicated to posting nudes or partial nudes. Many of the users there do not hide their faces but also stated that they do not share the same images on their personal social media pages. Researchers sought to understand how and why they posted there. What is notable about this study is that while they said that they were comfortable revealing the taboo to strangers who could see their faces, they sought to separate their online persona from their face-to-face one. This speaks to the “taboo” aspect of online communication that often influences how and why it is used. Like this study, participants in Van der Nagel and Firth’s study utilized anonymous online spaces as a space to interact with their own taboos. Problematically, there has been no research that showed consistency in what individual users considered to be taboo or how digital media users make these choices about what level of anonymity they require for different topics.

Joinson (2010) offered insights into why users choose anonymity despite the drawbacks. While this research predates Reddit and the type of anonymity addressed by Joinson looks very different than the anonymous social media website addressed in this study, a lot of his claims still hold true. Joinson found that “people disclose more information about themselves during CMC compared to FtF.” Additionally, he determined that “visually anonymous people communicating using computers disclose more about themselves than people communicating non-anonymously” (p 188). The disclosure aspect of anonymous communication is an important aspect of it as researchers consider the benefits and drawbacks of it. Problematically, as Joinson

and others address in their work, anonymity comes with inconsistency and the inability to validate claims.

Several recent studies have considered aspects of the changes in communication when anonymity is a factor. Birnholtz, Aaron, Merola, and Paul (2015) offer insight into anonymous online confession boards, a growing trend specifically across high school and college campuses. Like many of the other studies of anonymity within communities, the results of this study also indicated a connection among users, specifically with regards to taboo topics. This study found that without privacy as a concern, users were disclosing more traditionally taboo information via this platform than they did in face-to-face conversations. This is an important study towards a better understanding of disinhibition and how it influences online interactions.

Hammond (2015) took this discussion further to consider the role of empathy in these online interactions. Hammond also brought up something that was found in this work: the anonymous online community with rules, norms, and unique culture may influence how anonymity is practiced among users. His work suggested that rules were essential to this type of connection and how those rules are utilized created a space where users felt more comfortable to disclose within the framework. This author also expounded upon the idea of solipsistic introjection, also further discussed in this paper, the way that online users give a voice or characteristics where none exist to create understanding. This concept may be instrumental in how r/SuicideWatch users engage in dialogue about shared human experience. While anonymity is core to the interactions, it appears that the notion of humanity in other users is also important and influences what users choose to disclose or not disclose.

Other studies also considered how users utilize anonymity to discuss topics that are sometimes considered to be socially taboo, much like this one. Miller (2016) offered insights into

an online “coming out” forum in light of the disinhibition effect. The forum acts as a place where the LGBTQ community can connect with others and ask questions from those who have had similar experiences, albeit anonymously. The author recognized the role of disinhibition as users were able to explore alternative realities to their life and be someone whom they view as different from themselves. It allowed users to act out their “out” persona and explore the realities of it before doing so in their real life. There is evidence, although unsubstantiated, that this may also take place in r/SuicideWatch. If so, whether this community is toxic or helpful to fantasy exploration is an idea that must be further explored. Are users who “try out” suicide fantasies in anonymous online spaces more or less likely to follow through?

“Collective assembly” discussed in this paper, as defined by Gabriel, Valenti, Naragon-Galeny, et. al (2017) explains our need for belonging among a larger group than ourselves. Their study suggested that “that there is something unique and important about the propensity to feel connected to large, generally anonymous groups of people” (p. 1359). They found that overall people felt less loneliness and more sense of connection, even in anonymous spaces and suggested that one of the reasons people participate in this type of effervescent assembly is for social reasons as we attempt to achieve “synchronicity of behavior with others.” Per their research, this type of validation of one’s behavior as part of a greater social culture is an important part of our social needs. Several studies have considered the influence of r/SuicideWatch and other similar online support networks in light of the role of community. Dunlop, More, and Romer (2011) found that online spaces were a common place for adolescents to gather information and attitudes about suicide, namely in the form of suicide stories like those found on r/SuicideWatch. Conversely, Jun and Kim (2016) found that older Korean adults who utilized online websites that offered support for mental illness often exhibited lower suicide

rates. This contrast symbolizes the complexity and inconsistency of the conversation taking place surrounding online spaces. This makes a study of spaces like r/SuicideWatch even more important as researchers seek to determine what key factors influence helpful and healthy online support versus the opposite.

Additionally, Janis (1972)'s ideas regarding groupthink were also evidenced by an analysis of the data of this study. "The more amiability and esprit de corps among members of a policy-making in group, the greater is the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink... The social constraint consists of the members' strong wish to preserve the harmony of the group, which inclines them to avoid creating any discordant arguments or schisms" (p. 198). When these conditions occur, excessive group cohesion can outweigh individual perception in groups where opposing opinions go unheard. The cohesive aspect of Reddit can offer both benefits and drawbacks. In some cases, it may make users more comfortable to share taboo ideas with likeminded users, specifically in anonymous space. However, in spaces like r/SuicideWatch, it is possible that groupthink may validate unhealthy ideas, as was discussed above.

It is the hope of this researcher that this study will offer some insight into the use of r/SuicideWatch and how discussions of such a taboo topic manifest themselves in this type of online anonymous format.

Research Questions

To understand this unique aspect of Reddit, this study analyzed how users utilized Reddit to discuss the topic of suicide on Reddit's r/SuicideWatch subreddit. Research focused on answering the following questions:

Q1: What do the themes of r/SuicideWatch reveal about communication in anonymous online spaces?

Q2: What do the themes of r/SuicideWatch reveal about disclosure in anonymous online spaces?

Method

The data for this study was gathered using a thematic analysis. This approach was the best fit for this study of Reddit for two important reasons. First, thematic analysis is a more open-ended approach to qualitative research that does not constrain analysis to a particular theory. The second reason is that digital communication, specifically anonymous digital communication, is in its infancy and needs to be approached as such. Even in its relatively short lifetime, this area of communication study has already seen numerous changes due to the rapid pace of technological advancement; however, even mediums with longevity have seen drastic changes in format, users, and usage. Given a format with so much room for discovery, it is essential that studies like this one leave room for the medium itself to offer insights free of assumptions.

Braun and Clarke (2006) share this about thematic analysis: “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 10). This method involves engaging with the data and dividing it into categories and subcategories of themes that are prevalent in the data to seek patterns among the data. The specific guidelines that were utilized for doing so will be explained below.

Completing a thematic analysis in a space such as Reddit comes with some extra challenges because as Braun & Clarke (2006), suggest, there must be a distinction between the two levels of the themes: semantic and latent. It is this designation that makes it an excellent fit

for an anonymous community where there are multiple layers of understanding. Semantic themes are the “explicit or surface meanings of the data and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written” (p. 84) while latent themes seek understanding based on context, as the researcher is tasked to “identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies - that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (p. 84). Any study of anonymous media requires some level of interpretation of the data. The distinction between semantic and latent content allows the researcher to differentiate between what is known and what is implied or open to a greater level of interpretation. Additionally, analysis also focused on the influence of the unique culture of Reddit to offer context.

Once weekly, over the course of four weeks, posts from r/SuicideWatch were sorted into the top 5 most upvoted posts and coded for both semantic and latent themes and the cultural context that surrounded them. Additionally, the top 25 comments on each post were analyzed for content. This offered evidence of not only what content was most valued by that subreddit’s users based on the choice of users to upvote it, but also how users were engaging with it. Notably, the initial posts and the comments were coded separately.

Semantic themes focused specifically on topics of conversation and specific wording choices. Latent themes considered context and a knowledge of the online communities being studied to look for underlying meanings in the text to determine what was taking place. Cultural themes considered the greater context of Reddit and its influence on the conversations taking place in r/SuicideWatch.

The unit of analysis for this study was each individual post of content posted. Reddit users can offer an infinite number of responses beyond the original question and response. Each

of these threads were coded as a single unit. While semantic coding did not account for intertextuality, latent coding did, based on a user's historical posts, prior interactions with users, and historical usage of the subreddit. Moreover, it also accounted for cultural norms; however, efforts were made to distinguish knowledge from evidence-based assumptions. These themes were then coded into subthemes to see what type of story they produced about the conversations taking place.

While thematic analysis has often fallen under scrutiny, in this case, this method offers an appropriate multi-layer approach for the complications of studying a medium such as Reddit. Moreover, Braun and Clarke's explanation create a guide to approach the analysis in a more meaningful way. Using this method with the guidelines provided, this study offered insight into the complex world of r/SuicideWatch to provide a greater understanding of this anonymous online space.

Analysis and Discussion

An analysis of r/SuicideWatch was carried out in accordance with the procedures described in the previous section. The results of the analysis of this subreddit will be presented here in detail, highlighting the semantic, latent, and cultural themes of the posts found there.

Collective Assembly

The supportive environment of r/SuicideWatch asks users to engage in honest, although often dark, dialogue. The ideas of Gabriel, Valenti, Naragon-Galeny, et. al (2017) regarding collective assembly offers an explanation for why some users utilize online communities in this way. The authors believed that people seek collective assembly to fulfill social needs, even in anonymous spaces through "synchronicity of behavior with others." It invites the posters into one another's worlds and attempts to illuminate the importance of each individual through

stories. This was seen throughout the connected subreddits as users often made posts like these stating “me too” or asking “does anyone else...?”

On the semantic level, many of the most upvoted posts on r/SuicideWatch illustrated evidence of shared human experience. For example, during the week of January 15-22, poster Monnka posted “I feel like a robot that the only way to turn my feelings off and put my mind on ‘numb mode’ is by aimlessly watching Youtube videos.” Many of the responses indicated a similar experience such as mattimatti123 who stated “Same!! If I don’t wanna feel suicidal I have to stay constantly occupied. Watch TV, youtube, or scroll through reddit...” Phrases like “me too” or “I agree” were common there.

Scholars like Poster and Walther confirm this hyperpersonal online culture and how it is utilized for support and connection. Yet, problematic to a simple understanding of the collective assembly found on r/SuicideWatch is the evidence of groupthink (Janis, 1972) that appeared to exist there.

Groupthink

The culture of Reddit lends itself to groupthink by design, given individual subreddits about specific topics in which users participate. In fact, it is possible that groupthink is expected as users specifically choose groups focused on an individual topic and with a specific perspective. Many posts on r/SuicideWatch were greeted with confirmation and agreement by other posters whether they were factually accurate or not. The week of January 1-8, user Quirkicat posted the following:

How CAN’T people be depressed seeing how fucked up and selfish humanity is? I just can’t bare when I point out animal cruelty or wage slavery or bullshit in religion or

bullshit of politics and non depressed people are like “whatever... what can you do... focus on being productive”.

Oh yeah, PRODUCTIVITY I love that word, it keeps sheeple in a fucking line... just obey your 33 loving overlords and then you will get a cookie and a paycheck to paycheck life.

One of the most upvoted responses was by user Cancerius who replied “That’s why I keep saying most people (including me) should just commit suicide.” No one posted any statements of disagreement with any of the above posts. This type of affirmation can lead users to the type of groupthink, as previously discussed, where users conform to societal norms and expectations. Researchers like Kende et al. (2016) suggest that this type of affirmation can lead to social change, but there are also dangers involved when confirmation bias leads to the propagation of unhealthy or wrong ideas (Wason, 1960).

This has been the argument by some scholars (Finfgeld, 2000, Baker & Ray, 2001) for why online support groups can be problematic. The absence of professional care can lead to misinformation, namely in places like r/SuicideWatch where information may be culturally engrained rather than accurate. Although it is simply possible that these subreddits attract a those who already accept these cultural norms. The question of whether the benefits of these types of groups outweigh the concerns will continue to be highly contested. In this way, it is possible that these environments that other Reddit users perceive to be supportive may instead be contributing to groupthink and propagating unhealthy ideas.

Yet, it is possible that Reddit creates an anonymous world where users can explore different facets of their personality and complex ideas. As Poster suggested, if anonymity leads to the “playful, imaginative, multiple self” as opposed to a “rational and stable individual” (71),

it is possible that these subreddits in their extreme nature allow users to explore the extremes of their own personality free from societal constraints and consequences. Additionally, evidence suggests that users in anonymous online spaces may utilize this format to try fantasy roles (Mileham, 2007). In choosing specific communities with a known goal that meet their immediate need, users may feel safe to explore aspects of their identity that might have been previously unexplored or socially taboo even if they have not yet adopted them. While acceptance of suicide is culturally taboo, users of r/SuicideWatch engage with suicide as a societal norm. This exploration of fantasy is especially prevalent in pseudo-anonymous spaces such as Reddit where a user can create an identity for themselves. Users can not only post ideas while acting out characters, fantasies, or unexplored aspects of their personality but they can also continue the narrative, thus giving life to them. It is possible that the groupthink evidenced in subreddits may create an ideal space for this because users can choose subreddits that match user goals for fantasy exploration in a safe place where interactions may be more predictable.

Similarly, Suler (2005) suggested that hyperpersonal environments can be beneficial because they allow users to wrestle with their own opinions in a safe place. The disinhibition allows them to discuss the taboo or even ideas that they have not fully processed because of the lack of consequences that may come from sharing these ideas even if they are not perceived by other users in a positive way. By choosing specific communities, users choose to interact with those specific ideas. For instance, r/SuicideWatch users specifically stated that they chose these spaces because it allowed them an outlet that is not afforded to them in their face-to-face interactions to share culturally unwelcome opinions. The mindset of the community is what they choose, not the individual users of whom posters often see as a disconnected other (Dunbar, 2017). While this type of validation may allow users to avoid the uncomfortable dissonance of

contrary opinions (Festinger, 1957), creating an unhealthy echo chamber of affirmation, it can also create a safe place to discuss socially taboo topics or process through ideas that are not fully formed. Groupthink is an integral part of this intrapersonal exploration as it allows users to choose the specific group and mindset with which they want to engage.

It appears as though those users seek spaces to disclose where they can feel as though their experiences are part of a larger group. Yet, the evidence of groupthink that appears there also suggests that they actively chose spaces where they know they will be validated rather than spaces where they will be challenged. As for the question of how users utilize r/SuicideWatch to engage with a taboo topic, it appears as though they seek a conformity of ideas and validation from the other users there. Yet, the role of intrapersonal communication is also a key component that offers more pieces to this complex puzzle.

Intrapersonal Communication

In contrast to the supportive environment and communal experience of collective assembly, many of the subreddit posts appear to contain intrapersonal communication. Wood's definition of interpersonal communication requires that the person must be irreplaceable for communication to fit the designation of interpersonal (2016). This did not appear to be the case in most of the posts found on r/SuicideWatch where other users did not appear to be integral to the interaction; moreover, users often ignored the content of posts entirely when responding to them.

While, as explained above, users often seek collective assembly (Gabriel, Valenti, Naragon-Galeny, et. al, 2017) to process taboo, challenging, and nuanced topics, it also appears that in their respective subreddits, the Reddit experience is a more self-focused one. For example, poster `_Tinkle_Juice` responded to an emotionally loaded post with "Fucghhk. Ok you

taking the words outta my mouth... How do you fall asleep? Crying seems to help me a little but I dunno.” The poster did not respond to the question nor did the dialogue continue. The prevalence of posts such as this one indicates that users may not view other users as fully autonomous but instead interact with them in terms of their own personal experiences and knowledge.

The fact that collective assembly sits side by side with communication that is highly intrapersonal in nature is one of the most baffling aspects of anonymity that is reflected in this study of Reddit. Hammond’s (2015) findings about the role of solipsistic introjection in online support groups gives context to this. He contended that users fill in the unknown of online and anonymous interactions with their own knowledge. The presence of “me too” type posts suggest that while intrapersonal communication is taking place, they also interact with some users in more human ways because of these shared and relatable experiences. It is possible that these posts allow Reddit users to see one another as more human given this connection; however, it is also possible that instead of seeing other users as human and autonomous, they offer, as Poster (2004) and Hammond (2015) suggested, their own characteristics to other posters. Given this, it is possible that the dialogue that takes place forms less of a human-to-human dialogue but rather an intrapersonal and self-introspective one.

These three elements: collective assembly, groupthink, and intrapersonal dialogue create an interesting mix that are seemingly in contrast with one another, yet they reveal something important about the nature of anonymous online disclosure. It appears as though users of r/SuicideWatch seek places where they will most likely be affirmed in their beliefs, even ones that are not necessarily culturally accepted, to process their own ideas. While the collective

assembly appears to be an important part of the experience of r/SuicideWatch, the actual dialogue is more of an intrapersonal one.

This is notable, as research questions focused on what this analysis would illuminate about communication in anonymous online spaces and how users practice disclosure there. First, this study suggests that users process taboo ideas in anonymous online spaces to practice collective assembly and feel less alone. While they make the choice to engage with other humans, it also appears as though the communication that takes place there is primarily intrapersonal and exists for their own benefit. Posting there is an act of self-exploration rather than a community-centered experience. The choice to utilize this space rather than face-to-face communication or even a non-anonymous space may be a choice that is made for several reasons. First, users can explore fantasy themes, identities, or ideas that are not fully processed while avoiding the consequences that may come from breaking perceived social norms. Additionally, the groupthink element may offer the perception of safety from encountering contrary ideas. Users not only accept the groupthink that appears to exist in these spaces but may choose these spaces precisely for that reason.

The intrapersonal groupthink created by r/SuicideWatch may be an ideal environment for disclosure of the taboo since users are safe from both stigmas and consequences; they have also chosen an environment that offers validation.

Limitations

While this study added to a greater understanding of communication behavior with regards to r/SuicideWatch and anonymous online disclosure, there were a number of limitations involved with the research. Intentionality and sincerity of posters is an ongoing concern of anonymity researchers. Additionally, the presence of advertisers or those with a specific agenda

may cloud data. While this study tried to avoid this skewing of the data by focusing specifically on the most upvoted posts and also differentiating semantic and latent themes and also cultural norms of Reddit, there is no way to be certain that posts were not included that were inauthentic to the aims of this study. Moreover, the choice to focus on most upvoted posts in a specific time period may not represent the whole of the conversations taking place in that time period or in other time periods there. However, this study used a purposeful sample designed to represent the aims of this study. While research did try to account for content beyond this sample by adding an analysis of cultural themes for context, additional data outside of those recognized in this study may have offered new insights.

The role of the subreddit moderators could also add some limitations to this study. Moderation is at the discretion of individual human moderators. While not only is it impossible to account for inconsistencies in moderation style, it is also impossible to know if posts were removed before data could be collected that may have added new evidence to the findings. While the subreddit utilized for this study was carefully monitored throughout the course of data collection with respect to this concern, there is no way to know for certain that posts that exhibit important evidence to the discussion were not removed.

Conclusions and Further Research

This study was designed to discover the themes that are prevalent among posts of r/SuicideWatch and what they suggest about anonymous online disclosure. It was found that there are several key ideas at play that answer this question on the semantic, latent, and cultural levels in the chosen vehicle, Reddit. These key themes are: collective assembly, groupthink, and intrapersonal dialogue. This study suggests that discussions of the taboo are served by an anonymous online environment because of the groupthink and ability to process complex ideas

while encountering very little opposition. These findings are an important part of a much larger conversation about anonymous online communication. Disclosure is a small piece of that puzzle. Moreover, r/SuicideWatch is one of many avenues for a study of anonymous disclosure. More studies are needed in this area to continue to illuminate some of the nuance and complexity of this important area of study.

While this research looked primarily at how the subreddit was being utilized, the psychological aspects of these interactions is an important part of this discussion. Is this type of fantasy exploration in anonymous online spaces helpful or is the groupthink and normalization surrounding it make it more likely that someone visiting r/SuicideWatch might follow through on what was previously just a fantasy? While how these websites are being used is an important part of our understanding of them, the impact is likely even more important.

Reddit is a unique community that offers a glimpse of communication without many of the preexisting constraints that exist in other online communities; however, it does have some limiting factors of its own. Using it as a vehicle was an appropriate choice for this study, but studies that focus on these same questions should not be limited to this vehicle alone. Studies that explore these questions can and should look in new directions to understand anonymous online disclosure. This is a large and complex question with equally large and complex answers that scholars interested in social media platforms and especially those that are designed to provide anonymity, at least to some degree, can pursue.

Through the vehicle of Reddit, this study considered some of the themes that appear on the subreddit r/SuicideWatch. The contributions shared here will assist our understanding of anonymous online communication.

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