Patterns of empathy in online communication for older people
Overview

Background information
- Online communities
- Older people
- Empathy

Study
- Aims and objectives
- Methods and Tools for analysis
- Findings

Follow-up study

Important issues in Internet research
Online communities

Emphasis on **components** of online communities
- People
- Purpose
- Policies
- Software

Emphasis on **social interaction** within online communities
- Support
- Empathy
- Friendship
Older people I

Older people who are online

Year

% of older people

Age 50-64

Age 65+

Source: eMarketer and Department of Commerce (2005).
Older people II

Main Internet activities

- Communication (94% email; 28% instant messenger)
- Searching for information (66% search for health-related issues)
- Since 2008:
  - Huge increase in internet-usage the 70-75 age group
  - Instant messaging, social networking, and blogging have gained ground
  - But: older people are still less likely to use online videos, online games, and virtual worlds

Benefits of online communication for older people

- Positive influence on quality of life
- Increase of mental ability
- Provision of social interaction
- Similar life situation nurtures emotional support and trust
Empathy

Definition

- knowing what another person is feeling
- feeling what another person is feeling, and
- responding compassionately to another person’s distress

Four components of empathy

- Understanding
- Emotion
- Similarity
- Concern
Aims and objectives

I. Develop a **code scheme** that captures the content of an empathic discussion board.

II. Investigate how the **roles of target and empathizer** are conveyed in the online community.

III. Identify **components of online empathy** by relating the findings of the code scheme to components of offline empathy.

IV. Extract **interaction patterns** and compare them to those typical in empathic offline communication.
Data Source

Source: SeniorNet
- aims to educate older people about computer and internet usage
- hosts a large number of discussion groups on its website
- our study concentrates on the discussion board about depression

400 messages (6th August 2000 to 14th February 2002) posted by 47 members
Qualitative Content Analysis

1. Read all messages
2. Define the unit of analysis
3. ‘Meaning’
4. Extract/refine keywords and themes
5. Draft of code scheme
6. Saturation
7. Final code scheme
8. Order/group the themes
Distribution of roles

Roles in empathic communication
- Target
- Empathiser

Distinction in discussion board
- Active members (>4% of messages)
- Passive members (<4% of messages)

Finding
- Active members are more likely to be empathisers
- Passive members are more likely to be targets
Role of the target

Target messages: Self disclosure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>General feeling</th>
<th>Medical situation</th>
<th>Narration</th>
<th>Ask for support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In % of messages</td>
<td>28.75%</td>
<td>12.25%</td>
<td>19.75%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
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<td># of words</td>
<td>11810</td>
<td>3005</td>
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Role of the empathiser

Light support: **general**
- Best wishes
- Light encouragement
- Interest
- Humour

Deep support: **personalised**
- Reassurance
- Help
- Deep emotional support
Components - Understanding

Understanding is rarely described explicitly

Difference between Light Support and Deep support

– **Deep support** requires understanding

  “Your life is full of adjustments right now as is true for all of us in this new world order. I'm glad you're doing so well. Awful to lose a parent anyway and to be involved, worse.”

– **Light support** is general and does not require understanding

  “hang in there” “I think about you”
Components - Emotions

- Togetherness
- Ask for support
- Similar situation
- General feeling
- Best wishes
- Humour
- Thanks
- Light encouragement
- Deep emotional support
- Reassurance
- Medical situation
- Technical problem
- Technical suggestion
- Medical information
- Medical question
- Narration
- Interest
- Activity of others
- Off-topic chit-chat
- Other
- Interest
- Activity of others
- Off-topic chit-chat
Components - Similarity

Pre-determined
- Similar age
- Same/similar illness

Code scheme
- Code: Similar situation
- Similarity was explicitly mentioned as a great value of the discussion board
- “I know that all those people are here to help you too. We will listen because your story is ours too.”
Components of empathy - Concern

Messages of concern can be mostly found in the category Community building

- Own activity: Text units that reflect on the degree of one own’s activity within the discussion board.

- Activity of others: Text units that refer to the degree of activity from a specific other or from the whole community.

- Togetherness: Phrases that stress the perceived value of the community and welcome and encourage others to post.
Interaction patterns

Code occurrence in consecutive messages
- General feeling is very often followed by Deep emotional support
- General feeling is often followed by Give help
- General feeling is often followed by General feeling

Topics change quickly

Target and empathiser change roles
Conclusion

Empathy is a prevalent aspect of the depression discussion board

Code scheme clarified the occurrence of empathy online

Findings
- help to determine the success of online communities
- feed into the design of empathic online communities for older people
- can help moderators of empathic online communities
Further research

Follow up study:

- Emphasis on the interaction and relation between members

- Social Network Analysis

- Investigation of the Social Network that is made of the exchange of messages

- Compare Social Networks of categories
Social Network Analysis I

Deep support
Social Network Analysis II

Medical facts
Special issues of Internet Research

Characteristics of CMC
- Lack of non-verbal cues
- Anonymity in CMC
- Honesty in CMC

Ethical issues
- Distinction between private and public
- Informed consent
- Participant anonymity