Qeios

Peer Review

Review of: "Social Identity Processes Within Online Support Groups for People With Long Covid: A Longitudinal Survey"

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Thank you for the opportunity to review this timely and important work examining the effects of online support group use on the wellbeing of people living with long covid. The longitudinal study design provides an original contribution to the extant research on online support group use, the population of focus is understudied, and the application of the social cure theory to the field is novel. The use of PPI is a particular methodological strength. In sum, this manuscript offers an interesting contribution to the literature. There are some weaknesses in the current manuscript that, when addressed, will provide greater clarity for the reader.

Introduction:

Physical health as an outcome is named as a key contribution of this study. Have online support groups for other chronic conditions been found to impact or lessen physical symptoms? There is some exploration of this in the cancer literature that could strengthen the background summary of this literature: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.critrevonc.2015.01.011

The influence of group norms is an interesting and important discussion in relation to online support, as these types of groups are often criticised for being a potential source of worry for individuals with chronic conditions. Can you comment on how this integrates with the social identity approach to support groups (for instance, could a support group with a trend towards negative posts become a “social curse” rather than a social cure? E.g. **https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12440**

Methods:

There seems to be an error in the attrition information as the following figures don’t add up:

“At T1 we recruited 195 participants but 76 were removed due to not providing contact details (n = 18), not

meeting the inclusion criteria (n = 10), not selecting an online support group when asked which group they have used (n = 36), or not responding to any outcome measure (n = 11)" – please note that the bracketed information adds up to 75, not 76.

It is stated that "Participants who did not complete all three timepoints were also removed from the final analysis (n = 17), leaving a final sample at T1 of 102 participants" but also that "88 participants completed all three waves". Is the final sample then 102 or 88?

Results:

You note that some of the analyses are underpowered. This is a critical point when interpreting the findings, and the manuscript would be improved by greater clarity on which analyses are powered and which are merely exploratory and providing some indication of trends. Further, this point needs to be carried into the discussion when discussing the relationships between variables with care to acknowledge which findings were powered and which are more exploratory trends.

Discussion:

Can you comment on the extent to which the online nature of the support groups may have led to the surprising findings? For instance, you did not find the expected health outcomes, but is that because the extant literature is based on in-place support for chronic conditions? Is there something in the nature of online support that impacts the "social cure"?

Can you be more precise in describing the "negative norms" finding? The discussion described "low levels" of negative norms, for instance, but the study did not report actual levels of negative posting – rather, this variable appears to examine whether participant perceptions of posts are typically negative to positive.

Can you comment on the extent to which the findings are unique to long covid, or are there similarities or differences in similar studies of other chronic conditions or other support groups?

The study limitations acknowledge the low sample size and attrition issues with the study. Are the long covid online communities relatively large? This condition and the use of online communities might be relatively niche, so it is difficult to know whether this is a limitation of the recruitment strategy or simply reflective of the population studied.

The discussion suggests that "participants were not new to online support groups so it could be that benefits had plateaued". Is this a recognised phenomenon in the online support literature or the social cure literature?

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.