

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

The Usage of Online Support Groups by Teenagers, and it's Degree of Connection to their Relationship with their Parents and Friends, and to their Feeling of Social Belonging and Social Support

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Abstract

The internet has created a communications revolution, opening new possibilities for therapy and support in a myriad of fields. Online support groups are just a small part of this revolution, but form a significant part of common internet use.

Recent decades have seen rapid development and progress in information technology. The accelerated development in this field has had a vast social and cultural influence on the character of day-to-day human activities in various fields, including interpersonal communication, learning, entertainment, commerce and business. People's behavior while surfing the web – the virtual social environment created while using the internet – is affected by this unique personal and interpersonal state, which has specific characteristics, and incorporates unique psychological processes. The internet and the virtual environment it creates allow for a social environment in which humans act and interact in an intensive way, and where interpersonal interactions occur. The internet presents a large space for action, without physical borders and where users create a unique subjective experience, characterized by various behaviors.

The roots of online support groups lie in their physical, face-to-face counterparts, but the former utilize the unique traits of computer-mediated communication. Participants in these online groups do not depend on geographic location or temporal limitations to obtain support. Further, the members of online groups have far greater supervision of their interactions. Online discussion interaction patterns permit members to manage their contribution to debates more effectively than in face-to-face groups. The internet's anonymity allows group members to feel comfortable, and share sensitive and even embarrassing information. These unique characteristics of online support groups create a supportive, communicative environment.

Teenagers in Israel experience developmental processes identical to their peers in other countries. These processes are characterized by a rapid change of the individual's psychosocial reality, which undermines his or her psychological balance. In addition, Israeli teens experience country-specific, unique developmental processes, such as

mandatory service in the IDF, regional wars, terror attacks, a multicultural environment comprised of immigrants from all over the world, and an unstable economy.

To cope effectively with these processes, a teen must select from various external resources, comprising a large collection of formal and informal sources, offered by his or her environment. One such source is various face-to-face support groups and, increasingly, virtual support groups.

Studies that support groups are successful in relieving the stress experienced by their participants, through the provision of emotional relief and mutual support. At the same time, many teens experience emotional and social difficulties, and often turn to these support groups to ease their troubles.

This study aims to examine the level of support offered to Israeli teens by online support groups. To this end, we will examine four main hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 argues that participation in online support groups results in relief and personal change among participants.

Hypothesis 2 argues that relationships with parents and peer groups will be better among those who participate in online support groups, compared to control subjects who do not take part in these groups.

Hypothesis 3 argues that there will be differences between males and females in each of the following variables: self-image, sense of belonging, and sense of obtaining support.

Hypothesis 4 argues that, for teens, the better the therapeutic qualities of an online support group, the better their relationships with their parents and friends, as well as their sense of belonging.

This empirical study was conducted among 174 teens from the Center and Jerusalem districts in Israel, 74 of which participated in online support groups and 100 did not participate in support groups.

The results suggest that there are differences between teens who participate in online support groups, and those who do not. The sense of social belonging and the perception of relationships with friends were significantly higher among the teenagers who participated in online support groups than among teens who did not. The self-image of females participating in online support groups and how they perceived their relationships with their mothers were found to be higher than among those who did not participate in support groups. Males participating in online support groups were found have better perception of their relationship with their fathers. No significant differences were found in accepting social support.

Of the therapeutic strengths used in online support groups, guidance and interpersonal tutoring, as well as catharsis were found to be significant for predicting study variables. As teens felt more guided and that they were receiving better interpersonal tutoring within their support group, they also perceived their relationships with their friends as better, their sense of social belonging as higher, and their support from friends as greater.