

Emotions Expressed in Online Discussion Forums are Associated with Information Poverty and Level of Information Need

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Evidence Summary

Emotions Expressed in Online Discussion Forums are Associated with Information Poverty and Level of Information Need

A Review of:

Ruthven, I., Buchanan, S., & Jardine, C. (2018). Isolated, overwhelmed, and worried: Young first-time mothers asking for information and support online. *Journal of the Association for Information Science & Technology*, 69(9), 1073-1083. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24037>

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Abstract

Objective – To understand the emotions associated with online forum requests for information from young first-time mothers.

Design – Naturalistic study of existing online forum postings.

Setting – Two UK-based online discussion forums intended for use by young mothers.

Subjects – Two hundred thirty-seven young (aged 14 to 21) first-time mothers, who posted 279 messages in the two forums.

Methods – The 279 messages were categorized in terms of 1) the type of emotion expressed, using an inductively developed coding scheme that included interaction emotions, preoccupation emotions, and response emotions; 2) four dimensions of information poverty: secrecy, deception, risk, and situational relevance; and 3) whether the information request expressed a conscious or a formalized information need. In addition to analyzing the frequency with which particular emotions occurred, co-occurrences of emotions with information poverty dimensions and emotions with level of information need were analyzed.

Main Results – As expected, most of the forum posts included expressions of emotions. Interaction emotions relate to the mother's interactions (or lack of them) with other people and were expressed in 75 of the posts; the most frequently expressed interaction emotions were feelings of isolation and being judged. Preoccupation emotions are concerned with states of mental absorption or uncertainty and were expressed in 141 of the posts; the most frequently expressed preoccupation emotions were worry, a feeling of being overwhelmed, and self-doubt. Response emotions include reactions to someone else or a situation and were expressed in 45 of the posts; the most frequently expressed response emotion was anger, frustration, or venting (which were handled as one unit by the authors).

Dimensions of information poverty were found in 57 of the 279 posts in the sample. Situational relevance (i.e., the desire for support or information from someone that is in a very similar situation) accounted for over half of the instances of information poverty. The risks associated with young motherhood were expressed in over a quarter of the instances of information poverty.

Emotions were more likely to be expressed when the post included evidence of information poverty. When posts of conscious and formalized needs were compared, emotions were more likely to be expressed in posts of conscious needs (i.e., those which had not yet been formalized).

Conclusion – Almost all of the 279 posts in the sample included strong emotional content, mostly negative emotions such as worry, isolation, and frustration. These emotions were associated with expressions of information poverty; in particular, feelings of isolation were closely associated with information poverty. In addition, posters at an early stage of problem recognition, expressing a conscious but not yet formalized information need, were more likely to experience these negative emotions. These findings have strong implications for moderators of online forums hoping to provide support to young first-time mothers.

Commentary

The emotions associated with various information behaviours have been of interest to the library and information practice community since at least the late 1980s when early versions of Kuhlthau's Information Seeking Process model began to appear (Kuhlthau, 1988). Studies of the emotions associated with information seeking and related information behaviours have been reviewed in both Nahl (2007) and, more recently, Lopatovska and Arapakis (2011). This study focused on the emotions expressed by users of an online forum while requesting information or support from peers. Because existing taxonomies of emotions were not a good fit for the emotions found in these online forums, they developed and applied their own coding scheme, which is clearly defined in the paper and provides a strong basis for classifying the emotions expressed in these discussion forums. While valid for this study, this categorization scheme may not be applicable in similar studies, so a similar process of category definition may be necessary for a replication.

The population of interest in this study, young (aged 14 to 21) first-time mothers, was selected because they face significant challenges in the transition to motherhood. Because it was (necessarily) a naturalistic study, the sample was defined using very specific inclusion criteria for the two online forums selected and for the individual posts analyzed. These criteria did a good job of defining a homogeneous sample, avoiding ambiguity about who might be expressing the emotions identified during coding.

To address the study's research questions, descriptive statistics were reported in addition to findings about the relationships between the expressed emotions and the following two concepts: information poverty and the type of information need being expressed. The paper's tables report the relevant statistics, though the number of unique posts that contained at least one expression of emotion is not reported. At least one additional potentially confounding factor was not investigated in this study: the

topic of the information need (e.g., the advisability of breastfeeding, finding appropriate housing, etc.). It is possible that the topic might be related to the emotions expressed or affect the relationship between the expressed emotions and the other two concepts. It would be appropriate for a future study to investigate these potential interactions.

The findings of this study are of particular importance for moderators of online forums. Since emotions are frequently expressed in online forums, we can infer that they are important to the users of those forums. This finding has two specific implications for moderators. First, moderators should look for ways to retain user participation in the forum, thus reducing their feelings of isolation and helping them to link to other situationally relevant users. Second, analysis of current postings may allow moderators to identify those users whose information needs are not yet formalized and to provide additional support through some type of online mentoring program or FAQ services.

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