

**“Does Anyone Else Feel This Way? Please Tell Me I’m Not Alone”:
Examining Support Marshaling and Post Engagement by People Communicating on an
Anxiety Disorder Online Forum**

Isabel Anderson

Department of Communication, University of Washington

Abstract

Anxiety disorders are the most prevalent mental disorders in U.S. adults (Stein et al., 2017), and the use of online platforms to receive support for the disorders has increased significantly in recent years (Pendse et al., 2019). Current research has illustrated the promise of online communities in meeting support needs around mental health. To build on these findings, this study compared the strategies posters employ to request social support (support elicitation or marshaling), the types of support (informational, emotional, esteem, social presence) that creators request, and the frequency of responses that creators receive by examining r/Anxiety posts with the most ($n = 100$), and least ($n = 100$), engagement. The results indicate that direct support marshaling strategies were more common on posts with higher levels of engagement in the r/Anxiety community. Posts with a lower engagement score tend to include indirect support marshaling strategies.

Keywords: support marshaling, generalized anxiety disorder, online forum

“Does Anyone Else Feel This Way? Please Tell Me I’m Not Alone”:**Examining Support Marshaling and Post Engagement by People Communicating on an Anxiety Disorder Online Forum**

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is the leading mental disorder in adults and children across the world. GAD is characterized by persistent anxiety and uncontrollable worry that occurs consistently for at least 6 months (Fricchione, 2004). Online forums (i.e., websites in which users can communicate with each other) related to mental health have gained popularity, often as a way to learn about and/or get support for GAD. Online forums related to well-being, including those created to support people’s mental health, have emerged as an important resource, and a surge of new users have joined one or more groups since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, a survey conducted in the U.S. over 13 months and reviewing 28 online health forums for people with chronic illnesses found that the forums were used more during peak lockdown times and that there was increased desire for emotional or mental health support over the pandemic’s course (Sanger et al., 2023).

More broadly, many people who are struggling and looking for relief, reassurance, mutual understanding, and support have become participants in mental health online forums where they can access guidance from others around the world. For those living with health conditions, such forums serve as a way to access people from all over the world who have similar experiences. This method of communication allows users to ask, provide, and search for support for their condition. It is usually free, easy for many people to access, and a way to get help from others without leaving the comfort of one’s own home. Ample research has explored online communities and has learned about the many benefits they can offer for the psychological

well-being of users and observers (e.g., Prescott et al., 2017; O'Connell et al., 2021; Taniguchi & Thompson, 2021; Smith-Merry et al., 2019; Zhou & Cheng, 2022).

Much less scholarship, however, has centered on particular mental health disorder forums and the interactions that occur on those sites. Moreover, little is known about how people engage in these forums to garner help from others. This thesis aims to better provide this focus by looking at how people use an online forum for people with GAD to understand their interaction patterns when seeking and giving support to one another. In particular, it is guided by a concern for differences in support elicitation that may be more or less successful, as not getting desired support can add to the challenges that people with GAD face. It does so by analyzing interactions on one online forum: r/Anxiety subreddit to explore whether that the posts with the greatest engagement differ from those that get the least response. It uses the support marshaling framework (Crowley & Faw, 2014) to assess how and whether people use specific communicative forms on these sites. Before detailing the specific study, this paper reviews previous research regarding social support, mental health online forums, the benefits and significance of social support for mental health, and support marshaling to frame the importance, background, and need for this study.

Supportive Communication and Mental Health

Social support is defined as the physical and emotional comfort given by friends, family, and others (French et al., 2018). Although social types of support are categorized differently depending on the source, four categories are particularly germane to online communities: emotional, esteem, informational, and network support. Emotional support is provided through verbal and nonverbal behaviors that relate to emotions that the individual is experiencing and are used to reduce the individual's negative affect (Burlinson, 1985; McLaren & High, 2019). Esteem

support providers use phrases that enhance how they feel about themselves (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011). Someone who provides informational support contributes advice, information, and/or facts relevant to an ongoing issue (Guntzviller et al., 2017; MacGeorge et al., 2004). Network/social presence support involves people providing personal connections to the individual and makes them feel like they belong (Guntzviller et al., 2017; MacGeorge et al., 2004).

Social support and its effects on mental health have been widely studied. Researchers have found that support from others can help people's mental health as well as how it affects those with health complications, those who work in the medical field, and those who experience discrimination based on their condition. For example, Hou et al. (2020) evaluated the relationship between social support and the mental health of health care workers during the peak of the Coronavirus pandemic in China. Their results revealed that social support was negatively correlated with SCL-90 scores, a scale that indicates the severity of symptoms (Hou et al., 2020). The more social support a participant received, the more likely they were to have positive psychological well-being.

Research has also shown that self-disclosure about one's condition and social support can significantly improve psychological well-being. Taniguchi and Thompson (2021) tested two competing models linking self-disclosure to psychological well-being and found that self-disclosure itself can predict greater health outcomes. Moreover, self-disclosure indirectly contributes to psychological well-being via social support in that disclosing can lead to support, which then provides health benefits. Using data collected from online surveys completed by 174 college students diagnosed with a mental illness, the results suggest that disclosure worked as

both a prerequisite of social support and the “booster” of social support benefits on psychological well-being. Disclosure, then, appeared to function as a way to get support from others.

Online Support for Health Conditions

Technological advances present the opportunity for both disclosing to others and getting support from them, and various apps and forums provide the opportunity for users with many different varieties of health issues to benefit. This can even occur without any engagement with others. The use of an app for people who struggle with infertility serves as an example of the potential benefits of technology-based experiences. In a study by O’Connell et al. (2021), fertility patients were recruited from four fertility clinics and given access to an infertility app named *Infotility*. The researchers found that those who posted on the app and interacted with the app more scored significantly lower on the GAD-7, a scale which measures for levels of anxiety, at the follow-up intake compared to that of the initial intake (O’Connell et al., 2021). Over the eight weeks of engagement with the app, levels of anxiety significantly dropped.

More germane to the present study, Johnson et al. (2020) analyzed comments on an online forum for those with dementia and found evidence of the use of social support online. Out of 215 comments they reviewed, 28.83% included provisions of emotional support, and 55.81% contained informational support. Gao and Shih (2019) also show the benefits of social support on HIV/AIDS online forums, and they likewise found that emotional and information support were the most frequently used forms of social support provided to forum posts. As these authors have shown, not only is social support found through online forums, emotional and information might be the most prevalent forms that people offer to others.

Online Support for Mental Health Conditions

When looking into the social support that is present within mental health forums specifically, existing research documents also several benefits. In their meta-analysis assessing research relating to mental health and social support using databases such as Web of Science, PsycINFO, Scopus, and EBSCO, Zhou and Cheng (2022) found a strong correlation between the use of online social support and improvement in adolescents' mental health. Their analysis supported social augmentation theory by finding that engagement with social networking sites (SNS) was positively associated with enhanced well-being. In many of these cases, the benefits of using these SNSs were mediated by online social support.

Smith-Merry et al. (2019) interviewed users of online mental health forums, with disorders that were not specified, and found that online discussion forums allowed users to improve conversations held in the offline world. The practice the users derived from discussing their mental health online and the increased comfort they developed with the topic created more confidence when discussing the same issues in person. The researchers also found that the online discourse lessened the effects of mental health stigma and gave the users more motivation to hold similar conversations offline. These positive benefits may have occurred because most posts found within these forums are seen as constructive/positive (Johnsen et al., 2002).

Seeking Support Online for Anxiety Disorders

Within the larger body of research into online support for mental health, researchers have looked into how and why such support occurs and the activity that is present on mental health online forums, but the findings are typically generalized across mental health conditions. Kummervold et al. (2002), for example, reported that people who make use of mental health online forums found them to be useful in providing both practical and factual information. These forums also provide social contact and support, which can be hard for some users to find due to

their mental disorder. The threshold for self-disclosure online can also be lower than in person because of the anonymity available; that is, people are more likely to disclose private information when others do not know who they are.

In Kummervold and colleagues' study, people aged 11-35 said that they gained an understanding in online forums that they would not have found from their friends and family in-person. They also received support: As with other research, informational support and emotional support were most present within the posts that the researchers studied. The authors also noted that different issues received different types of support and responses, suggesting that the use of online forums for mental health concerns may differ depending on the users' disorders, however (see, also, Prescott et al., 2017). Collectively, this literature shows the connection between social support in online forums and mental health benefits. It also shows that certain forms of support are more common than other. In order to get support in these forums, however, people often have to ask for it, a process known more specifically as support marshaling.

Support Marshaling

Support marshaling is an active process during which one or both interaction partners enact strategies intended to either elicit the endorsement of network members or limit their perceived opposition. Crowley and Faw (2014) first applied this process to support for relationships and created a typology of 17 support marshaling strategies based on interviews with people involved in romantic relationships. These specific strategies exist within two larger categories: direct and indirect. The direct strategies include defending, reappraising, and soliciting support defined in Table 1. Using these strategies, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: How do posters of the r/Anxiety subreddit elicit support?

RQ2: What type of support do posters request most often?

RQ3: How do posts with more replies differ from those with fewer responses?

Table 1 - Direct Support Marshaling Strategies

Defend	Participants defended aspects of their mental health, or life with anxiety.
Reappraise	Participants reexamined beliefs they had about their mental health.
Solicit (approach-direct) (see below, asking for social presence support, asking for esteem support, asking for emotional support, asking for informational support)	Participants directly asked community to provide support to increase their mental health.

Method

Statement of Positionality

I have been diagnosed with GAD, and I turned to online forums for help during the height of the pandemic. Thus, I am entering this research from the perspective of a former forum user, and there is potential for my position to influence the research due to my familiarity with the forums. By approaching this online forum as an academic researcher instead of seeking support, however, I have gained a different perspective. This mixed “insider” (i.e. familiar) and “outsider” (e.g., unfamiliar) perspectives give me a diverse interpretation of the data (Tracy, 2020).

Data Collection

The UW Institutional Review Board determined my study was not human subjects research, as Reddit forums are not password protected (i.e., they are public). After that, posts and

comments were collected from the r/AnxietyReddit subgroup. This subreddit was chosen because it is the largest Anxiety subreddit and thus contains the most traffic and data available for collection. The r/Anxiety subreddit was created on September 15th, 2008, and now hosts 608,000 members. One of my advisors updated a data scraping script for the statistical program R Studio with the RedditExtractoR package to collect first-level posts and corresponding comments from the r/Anxiety subreddit. The data ($N = 999$ posts and any responses to them) were collected on January 12th, 2023 and included the most recent posts published to the r/Anxiety subreddit. These were downloaded and organized into a spreadsheet. Reddit limits the number of posts scrapped per subreddit, thus we collected the maximum number available for one. All demographic information is unknown.

After the initial scraping, I read each post for relevance before adding it to the dataset. I then organized the posts by the number of responding comments from the most ($n = 633$) to the least ($n = 0$) amount of comments. I numbered the posts in descending order by number of comments and labeled each post with its number (#post number). The final dataset included 200 posts and the responses to them and was 50 pages of single-spaced text and 24,326 words.

Coding Procedures

A qualitative content analysis approach for this research allowed for each post and comment to be analyzed to determine the forms of social support being asked for and offered (Smedley & Coulson, 2021). The top 100 and bottom 100 posts were analyzed using a codebook created by Wolfe et al. (2022; see Table 1). I adapted the seven support marshaling strategies from Crowley and Faw (2014) to make sense in the context of an online forum specifically designed for anxiety disorders. Direct support marshaling strategies were (a) defend, (b) reappraise, and (c) solicit. I categorized the “solicit” posts into four types of social support

(emotional, esteem, network/social presence, and informational) adapted from the Scott and Carrington (2011). See Table 2. The fifth type of social support identified in previous research, tangible support, has rarely been identified in online support formats (see Ki & Jang, 2018; Mo & Coulson, 2008; Rains et al., 2015) and thus was not included in this research study. For the purpose of this study, the level of engagement was defined by the number of replies a post received.

The definitions and examples in the codebook provide distinctions between the terms and allow for better understanding and categorization. An independent coder with expertise in qualitative methods coded around 25% of the data. The coder and I met multiple times to discuss our coding and ensure consistency in the coding of support types.

Table 2: Categories of Support Solicitation

Type	Definition
Informational	A post asking for messages of advice, perspective, and feedback that attempt to solve a stressful situation.
Emotional	A post asking for support that communicates love, caring, empathy, and/or concern.
Social Presence	A post asking for someone to be available to them or wanted to know that someone was there for them (even virtually).
Esteem	A post asking for support that involves messages that enhance how the person might feel about their attributes and abilities, despite them facing a problem. The message could include requests for validation.

Results

Direct Support Marshaling Strategies

The data analysis process revealed differences in the commonly used support marshaling strategies in the most and least engaged posts. More than half of the posts that received the most engagement ($n = 57$) used at least one form of direct support marshaling. Less than half ($n = 43$) of the least engaged posts, however, used at least one form of direct support marshaling strategies.

Defend

The defend marshaling strategy emerged when the support seeker protected and explained their mental health, their beliefs, or an issue they were having. Participants utilized this strategy in 19 of high-engagement posts and 12 of the low-engagement posts. This means that this strategy was slightly more prevalent in high-engagement posts. Illustrating their use of this strategy, a poster wrote:

My (26F) mom (58F) has a lot of anxiety and depression. She started taking omega3 supplement to help her. Today she said to me “you should take some too. Its good for the brain. Like me you are missing something up there”...I know anxiety disorders are real illnesses. But i don’t consider myself sick. I have a different brain chemistry that i need to take care of carefully but i certainly am not “missing something up there”. That made me upset... (P46)

This user defends their perspective and position on their mental health and stands their ground. It can be seen throughout the rest of the data, but primarily occurred in high-engagement posts.

This strategy often emerged when users recounted an incident/argument and informed the readers of their opinion while stating their knowledge of the mental illness. This is illustrated in this post as the poster clarified, “I know anxiety disorders are real illnesses,” before stating their

opinion. On occasion, if the poster was posting on behalf of a friend, relative, or partner, this defense strategy was used to guard and validate the person, their mental illness, and their experience. For example:

When I say that there really is not help out there I mean it. Now my son is being labeled as something he's not, and I just want it to stop. My son is innocent, he's a gentle giant. This big guy who has a brain of a 10 year old. He has no friends because it's hard for him to socialize. (P170)

A common variation of this strategy was to clarify the poster's previous knowledge of the harmful side-effects of medication to inform, and clarify, the support they were looking for.

Exemplifying this, a poster wrote:

Gday 22M from Australia, just wanted to get everyones opinions and experiences with different benzos for panic attacks. I am currently prescribed diazepam 5mg and alprazolam 0.25mg, personally I feel more of a calming effect from diazepam but has barely any effect when a mild - bad panic attack comes. And recently only just started the alprazolam which I feel barely any effect at all from. (Barely calms my general anxiety like diazepam does, and no help with panic attacks so far >r) (Also I know the risks and dangers of benzodiazepines, I take them responsibly and when needed d) (P80)

In this example, the poster clarified their knowledge of the risks associated with the use of benzodiazepines. This gave the readers a better understanding of the knowledge that the poster had already attained. In this way, the poster informed the readers how they could structure their support to be the most beneficial to the support seeker. Disclaimers, such as the previously known information about drug use, were prevalent in both the high and low-engagement posts, occurring slightly more often in the high-engagement posts.

Reappraise

The reappraise strategy was used when the poster re-examined the beliefs that they held about their own mental health and life with mental illness. This strategy was not used often but was more common in low engagement posts ($n = 9$) compared to the high-engagement posts ($n = 5$). This poster exemplified one manner in which the reappraise strategy was used:

Im not talking about normal anxiety, Im talking about a debilitating anxiety that turns into a disability. Who said disability could be physical? Ive suffered from depression for a very very long time and dear god how awful anxiety is? In my experience, I would rather be depressed than be anxious, while depression makes me lifeless, anxiety strips away my freedom and overall health. I have never thought to struggle with physical illness as a result of mental illness. Depression never gave me GERD or other health issues. It never made me unable to live like other people or gave me panic attacks. I hate this. (P32)

The poster stated their positionality about their mental health and the realization of the effect anxiety can take on physical health. They also detailed their experience with depression and reinforced their belief that anxiety took a greater toll on their life. The poster reflected a shift in their idea of what anxiety can look like and how it can manifest.

Posters also noted a change in perception of medication when given a new medication to try. A poster shared a common sentiment, stating:

I never take medicine but when at the ER the doctor prescribed me ativan and who knew how much it helps!!! It is crazy i swear i had such an anxious day until i took medicine (P36)

The poster noted at the beginning of the post that they had never taken any medication to aid their anxiety but when provided with Ativan, a benzodiazepine, they were surprised to find reduced levels of anxiety. Mention of medication and its side effects, benefits, and dangers were common among posters on this online forum. Discussion of a shift in perception of medication, such as the example above, reflected reappraisal of an earlier belief.

Solicit

Participants used the solicit strategy when they directly asked the community to provide a form of social support to increase their mental health. This strategy was the most often used across the entire data set, with 25.31% ($n = 79$) of all posts including at least one of the following forms of the solicit strategy: social presence, esteem, emotional and informational support.

Participants most often solicited support in high engagement posts (60.78%; $n = 48$) although the strategy also occurred in low engagement content (39.24%; $n = 31$).

Social Presence Support. Solicit social presence support was coded as when a poster reveals they are looking for someone to be available to them or want to know that someone was there for them (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). In these data, posters also asked for others who experienced similar things. In the high-engagement posts, 24% and 19% of the low-engagement posts solicited social presence support. The most highly engaged post, which received 633 comments in response, served as a particular example of social presence support elicitation in action:

I have 2 specific shows that I turn on when I start to have an anxiety attack or feel extremely stressed (if I'm lucky enough to be home at the time). I feel crazy for doing so, especially since I've seen both about a million times. It's almost like a safety blanket.
Anyone else? (P1)

The poster started this post by disclosing some information about how they dealt with their anxiety by turning on two specific comfort shows. They then shared how this makes them feel “crazy” as they have seen the shows multiple times before, but they would like to receive some reassurance that they are not the only one who uses this coping mechanism.

Other users posted that they were seeking people who can relate to anxiety triggers. For instance, a user wrote:

Does anyone else gets their anxiety triggered after drinking coffee? Im a college student so some days i really have to drink some coffee or else i wont be able to study. However it happened on many occasions that I feel like my heart almost stopped, short breath, my body becomes tense, and my legs start shaking without me realising it, sometimes stomach pain. If some people experience the same things how do you cope? ... (P75)

This poster started by establishing that they were looking for other users whose anxiety becomes heightened after drinking coffee and then described their experience, symptoms, and personal information that was relevant to the subject. The post ended with a form of informational support solicitation, which will be described further in an upcoming section. Once determining those who have similar experiences, the poster sought information for how to deal and remedy their problem.

Many users on r/Anxiety, in both the high and low engagement posts, appeared to know that they are not the only ones who have certain experiences. A commonly used phrase within the high and low engagement posts is, “Does anyone else...” (P130). It was used so frequently that the posters on the r/Anxiety subreddit coined a written short term for it as “DAE”:

DAE ever have a really good day and just going about your business when ..Bam !!! It comes from no where and the worrying starts all over again? ... (P102)

The DAE forms of questions are so commonly used that the r/Anxiety moderators created a separate filter, titled “DAE Questions,” meant for these types of social presence support marshaling posts.

Esteem Support. Esteem support solicitation occurs when participants asked for support that involves messages that enhance how the person might feel about their attributes and abilities, despite them facing a problem (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011). Requested messages could include expressions of respect, validation, and confidence that might bolster the poster’s self-concept. Only 1 of the high engagement posts and 3 low engagement posts were coded as using esteem support solicitation, however. One of these esteem support solicitations occurred through asking for reassurance and validation:

I’m at the point of getting checked out again, my chest pain just doesn’t go away, I feel pain in my armpit a bit and I’m scared. I’m trying my best to overcome it and stay strong but idk. Dizziness doesn’t go away either. I just feel like I need constant reassurance, anxiety is really ruining everything, I hate acting like I’m fine when I’m going through this..... I really hope we all get better like seriously, being here for each other is the best we can do during these times! (P172)

The poster began the post by explaining their physical symptoms, worries and the need to be reassured. They stated their dislike for acting like they are doing well and progressing when in reality, they are not. Specifically, esteem support is being requested in response to the need of having their feelings and experiences validated and heard.

Some posts utilize more direct and easily identifiable ways to ask for esteem support:

Someone please tell me this isnt the end, and that Ill feel normal again someday:(I dont know what the fuck to do, I had an appointment with a psychiatrist but I have to go through another screening process and I just feel panicked, like I need to fix this now or Im going to die. (P129)

This poster asked for reassurance that they will be able to overcome this struggle and improve their mental health. They showed their lowered self-esteem as a lack of trust in their ability to recover and sought esteem support to encourage them to on their mental health journey. Throughout the high and low engagement posts, esteem support was the least commonly sought out form of social support. Given the nature of this online forum and the anonymity it maintains, esteem support can be hard to ask for and receive when you are unknown by the other community members.

Emotional Support. Seeking emotional support was coded when the participant asked for support that communicates love, caring, empathy, and/or concern (Burlison, 1985; McLaren & High, 2019). Increased mention of emotions and feelings were categorized as emotional support solicitation. Only 4 of posts with high engagement and 3 of the posts with low engagement contained emotional support solicitation. Through expression of emotions, this small group of posters communicated their need for emotional support. One wrote:

...Why do I feel like everyones out to get me? Why do I feel like everyone hates me? Me and the girl who is in the apartment next to me havent said a word since I moved in yet I always feel like shes judging every thing I do. Eurgh I hate life more than anything
(P183)

This poster expressed concern and worry that everyone hated them and they are constantly being judged. Receiving validating and comforting emotional support from other community members could potentially relieve some emotional weight.

Another expressed their emotions to receive emotional support:

...I am desperate that we get that missing cat back. If you have any ideas on how tolltry to find her please let me know. The other cat probably died screaming at the door for over

an hour. I was not there to let him out. The dead cat loved me so much. He always told me how much he loved me. I feel so bad (P78)

In this case, the poster solicited emotional support while going through a tough time when their cat passed away. The direct statement, “I feel so bad,” served as a call to action for emotional support. After esteem support, emotional support was the least commonly sought out form of support on r/Anxiety. It is possible that a reason for this is because emotional support is sought from close friends and family instead of anonymous community members.

Informational Support. This form of support solicitation occurred when a poster asked for messages of advice, perspective, and feedback that attempt to solve a stressful situation (Guntzviller et al., 2017; MacGeorge et al., 2004). Informational support solicitation was the most commonly used form of support solicitation, with the high and low engagement posts making up 37% and 19%, respectively. Informational support solicitation appeared in 56% of all posts that included a form of solicitation.

A very common type of informational support that posters sought was asking about their specific symptoms and if they are “normal” or not:

I am constantly talking and singing in myself is it something normal or because of anxiety or stress ? When I Google it it’s showing schizophrenia. (P83)

I went to a doctor and I did EKG, told me it was fine, but heart skipping palpitations are still happening from time to time. Now I have shoulder pain, I have many other anxiety symptoms, is this normal? ...(P87)

Both of these examples show the manner in which the poster described their symptoms, history, and other applicable information to receive informational support from the other forum members.

Although the discussion of how to obtain drugs and medication is not permitted on this online forum, there was discussion of others' experiences with medication and drug interactions, reactions, which also solicited information:

I'm starting Escitalopram today. I'm nervous because I was on sertraline and it fucked me up pretty good. Has anyone here used this medication and what are your thoughts/results? (P13)

Throughout the most and least engaged posts, informational support was a highly sought form of support that can provide direct and useful answers to the participants. Given that it can come in the form of advice, knowledge, or experience, many types of support marshaling include a form of informational support solicitation.

Indirect Support Marshaling Strategies

In the data set, 13 of the high engagement posts and 27 of the low engagement posts use at least one form of indirect support marshaling strategies. The strategies included (a) self-enhancement, (b) other-enhancement, (c) highlight positives, and (d) recruitment.

Self-enhancement

When posters sought to share good news and updates on their mental health to the readers, the post was coded as using the self-enhancement support marshaling strategy. This was the only indirect support marshaling strategy that the high engagement posts ($n = 12$) used more than the low engagement posts ($n = 8$). Posters discussed improvements in their mental health and wanted to share their good news with others:

... I discovered this feeling 2 months ago and it stopped every day small mental breakdowns i experienced my whole life, because i stopped to associate myself with feelings and thoughts and started to feel more free in my mind ... (P124)

This poster discussed the development of their ability to perceive reality in the manner that it truly presents itself. The discussion of mental health improvement gave the opportunity to readers to respond with encouraging and supportive comments.

On occasion, posters shared with the readers the success they had achieved over time:

After 35 years my anxiety tried to win.. Im thankful for my doctors and my medication. Im lucky. Im strong. I celebrate every small victory now, and I meditate and find kindness in everything I do. I believe in every single one of you. Youre all strong. Youre all powerful.

(P143)

Posters who shared their long-term successes helped readers by giving them their advice while sharing their improvements. By highlighting their progress, their post served as motivation and encouragement for the readers.

Other-enhancement

When the poster sought to increase the esteem of the reader, the *other-enhancement* strategy was coded. Respectively, 1% and 9% of the most and least engaged posts used this strategy. Posters who use this form of support marshaling will share encouragement or positives for the readers. As one participant wrote:

I really give all I could but it wasnt enough. So if you have a job, keep fighting! Is so incredible that you can keep it! (P70)

This poster used their story of losing their job due to their mental health as a way to empower and encourage the readers who are in a similar position.

On multiple occasions, posters published a post that let the readers know that they are there for them:

Much like many people here I have anxiety, but that's not the point of this post. The point of this is to tell you that my DMs are open for anything you need. You can chat, vent, tell

me how life is going, or just ask advice. I know how anxiety can impact the ability to function so i want to be there for anybody who needs it. (P157)

This form of other-enhancement did not show that the poster is directly looking to receive support but instead to create relationships with other community members and to provide support to each other in a private manner through the Reddit direct messages.

Highlight Positives

When participants actively noted the positive qualities of their mental health in the post, the post was coded as using the highlight positives marshaling strategy. Just 2 of the high engagement posts included the highlight positives strategy, whereas 13 of the low engagement posts did so. Unlike the self-enhancement strategy and the long-term improvement in their mental health, this strategy is used to highlight a specific time when the posters had a success and overcame a struggle.

When using this strategy, some posters recounted a story in which they struggled with their mental health and overcame their anxiety and made an improvement:

basically my credit card was stolen and loads of money taken from my account, literally every penny i had. but i managed to call the bank (worked up to it all day) and fix the problem. sorry im just rlly proud of myself (P81)

... It subsided a little but kept creeping back. When it started to come back again full force, I stood up, started moving my body defensively and told anxiety to shut up, you aren't winning, im not going to die and to leave me alone! It immediately started backing down and anytime it started to creep up again I told it off. And now I feel fine. I find staying still makes anxiety worse. I internalize and it makes me feel awful. So today I tried something else and I can't believe it worked. I just had to share! (P125)

These stories centered on times when they had to face their anxieties and that they overcame them. The posters showed the improvement in their ability to cope and push aside their anxiety.

Recruitment

Recruitment was coded when participants asked others on the forum to encourage and support them on their mental health journey. Just 2 of the high engagement posts used this recruitment strategy, and 9 of the low engagement posts included recruiting help, as seen in the following examples:

Anything that has worked for you please tell me, I will do everything (P37)

I just want to be calm, and be able to enjoy life. But I am anxious 24/7 regardless of telling myself that everything is ok. What can I do ? I need help. (P182)

These posts aimed to recruit readers to provide them with various types of support as they begin to recover their mental health. These forms of recruitment were rarely used in the most and least engaged posts which could potentially indicate that those who sought support on r/Anxiety would more frequently ask for specific forms of support instead of asking for generalized help.

Discussion

There were three research questions that were used to shape the findings in this thesis: (a) how do posters of the r/Anxiety subreddit elicit support, (b) what type of support do posters request most often, and (c) what are the differences between the posts with higher and lower engagement? Using adapted definitions from Crowley and Faw (2014) and Scott and Carrington (2011), it was found that users of r/Anxiety elicited support through several indirect and direct marshaling strategies: defend, reappraise, solicit, self-enhancement, other-enhancement, highlight positives and, recruitment. The coded data revealed that posters requested

informational support with the social presence being the second most commonly elicited. Lastly, significant differences between posts that received higher levels and lower levels of engagement revealed the top posts held a 14% ($n = 17$) increased use of at least one form of direct support marshaling strategy.

The reappraise direct support marshaling strategy was the least used in both the high and low engagement posts. This indicates that it is not a common form of support strategy elicited by r/Anxiety community members and thus might signify their lack of need for reappraisal. In terms of indirect support marshaling strategies, for high engagement posts, other-enhancement was the least used and for low engagement posts, self-enhancement was least used. Interestingly, self-enhancement was used the most in high engagement posts which signifies that self-enhancement can lead to increased engagement.

The results indicate that the use direct support marshaling strategies that specifically elicit informational and social presence support, will lead to more engagement from other community members. This data can help community members adjust how they elicit support to receive the most support and benefits from the r/Anxiety online forum.

Limitations and Future Research

Given the breadth of data available and the different methods of determining what defines a “successful” post, there are certain limitations that this study contains. For the purpose of this study, the number of comments was used to determining the level of engagement. Further investigation into the number of “upvotes” or “downvotes,” a system for Reddit users to show support or dislike of a post, and the relationship to the support marshaling strategies could further assessments of level of engagement. Other factors, such as taking the time and day of publication, could contain information that affects levels of engagement. In addition, in this

study, one online forum was used. But there are other online forums, outside of Reddit, that could provide rich data and provide results that span across multiple variations of online forums.

Despite these limitations, this study has highlighted the use of support marshaling strategies and how they can relate to increased or decreased levels of engagement. Direct forms of support marshaling are most commonly used by the posters who received the most engagement, which could indicate that this support marshaling form is more successful and helps those who seek support to receive greater benefits.

References

- Burleson, B. R. (1985). The production of comforting messages: Social-cognitive foundations. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 4*(3–4), 253–273. <https://doi-org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.1177/0261927X8543006>
- Crowley, J. P., & Faw, M. H. (2014). Support marshaling for romantic relationships: Empirical validation of a support marshaling typology. *Personal Relationships, 21*(2), 242–257. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12029>
- French, K. A., Dumani, S., Allen, T. D., & Shockley, K. M. (2018). A meta-analysis of work-family conflict and social support. *Psychological Bulletin, 144*(3), 284–314. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000120>
- Fricchione, G. (2004). Generalized Anxiety Disorder. *New England Journal of Medicine, 351*(7), 675–682. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMcp022342>
- Gao, Z., & Shih, P. C. (2019). Communities of support: Social support exchange in a HIV online forum. *Proceedings of the Seventh International Symposium of Chinese CHI, 37–43*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3332169.3333576>
- Guntzviller, L. M. (2017). Testing multiple goals theory with low-income, mother-child Spanish-speakers: Language brokering interaction goals and relational satisfaction. *Communication Research, 44*(5), 717–742. <https://doi-org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.1177/0093650215608238>
- Holmstrom, A. J., & Burleson, B. R. (2011). An initial test of a cognitive-emotional theory of esteem support messages. *Communication Research, 38*(3), 326–355. <https://doi-org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.1177/0093650210376191>

Hou, T., Zhang, T., Cai, W., Song, X., Chen, A., Deng, G., & Ni, C. (2020). Social support and mental health among health care workers during Coronavirus Disease 2019 outbreak: A moderated mediation model. *PLoS ONE*, *15*(5), e0233831–e0233831.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0233831>

Johnsen, J. K., Rosenvinge, J. H., & Gammon, D. (2002). Online group interaction and mental health: An analysis of three online discussion forums. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, *43*(5), 445–449. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9450.00313>

Johnson, J., Black, R. W., & Hayes, G. R. (2020). Roles in the discussion: An analysis of social support in an online forum for people with dementia. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *4*(CSCW2), 127:1-127:30.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3415198>

Ki, E. J., & Jang, J. (2018). Social support and mental health: An analysis of online support forums for Asian immigrant women. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, *28*(2), 226–250. <https://doi.org/10.1075/japc.00011.ki>

Kummervold, P. E., Gammon, D., Bergvik, S., Johnsen, J.-A. K., Hasvold, T., & Rosenvinge, J. H. (2002). Social support in a wired world: Use of online mental health forums in Norway. *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry*, *56*(1), 59–65.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08039480252803945>

MacGeorge, E., Feng, B., Butler, G., & Budarz, S. (2004). Understanding advice in supportive interactions - Beyond the facework and message evaluation paradigm. *Human Communication Research*, *30*(1), 42–70. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/30.1.42>

- McLaren, R. M., & High, A. C. (2019). The effect of under- and over-benefited support gaps on hurt feelings, esteem, and relationships. *Communication Research*, 46(6), 785–810.
<https://doi-org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.1177/0093650215605155>
- Mo, P. H. K., & Coulson, N. S. (2008). Exploring the communication of social support within virtual communities: A content analysis of messages posted to an online HIV/AIDS support groups. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 11(3), 371-374.
<https://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2007.0118>
- O’Connell, S. B. L., Gelgoot, E. N., Grunberg, P. H., Schinazi, J., Da Costa, D., Dennis, C.-L., Rosberger, Z., & Zelkowitz, P. (2021). ‘I felt less alone knowing I could contribute to the forum’: Psychological distress and use of an online infertility peer support forum. *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine*, 9(1), 128–148.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21642850.2021.1884556>
- Prescott, J., Hanley, T., & Ujhelyi, K. (2017). Peer communication in online mental health forums for young people: Directional and nondirectional support. *JMIR Mental Health*, 4(3), e6921. <https://doi.org/10.2196/mental.6921>
- Rains, S. A., Peterson, E. B., & Wright, K. B. (2015). Communicating social support in computer mediated contexts: A meta-analytic review of content analyses examining support messages shared online among individuals coping with illness. *Communication Monographs*, 82(4), 403–430. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2015.1019530>
- Sanger S., Duffin S., Gough R. E., Bath, P.A.(2023). Use of online health forums by people living with breast cancer during the COVID-19 pandemic: Thematic analysis. *JMIR Cancer*, e42783. <https://doi.org/10.2196/42783>

- Scharp, K. M., & Dorrance Hall, E. (2019). Examining the relationship between undergraduate student parent social support-seeking factors, stress, and somatic symptoms: A two-model comparison of direct and indirect effects. *Health Communication, 34*(1), 54–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2017.1384427>
- Scott, J., & Carrington, P. J. (2011). *The SAGE handbook of social network analysis*. SAGE Publications.
- Smedley, R. M., & Coulson, N. S. (2021). A practical guide to analysing online support forums. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18*(1), 76–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2018.1475532>
- Smith-Merry, J., Goggin, G., Campbell, A., McKenzie, K., Ridout, B., & Baylous, C. (2019). Social connection and online engagement: insights from interviews with users of a mental health online forum. *JMIR Mental Health, 6*(3), e11084. <https://doi.org/10.2196/11084>
- Taniguchi, E., & Thompson, C. M. (2021). Mental illness self-disclosure among college students: A pre-requisite of social support or a booster of social support benefits? *Journal of Mental Health, 30*(3), 323–332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2021.1922626>
- Zhou, Z., & Cheng, Q. (2022). Relationship between online social support and adolescents' mental health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Adolescence, 94*(3), 281–292. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jad.12031>

Table 1 - Direct Support Marshaling Strategies

Defend	Participants defended aspects of their mental health, or life with anxiety.
Reappraise	Participants reexamined beliefs they had about their mental health.
Solicit (approach-direct) (see below, asking for social presence support, asking for esteem support, asking for emotional support, asking for informational support)	Participants directly asked community to provide support to increase their mental health.

Table 2 – Types of Support Solicitation

Asking for Social Presence	This code means that the participant asked for someone to be available to them or wanted to know that someone was there for them (even virtually). Looking to find others who experience/d similar things or feel similarly.
Asking for Esteem Support	This code means that the participant asked for support that involves messages that enhance how the person might feel about their attributes and abilities, despite them facing a problem. Requested messages could include expressions of respect, validation, and confidence that bolster another's self-concept.
Asking for Emotional Support	This code means that the participant asked for support that communicates love, caring, empathy, and/or concern.
Asking for Informational Support	This code means that the participant asked for messages of advice, perspective, and feedback that attempt to solve a stressful situation.

Table 3 - Indirect Support Marshaling Strategies

Self-enhancement (approach-indirect)	Participants sought to share good news and updates on mental health to the readers.
Other enhancement (approach-indirect)	Participants sought to increase the esteem of the reader.
Highlight positives	Participants actively noted the positive qualities of their mental health in the post.
Recruitment	Participants asked others on the forum to encourage and support them on their mental health journey.