COMPUTER MEDIATED SELF-HELP: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION NORMS AND SELF-DISCLOSURE IN CODEPENDENTS ANONYMOUS ONLINE SELF-HELP GROUPS

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Heather Janeen Grubb

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COMMUNICATION NORMS AND SELF-DISCLOSURE IN CODEPENDENTS

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Heather Janeen Grubb

Approved by:

__________________________________, Committee Chair
Gerri Smith, Ph.D.

__________________________________, Second Reader
Diego Bonilla, Ph.D.

__________________________________, Third Reader
Edith LeFebvre, Ph.D.

____________________________
Date
Student:  Heather Janeen Grubb

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this thesis is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the thesis.

__________________________, Graduate Coordinator
Michele S. Foss-Snowden, Ph.D.  Date

Department of Communication Studies
Abstract

of

COMPUTER MEDIATED SELF-HELP: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION NORMS AND SELF-DISCLOSURE IN CODEPENDENTS ANONYMOUS ONLINE SELF-HELP GROUPS

by

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This study examined communication norms and levels of self-disclosure in Codependents Anonymous online group meetings. The Social Information Processing (SIP) theory, anonymity, and hyperpersonal communication were reviewed to explain how messages were communicated through the computer mediated environment (CMC). Communication norms and levels of self-disclosure were identified in 12 meetings and the subsequent 30 minutes after meetings, evaluated using content analysis, and categorized into themes. Communication norms in the meetings included structure, repeated order of topic discussion, clear roles of participants, standard acronyms and responses, and turn-taking. These norms enabled deeper levels of self-disclosure including beliefs and feelings. Communication norms including open and friendly conversation, gradual participant dissipation, and a relaxed structure and environment in the after meetings enabled lighter levels of self-disclosure including basic information and preferences. Results are discussed as they relate to potential future online self-help group studies.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Gerri Smith, Ph.D.

_______________________

Date

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

With the technological advances of the 21st century, rising costs of healthcare, and the stigma of seeking help with mental health issues, online self-help support is an emerging area worthy of scholarly examination. As opposed to a traditional face-to-face self-help group meeting, the online environment offers unique benefits such as more flexibility in the physical location of communication, convenience, perceived privacy, and the ability to remain somewhat anonymous. As we globalize, people are traveling more and the online community offers an opportunity to be socially connected remotely. The cultural shifts that technology has brought to society have impacted how we seek social support and additionally self-help. This thesis examines how one particular online self-help group, Codependents Anonymous, or CoDA, functions with these unique online characteristics. This chapter will review some of the contributing factors that lend evidence to the growing usage of online self-help support groups and will cover background information on Codependents Anonymous, the group of focus in this study. Additionally, justification for this particular study will be presented.

In a world driven by rapid technological advances with easy access to devices such as laptops, smart phones, electronic tablets, and portable electronic pads, the Internet has become widely used and accepted. Online communication offers a convenient outlet for communicating. The Internet is a widely used tool with 67% of American adults ages 18 and older saying that they use the Internet or email on a typical day and 82% saying they use it at least occasionally (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012) and other reports showing usage as high as 81% of Americans using the Internet (Fox & Duggan, 2012). According to “internetlivestats.com” (2015) about 40% of the world population has Internet connection and the number of Internet users has increased tenfold from 1999 to 2013. As the Internet is a “profoundly social medium” (Walther & Parks,
2002), it would be logical to conclude that people may follow the cultural electronic trends and seek mental health resources online as well. Over the past 20 years, the IT industry has grown substantially, leading to services provided by psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and counselors now also being available online (Campos, 2009) but services are likely to vary greatly and the quality and effectiveness of them is an area of potential research.

A recent report from Kaiser Family Foundation Employer Health Benefits states that in 2013, the average annual premiums for employer-sponsored health insurance were $5,885 for single coverage and $16,351 for family coverage. This represents a 5% higher rate for single and 4% higher rate for family than the 2012 numbers. Over the last decade, health premiums have increased considerably. In the same report, a graph depicts the average family’s annual cost of $16,351 represents about an 80% increase since 2003 (kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com, 2013).

With The Affordable Care Act, the future is unknown and costs could likely continue to escalate and perhaps influence people to seek other means for health care, again possibly turning to online support options. Group therapy may not be affordable and online groups may provide the needed forum for individuals seeking private, anonymous social support. There are online therapy groups available but often times a cost is associated and this can be a prohibiting factor. For example, The International Society For Mental Health Online is a website that focuses on mental health but charges membership dues. The mytherapy.com site attests that help is available to clients experiencing family and relationship issues, illnesses, and those looking for something outside of face-to-face counsel but again it is not offered free. Furthermore, according to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2001) even people fortunate to have health coverage find greater challenges and restrictions on mental health treatment than other illnesses.
Davison, Pennebaker, & Dickerson (2000) found support-group seeking behavior across 20 disease categories in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Dallas was highest for stigmatizing diseases and lowest for less embarrassing disorders. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2001) declared people with mental health issues tend to turn away from treatment due to shame, stigma, and discrimination, regardless of race or ethnicity. As globalization and people working in geographically dispersed locations has increased and likely will continue to do so, having support and guidance at our fingertips is an important move in a new direction. Remote electronic access affords computer and hand held electronic device users a chance to stay in touch and be social despite physical location. These modern electronic devices could also be used to seek help for personal issues and may provide an attractive solution to hesitation or embarrassment of seeking traditional medical care.

The Internet provides an avenue for convenient and private communication. Howard, Rainie and Jones (2001) found that the Internet was a large part of social and work life and that e-mail provided a way to build friend and family relationship networks. Joinson (2004) found individuals with lower self-esteem may favor email usage over in-person conversation when in a situation with a great chance of rejection. Morahan-Martin and Schumacher (2003) suggested that lonely individuals are more likely to use the Internet for emotional support and making online friends than other less lonely people. Individuals suffering from mental struggles may be too frightened to seek care, too downtrodden to meet a counselor, and the cost of medical care may be prohibitive for some. DePaolo (1982) found people often prefer help they can self administer without seeking outside sources. Given these considerations, online group therapy may be a feasible option for some to seek support and comfort. The quick access and lack of roadblocks to help may add to the appeal (Campos, 2009).
Widyanto and Griffiths (2011) found that a relationship exists between Internet use and low self-esteem, and Ebeling-White, Frank, and Lester (2007) found shy people developed virtual friendships online to decrease their feelings of a lack of face-to-face social life, which then provided relief from feelings of loneliness and depression. These studies showing that shy people favor online social relationships very well merit further study as they relate to the online self-help environment. Additionally, the percentage of Internet users seeking mental health help online is increasing; while from 2002 to 2006 the numbers remained somewhat flat, in 2008 the percentage climbed from about 22% to 28% of people searching online for information about depression, anxiety, stress or mental health issues (Fox & Jones, 2009).

Stritzke, Nguyen, and Durkin (2004) studied shy and non-shy individuals and found that they differed greatly on rejection sensitivity, initiating relationships, and self-disclosure. With this, they found that the lack of visual and vocal cues may decrease shy online communicators’ inhibitions in an online environment. As Zhou and Zhang asserted (2008), online communication enabled by electronic media creates an atmosphere in which deception and selective self-presentation can grow exponentially due to physical separation and the option to remain anonymous. Without seeing a person face-to-face, experiencing their facial expressions and other non-verbal behavior such as vocal tones and pace of speaking, one can create his/her best self in cyberspace without concern for whether a genuine connection with another person is made. It becomes a social construction of reality as researchers have described over the decades; we are what we design ourselves to be in this environment (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Fischer, 1992; Fulk, 1993; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000).

The computer mediated environment indeed offers some advantages to modern day communication. Rheingold (1993) was able to foresee just before the wide scale launch of Internet growth that the online environment would offer new abilities to users. He found the
online community was a place where individuals could do what they do in normal life while leaving their bodies behind, meaning they could remain anonymous and faceless. Donath (1999) described the online environment as a place where a person would be able to create as many personas as one wanted. The online setting then provides for a comfort zone without added pressure of meeting face-to-face or sharing one’s self completely, mannerisms and all, as in a face-to-face setting.

Furthermore, technology such as instant messaging (IM) affords users a web based communication exchange that offers more privacy and immediacy. As Peslak, Ceccucci, and Sendall (2010) found, “Instant messaging as a form of communication offers unique advantages to traditional email communications, centered mostly on its immediacy” (p. 263). Given this, individuals may find themselves more apt to share certain levels and types of information online than they might otherwise share in a face-to-face context.

Scholars have found that people can grow close through communication online regardless of geographic location. Antheunis (2009) found that friendships expand further distances through the Internet. He states, “offline friends lived closer to each other than mixed-mode and online friends, which suggests that in online and mixed-mode friendships, actual geographic proximity is less important in establishing friendships (Antheunis, 2009, p. 120). Bargh and McKenna (2004) state the Internet bridges distances and connects people with similar interests and values while affording the feature of staying anonymous. Rosenfield (2002) said technology can offer a cost-effective and practical way to obtain access to exclusive services. The computer mediated environment also offers benefits such as convenience and a quicker response time. Tanis (2008) investigated why people use online forums and his results showed people enjoyed the support with their individual situations, the anonymous features, and the possibility to have an extended network even with limited mobility.
While the above studies have looked at various aspects of online communication in terms of self-esteem, convenience, and accessibility, more studies could specifically consider the self-help online environment and its potential for effectiveness. Matzat and Rooks (2014) state that online health and support communities (OHSCs) are unique and attractive to online participants because they are convenient, offer an opportunity to meet similar people and build relationships, and can be an alternative or supplement to face-to-face social support. There are many self-help groups currently available online covering a wide range of topics yet few studies have been done to consider how and what group characteristics allow these self-help groups to function and how effectively. Campos (2009) stated that the evolving nature of technology has led to a need for literature to investigate conditions that lead people to seek telephone and web counseling service and furthermore that the effectiveness warrants exploration. Dowling and Rickwood (2012) found there is a pressing need to research mental health online interventions with online chat being a growing area for potential examination.

Many Americans are already using alternative health care options and “Research is needed to fully understand the effects of complementary care and their interactions with standard mental health interventions” (Mental Health: Culture, Race, and Ethnicity, 2001, p. 165). Christensen, Griffiths, and Korten (2002) stated that web sites were a practical place to address cognitive behavioral interventions for depression and anxiety but that more research would be needed to determine effectiveness. The specific online area of focus in this study will be placed on codependents in a self-help environment, as codependency is often associated with low self-esteem and mental health issues. This study will consider Codependents Anonymous, also known as CoDA. Meetings are available in-person and online and this study will focus on the online setting.

**Codependency**
Because codependency can be so widely interpreted, an analysis of the concept was done by Dear, Roberts, and Lange (2004). Dear et al. (2004) found four key behaviors of codependency: focusing on the needs of others, self-sacrificing one’s needs for meeting the needs of others, a belief that one can fix other people’s problems, and suppression of emotion. Marks, Blore, Hine, and Dear (2012) found a codependency measure that was a “significant predictor of lower self-esteem, weak narcissistic tendencies, and low emotional expression” and furthermore the revised measure “was also predictive of higher symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and familial dysfunction” (p. 125).

Codependence involves an unhealthy reliance on another person in which one individual rescues another, providing support while unintentionally enabling problems in the lives of both people (“Co-Dependents Anonymous,” 2015). The individuals feel they are helping one another and instead hurt one another by becoming stuck in a dysfunctional relationship. Studies have found a correlation of codependency to alcoholism and childhood problems and abuse (Carson & Baker, 1994) as well as depression (Carson & Baker, 1994, Martsolf, D, Sedlak, C. & Doheny, M, 2000).

**Codependents Anonymous**

Codependents Anonymous, also known as CoDA, is a group described by coda.org as an international fellowship that exists to help individuals suffering from codependency in their personal relationships. CoDA was established by two members of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1986 as a network to provide relationship support, based similarly to the structured step program established in the Alcoholics Anonymous group (Irving, 1999). The group members meet to share experiences and stories and just like in Alcoholics Anonymous, the framework for the program is built on 12 Traditions and 12 Steps to recovery. The CoDA meeting attendees seek refuge in a higher power, accept and learn from their mistakes, attempt to make peace with harm
they have done to others, and then help others through the program as they themselves become stronger (“Co-Dependents Anonymous,” 2015).

CoDA is built on the 12 Traditions and 12 Steps, principles of the program that guide members to develop self-love and healthy relationships with others while striving to build a bridge to a higher power of one’s own understanding, concurrently allowing others the same privilege (onlinecoda.net, 2015). By working the CoDA program, participants seek joy, acceptance and serenity. The CoDA program is for both males and females and is open to anyone that has a desire to develop healthy relationships. While the goal seems to be fitting for most any human being, coda.org describes codependents as characterized by having difficulty understanding their personal needs, having low self-esteem, and being overly compromising to the needs of others. This description also fits for individuals that might seek an online environment to communicate.

**CoDA Self-Help Face-to-Face Meetings**

Traditionally, a CoDA meeting would be a face-to-face group therapy meeting where attendees share personal challenges and experiences with their perceived codependency and seek group support. According to coda.org, face-to-face meetings are offered across the United States. The meetings are structured in four main styles and all meetings include specific characteristics. For example, a *speaker meeting* is a style in which a primary speaker shares a story and his/her experience with the program. An *open share style meeting* allows for meeting participants to equally share their stories. In a *topic share meeting*, a facilitator opens the meeting with a topic for participants to consider. Lastly, in a *step meeting session*, the CoDA literature is considered and discussed in the session.

One key feature of the CoDA group is the avoidance of using crosstalk when attending meetings. Crosstalk is giving unsolicited advice and feedback and is open to multiple
interpretations. Forms of crosstalk may include criticizing, controlling, dominating, minimizing other’s feelings or experiences, giving advice or unsolicited feedback, or referring to a person by name (onlinecoda.net, 2015). Participants are encouraged to focus on taking responsibility for their personal choices and to not give advice or suggestions to others in the groups.

**CoDA Self-Help Online Meetings**

Today the meetings are also offered online from the comfort of one’s own home (or coffee shop, school, work, or other remote location), which is the focus of this study. Online meetings follow the same rules as the in-person meetings and the style of meetings are a combination of the four main in-person types. For instance, there is an online meeting facilitator that may act as the primary speaker and share a personal story before opening the meeting to open shares from the group. A topic is shared and participants may respond to that and the CoDA literature is the underlying belief system referred to throughout the online meeting. Crosstalk is not permitted.

To protect confidentiality in the chat room, users of CoDA online self-help meetings are required to complete a free account registration process prior to being able to participate in the free online chat sessions. A few steps are involved and can be done online through the coda.org website. Signing up for an account allows members a level of security to prevent hackers from easy entry into the chat room setting. The website, chat room, and online meetings are designed for healing, confidential sharing of stories and experiences, and open discussion with serious online participants.

In addition to being the meeting place for the formal self-help meetings, the main chat room is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week for registered coda.org members. Outside of formal meeting times, the chat room is referred to as “the lobby,” and is available for conversation at any hour, even when official meetings are not in session. There are currently 12
scheduled weekly meetings available throughout the week spanning morning, noon, and evening
time frames and at least one meeting is available daily. The meetings are listed on the online
CoDA message board in Eastern standard time. Meetings typically run 90 minutes in length and
all occur in the main CoDA chat room online. The main website also has a link to click if one
would like to express interest in volunteering to host additional meetings.

This offers a cost effective and convenient option for individuals to seek social support
for mental issues. The coda.org website characterizes codependents as having low self-esteem.
Individuals who lack self-confidence and want to work on personal issues and seek healing could
look not only to CoDA, but in particular to the online CoDA setting. CoDA is also a unique
option for free mental therapy as it covers a wide range of self-help needs. CoDA exists for
people who want to work on improving relationships, a desire that seems would belong to most
anyone. However, the CoDA online self-help is more than about talking about having happy
relationships with others; the online environment offers an open forum in which participants can
remain incognito and share deep feelings about what currently makes their lives and relationships
less than loving and healthy. The online CoDA environment may be less intimidating than the
traditional in-person sessions, especially for shy codependents or those afraid to talk, cry, or show
emotions in front of others. With the rapid technological advances of the 21st century, we likely
will continue to see more online groups and the growth of the self-help group in particular. It is
worthy to explore how these online groups function and to what extent they are effective at
addressing human emotional or mental health needs. As the CoDA website is available at all
hours via computer, is completely free to use, and is personally private, it is a justifiable
environment to study online self-help group communication.

In this chapter, a case was built to show online self-help groups are an area of important
academic study. Technological improvements and rapid advancements, the rising cost of health
care, and challenges around seeking help with mental health issues were considered as possible reasons for individuals to turn to the online setting for help. The online environment was described as a comfortable place to communicate conveniently, anonymously, and privately. With these benefits, shy or depressed people may look to an online setting as a favorable option. Codependents Anonymous was reviewed and the online self-help setting for CoDA was presented as a focus for this study.

While online self-help group research exists, research on the online CoDA group is scarce. In addition, there is minimal research on the online self-help group in the Communication Studies arena. Clearly, research focused on the communication in online CoDA self-help groups is a rare area of study at present and would provide a new research perspective for online communication. In Chapter 2, literature on computer mediated communication (CMC) will be reviewed including anonymity in CMC and the social information processing (SIP) theory, which will be provided as theoretical support for this study. Current research on communication norms, self-disclosure, and hyperpersonal communication as they relate to online self-help support environments will be covered. The chapter will also introduce the research questions being posed in this study.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will define computer mediated communication (CMC) and the concepts of anonymity in CMC with emphasis on the social information processing (SIP) theory, the theoretical foundation to this research endeavor. Communication norms, self-disclosure, and hyperpersonal communication will be described as related to CMC. The chapter will conclude with a preview of the research questions that are being addressed in this study.

Computer Mediated Communication

Computer mediated communication, or CMC, refers to human communication through electronic means involving two or more devices (McQuail, 2005), and human-computer interaction has grown substantially and worldwide since 1973 (Jacko & Sears, 2003). Online communication through emails, instant messaging, and text messaging as well as video, audio, and online blogging are examples of CMC. People are able to communicate across geographical distances through the electronic devices and with rapid advances in technology, the CMC environment has shaped the dynamics of how we communicate.

Researchers have found the CMC environment is a place where individuals can create other representations of themselves and be safe to express feelings and receive support. As Turkle (1995) found, when a person interacts online, he or she can create an anonymous electronic personality which may enable more comfortable expression of subjective thought and feelings. Concurrently, when participating in online groups, one can receive support from others, learn from the group, and build relationships with those in similar situations (Matzat & Rooks 2014; Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008; Coursaris & Liu, 2009; Eysenbach, Powell, Englesakis, Rizo & Stern, 2004; Shim, Cappella, & Han, 2011; Mo & Coulson, 2014). Barak, Boniel-Nissim, and Suler (2008) found online support groups may foster a sense of well-being.
and self-confidence that could result in being better able to handle stressful personal situations. Furthermore, Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) found that identity not being authenticated could lead to members moving in and out of chat rooms at will and pseudo selves being presented. With this, they posited that this could be reason for the CMC being a safe place to express feelings to online strangers as they would not expect to be seen.

**Anonymity in CMC**

Anonymity refers to a person not being identifiable by remaining nameless (Marx, 1999; Nissenbaum, 1999). Powell (2002) found that online users value the convenience of finding online information while remaining anonymous. While the individual may not share their name, there could be other identifiers that help us understand their identity. Anonymous computer mediated communication may give message senders added confidence as they hide who they really are or redefine who they want to present themselves to be. While other forms of communication do allow for anonymity, such as a handwritten letter or a telephone conversation, “computer technology has greatly facilitated anonymity by providing many channels for communication between people separated in time and space (Qian & Scott, 2007, p. 1429).

CMC anonymity can involve both words and pictures. Qian and Scott (2007) describe visual anonymity as a condition in which the physical presence of the message source is unknown and discursive anonymity as an inability to pair the verbal communication to a source. Visual anonymity occurs when the physical message source cannot be identified, such as containing no pictures (Barreto & Ellemers, 2002; Lea, Spears, & de Groot, 2001; Postmes et al., 2001). Discursive anonymity occurs when verbal communication cannot be attributed to a particular source. For example, when personal information such as real name, age, or gender, is hidden the individual remains unidentifiable. The degrees and levels of anonymity vary based on the technology. For example, pictures, photos, and identification are types of information that may or
may not be included in an online discussion. Being anonymous is especially useful for socially stigmatized people to feel they can safely self-disclose their emotions without being seen (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Visual and discursive anonymity are both relevant to how anonymity relates within online CoDA meeting room behavior.

The CoDA online site offers users an opportunity to be both visually and discursively anonymous. In the CoDA online self-help meetings, users are not required to give their full or real name; only a user name that appears on the chat room participant listing is needed. Sharing more personal details such as a real name, age, geographic location, career information, or hobbies is not requested or required to participate. If users choose to divulge this level of information in a meeting, it is purely voluntary.

Avatars, or cartoon representations of people that can be selected to appear next to one’s screen name, are available for optional use in the CoDA online self-help chat room (see Appendix A) but are not required. If an avatar is not chosen, the participant will be assigned a default selection, a blank profile of a face. This protects visual anonymity because there really is no way to identify where the speaker is located unless he/she chooses to disclose those details. In addition, pictures can contribute to anonymity. These identifiers may provide more or less anonymity depending on how the user chooses to self-present. For example, a white male may choose a female screen name and a female avatar picture in the chat room. With this, he can remain anonymous and construct a completely different persona of himself in the group.

Information sharing in the CoDA online chat room could be influenced by the ability for users to remain faceless and anonymous behind the computer keyboard. While participants in the CoDA online meetings are not required to provide identification such as real names or gender, some of this information may still be inferred through chat exchanges. It is worthy to explore then how CoDA online self-help group participants interact virtually despite their anonymity. As
this is examined, this study will consider to what extent group norms emerge and personal information is self-disclosed.

CMC is also unique in that communicators are not readily seen and therefore people are able to communicate that may not otherwise do so in-person. CMC related communication has been studied in various aspects including impression management and relationship building as well as the anonymous nature of the communication. Because the CoDA online self-help group participants do not identify themselves, there is a high level of privacy and anonymity in the chat room for all. As Qian and Scott (2007) found, bloggers conversing with people they do not know outside of the online environment report a high degree of anonymity and when people do not give personal identification are more likely to self-disclose. Tanis (2008) discovered in his study that the CMC characteristics of the online group such as anonymity are appreciated differently by different users, but that people that feel stigmatized especially enjoy the anonymous nature of online environments. This study will consider how this perceived privacy impacts group norms and self-disclosure in the online meetings.

CMC has the potential to create an environment in which communicators feel more comfortable and free to converse. Higher levels of self-disclosure have been found within the CMC conversations as opposed to face-to-face interactions (Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011). Norris (2002) found that the Internet could possibly help to bridge traditionally disparate groups, bringing together different socioeconomic, religious, or racial groups by means of sharing similar beliefs in a virtual community. With the CMC, social divisions are less obvious and people can be a part of an online group that shares other similarities. Asynchronous, or communication occurring with delay between responses of communicators, as in email, is one form of CMC. Synchronous, or communication occurring simultaneously, as in instant messaging, is another
angle in which to look at the CMC. CMC is also unlike other media in that it lacks governing
codes of conduct (McQuail, 2005).

**Social Information Processing Theory**

Social Information Processing (SIP) theory (Walther, 1992) is useful for studying online
communication, because it acknowledges that online communication is an active social process
despite being mainly accomplished through written messaging. Typing thoughts in the computer
mediated environment is without traditional face-to-face elements such as facial expressions,
body posture, mannerisms, and vocal tones. With these cues absent, communicators have to find
other ways to present themselves in the online context. Preece & Maloney-Krichmar (2003) said
that online environments are characteristic of people representing themselves through words,
syntax and semantics to create meaning without the in-person nonverbals. This study investigates
if there are group norms in the online meetings that contribute to help the CoDA participants to
do so.

While CMC functions without these types of communication cues, Internet users will
find ways around these limitations to relay important emotional information according to the SIP
theory. In CMC environments, users are left to find ways to build relationships without
traditional face-to-face interactions; SIP suggests users will find alternate ways to get meanings
across. Some possible ways of doing so are through strategic use of punctuation marks such as
the “!” to demonstrate excitement or the “?” to demonstrate confusion. Also emoticons, pictorial
representations of emotions, such as smiley faces, can help communicate feelings. For example,
Walther, Loh, and Granka (2005) studied a group of individuals communicating their feelings
towards one another through mediated channels. Their study lends support that over time,
mediated relationships can be just as strong as the face-to-face type. Participants were able to
effectively convey online messages similar to face-to-face in immediacy and affection, in line with the SIP theory.

Concerns with SIP consider that the online compensation for lack of face-to-face cues can lead to some misleading behaviors. For instance, a smiley face emotion to convey happiness may not be the reality of the communicator’s facial expression. Perhaps he or she simply wants the receiver to think he or she is happy. In other words, it is easy in the CMC environment to self-present in favorable ways. It is easy to fake emotions online because the true reactions are unseen. True nonverbals are unplanned (Walther & D’Addario, 2001) and an emoticon is thought about prior to being posted, allowing for creative self-presentation. Nevertheless, given enough time, it is possible for the CMC communication to be just as effective as face-to-face communication (Walther, 1993).

While the online environment sets the stage for open and perceived private communication, the self-help group can only function effectively with group participation (Pfeil, Zaphiris, & Wilson, 2010; Matzat, 2010). Studies of online groups have found a key to success is effective moderation of the membership to increase engagement and positive outcomes (Chen, Xu, & Whinston, 2011; Gairin-Sallan, Rodriguez-Gomez, & Armengol-Asparo, 2010; Hsieh & Tsai, 2012; Wise, Hamman, & Thorson, 2006). Matzat and Rooks (2014) studied what forms of moderation, or leadership, in the online health and support community seems to work best; they found the online group thrives on the participation of members and found indirect forms of moderation that favor relational interests are more effective. Hogg & Reid (2006) described that norms within the social identity perspective could help explain why some group members have more normative influence than others.
Communication Norms

This study will examine how communication norms function within the CoDA online self-help group and how these impact resulting self-disclosure. Parks (2004) states that group norms help create unity and provide boundaries within a group, assist the group to understand what is appropriate and acceptable, are socialized to new members of the group by means of the group leader or other influential member, and can be learned as well by informal observation or conversation. In online self-help groups, norms can become strong and guide behavior (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005) and norms act as the rules for engagement. Walther & Bunz (2005) found following the rules and norms could reduce uncertainty and increase trust in distributed teams.

Group norms are defined by Parks (2004):

Group norms are the standards that largely govern behavior within a group. The norms may be explicit and carefully recorded for all future members to see and learn, but just as often they might be implicit, in which case transmission to a new member will be dependent upon the ability and motivation of senior group members to accurately convey the norm. Norms have a strong influence on group-based behavior and are difficult to change. (p. 627)

Feldman (1984) found group norms develop through group history and primacy and are related to behaviors from prior situations. It may be difficult to change the norms once behaviors become accepted into the group. Postmes, Spears, and Lea (2000) studied norms in an online setting and found that social identity is developed through group norms and that group norms become more salient over time spent within the one particular group. They noted that when the group members communicate with a group outside of the ingroup that different norms applied. Hogg and Reid (2006) found that group norms are context dependent and that some members,
such as leaders, have more influence. These findings align with Postmes, Spears, and Lea’s study (2000), lending further evidence that group norms are unique to a particular group and not applicable when the group is communicating outside of the group.

Norms are developed by the interaction between particular individuals, within a particular group, and over time. Group norms then function as the standard operating procedures for how a group will communicate, and are fairly difficult to alter once set into place. Lee (2004) found that group identification accentuated adherence to group norms, consistent with the SIDE model. As the group level of self-identity was formed, depersonalization and subsequent conformity was seen, showing depersonalization accentuated adherence to group norms by way of group identification.

For purposes of this study, group norms will be referred to as communication norms. The participants in the online CoDA meetings change day to day and week to week, so it was impossible to approach the study with the expectation to study the exact same group of members in each meeting. Also, because of the technical ability for the participants to change their user names and avatar selections at will, it was impossible to confirm if the attendees were the same or different from meeting to meeting. There are still specific norms, or rules, that can be identified despite these challenges and those are the focus for the communication norms research questions. In the CoDA online group, communication norms were studied in terms of specific roles in the group and participant behavior and communication. Communication norms were considered as they relate to chat participants’ self-disclosure in the CoDA online meetings.

The first four research questions addressed communication norms.

RQ1: What communication norms are established in the online CoDA meeting?

RQ2: To what extent do communication norms affect self-disclosure in the online CoDA meeting?
RQ3: What communication norms are established in the open chat room immediately following meetings?

RQ4: To what extent do communication norms affect self-disclosure in the open chat room immediately following meetings?

Self-Disclosure in CMC

Self-disclosure is defined by Adler and Rodman (2006) as consciously revealing significant, personal information about oneself that is not typically known by others. While sharing information thoughtfully with others can be risky, there are situations in which it may be more apt to occur, such as to a close friend or an intimate partner. Sometimes self-disclosure is rewarding as we get to know someone better, drawing emotionally closer. The anonymous nature of the online environment also creates an environment in which self-disclosing may be felt as safe or comfortable.

Multiple studies have shown that the online environment enables self-disclosure (Bargh et al., 2002; Coleman et al., 1999; Joinson, 2001; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Stritzke, et al., 2004; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Self-disclosure is defined by Jiang, Bazarova, and Hancock (2011) as any verbal communication of personal and important information, thoughts, and feelings which maintain interpersonal relationships. The CMC environment, with the absence of face-to-face or nonverbal communication may help participants feel more comfortable self-disclosing. As Qian and Scott (2007) found, online users that limit self-identifying information are more likely to self-disclose online.

In addition to the amount of self-disclosure, it has been found that CMC also influences the depth of information shared (Antheunis et al., 2007; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Derlega and Chaikin (1977) found people often were more apt to self-disclose to strangers as they are not a part of the person’s social group. Shared understanding for social presence, empathy, and trust is
harder to develop in the online context without in-person nonverbal cues (Preece & Maloney-Kritchmar, 2003).

Along with the tendency to disclose more personal information more quickly online as compared to face-to-face, disclosing often leads to reciprocal self-disclosure that is similar in level of intimacy (Antheunis, 2009). The audience receiving the sender’s disclosed message could tend to feel compelled to disclose information of a similar nature or level of intimacy (Jourard, 1971; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Furthermore, reciprocity may increase if self-disclosure depth is higher, which can be the case often in the CMC enabled environment (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007; Dietz-Uhler et al., 2005; Rollman et al., 2000; Rollman & Parente, 2001). This reciprocity of self-disclosure could then be what attracts users of the CMC environment to feel comfortable and at ease to share deeply intimate information with unknown recipients.

In the online CoDA meetings, dissimilar individuals have an opportunity to develop commonalities. Hypothetically, this would occur through the CoDA shared goal of seeking loving and healthy relationships, but it is possible that some attendees are there for other reasons. While participants remain anonymous, each is able to personally decide what a journey through codependency entails. The anonymous nature of the CoDA chat room may enable a deeper level of self-disclosure to be shared confidentially. Also, communication exchanges with those similar to one another can assist with confirming personal thoughts and views (Byrne, 1961). Along these same lines, Reis and Shaver (1988) also found that emotional self-disclosure gives a listener the chance to confirm the speaker’s view of him/herself. Scissors, Gill, Geraghty, and Gergle (2009) found that trust develops when similar text content, structure, and style is used. The study will focus on commonalities found in various CoDA online meetings that contribute to similar text stylistics and chat room structure including the group norms seen. As Brym and Lie (2006)
note, “Nobody hands values, norms, roles, and statuses to us fully formed . . . We mold them to suit us as we interact with others” (p. 144).

**Hyperpersonal Communication in CMC**

Additionally, scholars think that anonymity could contribute to online communicators being more open to share information (Nowak, Watt, & Walter, 2005; Walther, 1996). Joseph Walther advanced the hyperpersonal model of interpersonal communication in 1996. The hyperpersonal model of interpersonal communication may help explain how and why individuals are more apt to readily share in a computer mediated environment as opposed to face-to-face settings.

Hyperpersonal communication theory posits that due to the reduction in immediate non-verbal cues in the computer-mediated environment, online communicators feel more open to disclose personal information faster than they would in a face-to-face situation. This may be especially so in anonymous online communication in which the communicator types rather than speaks. Hidden behind the computer, the communicator may remain faceless and unknown to whom they are speaking. The pressure of meeting the person(s) on the other end of the computer is eliminated and there is no need to deal with non-verbal reactions from others as would be the case in a face-to-face interaction.

The hyperpersonal model also suggests that computer mediated communication (CMC) can become hyperpersonal because a message sender has the ability to craft messages in new ways that supersede traditional face-to-face communication. For instance, CMC allows communicators more time to think through what to write in a text only message. With the ability to remain alone while thinking through in private exactly what to write, the communicator has an added benefit of not having the receiver of the message observing his/her nonverbal during the process. Additionally, the communicator writing the message does not see the receiver’s non-
verbal reactions; this may further put the communicator at ease without seeing the receiver’s initial reactions. Online the nonverbal actions of the typist are unseen, whereas face-to-face we have other communication cues such as facial expressions and body language.

Hyperpersonal communication may become preferred over face-to-face communication, and as such, may possibly be favored (Walther, 2006). The message sender can create his or her own vision of what the message receiver is thinking and feeling. Additionally, the message receiver can create his or her own vision of what the message sender is thinking and feeling. Without face-to-face communication, online message interpretation is left for the sender and receiver to determine individually. This affords an opportunity to not only create personal meanings, but also is risky in that the communication messages that the sender and receiver derive may not match what was intended. Messages could be misread and misinterpreted, but the communicators do not see each other so perhaps some of this is unknown.

In CMC, there is a tendency for users to become hyperpersonal in the information they self-disclose. Derlega and Chaikin (1977) considered self-disclosure in relation to boundaries in the maintenance of privacy as a way to begin to study self-disclosure. Since then, the Internet has afforded a new form of communication in a private setting and these boundaries have been expanded. Researchers have found that social interactions in the virtual community afford flexibility for creating self-identity regardless of geographic location, connecting people from different locations and cultures (Donath, 1999; Etzioni & Etzioni 1999). Furthermore, researchers have found that while also affording dispersed individuals the opportunity to communicate, the computer-mediated communication also could also attract individuals suffering from illnesses or underdeveloped social skills, providing a safe avenue for people that desire communication from a safe location (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999; Matzat & Rooks, 2014; Powell, 2002).
In CMC, there is less pressure of the reality of facing someone in person and a wider margin of interpretation. With this, the hyperpersonal model of communication may explain why users find a more comfortable place to share information in the online environment more so than in face-to-face settings. With this, greater levels of intimacy can possibly be attained between communicators. This may help explain why therapy seekers may prefer an online setting. Furthermore, this model could help support why codependents may prefer CoDA online therapy options over the traditional face-to-face meetings.

**Four Levels of Self-Disclosure**

Glaser and Eblen state in their workbook (1986) that, “Whatever its content, self-disclosing information reveals that which would otherwise be inaccessible to a listener” (p. 148). While self-disclosure involves personal risk to open up and share with others, alongside the risks are benefits that Glaser and Eblen identify as getting to know others on a deeper level and confirming one’s own inner thoughts when finding someone with shared experiences. They describe four levels of self-disclosure: basic data, preferences, beliefs, and feelings.

Basic data refers to biographical and demographic information: where you were born, where you went to school, the places you’ve traveled, your current employment, and so forth. Preferences refer to likes and dislikes – what kinds of events and behavior please and displease you. Beliefs refer to the thoughts and opinions you hold. Feelings are the emotional responses you have to your experiences. (p.148-149)

The final two research questions addressed what levels of self-disclosure appear in the CoDA formal meetings and the subsequent time in the after meeting.

RQ5: What levels of self-disclosure are evident in the online CoDA meeting?
RQ6: What levels of self-disclosure are evident in the open chat room immediately following meetings?

In this chapter, literature was reviewed and discussed relative to computer mediated communication (CMC) and anonymity in CMC. The social information processing theory (SIP) was established as the theoretical framework for this study. Communication norms, self-disclosure, and hyperpersonal communication in CMC were discussed as they relate to online self-help groups. The four levels of self-disclosure were covered and the research questions for this qualitative study were presented.

In Chapter 3, an overview of the methodology will be presented and explained. The participants, procedure, and data collection methods employed in this study will be discussed.
Chapter 3

METHOD

This chapter will cover the method including the participants, preliminary steps to prepare the computer for the online research, a description of the participant observation method for collecting data, and conclude with explanation on how the resulting research data was analyzed through content analysis.

Participants

The participants for this study were individuals of mixed gender, unknown age, and unidentified geographic location in online CoDA meetings. Participants spanned three meeting sessions during the week on Mondays, Fridays, and Saturdays. Attendance varied by meeting and attendees were recognized only by their user name and avatar selections, shown in the chat room. I joined CoDA meetings as an online participant observer.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is protected at all times. There is no required personally identifiable information of online participants in the chat room relative to real name, sex, age, ethnicity, location, or occupation. The self-created online user names are not shared in this study. Consent to participate was not deemed necessary due to no identifying information being given at any point during the study. Any comments referenced in the chat room in this study were not aligned to participant names and resulting themes found are reported in generalities to preserve anonymity.

CoDA Online Website Registration

Prior to being able to participate in online CoDA chat sessions, I completed a required free account registration to gain access to the meetings and the chat room. The onlinecoda.net site states the reasoning for required registration is to ensure the recovery process is not disrupted
by outsiders. Signing up for an account allows a level of member site safety by preventing hackers or spammers from interfering with the online chat room setting. The account registration requirement may also provide some privacy for participants so that their personal comments are not visible on random web searches. Also, the extra step to register may help to filter out anyone who is not serious about using the website for its intended purpose.

The process began by visiting the main website at www.coda.org. The www.coda.org website states that the only requirement for membership is a desire for healthy and loving relationships. From the home page of the website is a link to “Find a Meeting.” Once you click this link, you are redirected to another page that offers a drop down menu of meeting options including face-to-face, phone, and online. I selected the online option and then found many CoDA online self-help group options. I selected http://www.onlinecoda.net/meetings.html. The www.onlinecoda.net website can also be discovered using an Internet search engine search without going to the www.coda.org website first.

Once on the www.onlinecoda.net/meetings page, visitors are informed that access to meetings and chat is reserved for registered members only. I submitted an email to someone listed on the main site for help as I was unclear how to complete the registration. I received an email response almost six weeks later with an apology stating they are staffed with volunteers and have been very busy. The very detailed email provided information about how to register for a free account. I completed the free registration which involved choosing an online user name and awaiting a chat room meeting password to be sent via email.

After completing and submitting registration information, I received another email from the Online CoDA Message Board, as was indicated in the registration steps. This email had instructions asking me to verify my account by clicking a link within the email. Once I clicked the link, my account was verified and I then received another email from the Online CoDA
Message Board. This email thanked me for registering and stated my account was approved. I received a final email after this from a volunteer moderator that provided me the password to access the CoDA online chat room.

After completing the registration process, there are no further steps involved to attend online CoDA meetings. Participants may attend any online CoDA meetings with the password given in the final registration email confirmation. A participant is prompted to sign in with a user name to join the chat room. This can be any name the participant chooses and may change from meeting to meeting, allowing for additional identity protection. Upon signing into the chat, the meeting schedule is immediately visible in the window as the first text (see Appendix B).

**Procedure**

As a participant observer in this study, my main focus was to identify communication norms and the levels of participant self-disclosure in meetings and the after meetings immediately following. Data was collected through unobtrusive participant observation in CoDA online meetings. The online meetings and the subsequent 30 minute after meetings were attended on three separate days a week over the course of four consecutive weeks. The meeting times chosen were Mondays and Fridays at 9 p.m., Eastern standard time, and Saturdays at 3 p.m., Eastern standard time. A total of 665 minutes (11 hours) of data was gathered. Of the 12 meetings, two were without a host so this was classified as separate data. The other ten meetings ran an average of 67 minutes each. Also, I spent 30 minutes immediately following each of the meetings I attended which resulted in an additional 310 minutes (five hours) of observations. The two meetings that were without a host are classified as separate data as they were not meetings or after meetings; this totals an additional 125 minutes (two hours) of data collected.

Each of the three weekly meetings was hosted by a different facilitator which allowed an opportunity to research the variances and similarities found in the online CoDA meetings by day
and facilitator. I joined each meeting with a different gender neutral user name. This gave me the opportunity to go by a different name in each of the 12 meetings and be less recognizable. I also remained silent throughout the entire duration of the meeting and after meeting, not typing anything in the group chat. A data collection worksheet for each meeting and after meeting was completed (see Appendix C) and chat transcripts were collected. Unobtrusive participant observation allowed me to collect data while minimizing my contribution to the results. I joined the meetings exactly as a regular participant would by signing on to the onlinecoda.net website. Other than the alias user name, no personally identifying information was viewable. While some participants would enter the room and greet others, as an unobtrusive participant observer, I did not announce myself as a meeting attendee or researcher. As chat participants may not be completely themselves in an environment where a researcher is present, I decided to remain anonymous to preserve the natural environment as best as possible. As an “invisible” state on the chat statuses was not an option, I remained in the “available” chat state but only watched without typing. Although my chat name did appear in the list of meeting participants (see Appendix B) I remained in complete silence for the full duration of both the meeting and after meeting.

**Data Collection**

The study involved two major areas of focused data collection. The first focus of data collection involved my participation-observation and resulting content analysis of the CoDA online self-help meeting and after meeting communication norms. The second focus of data collection involved my participation-observation and resulting content analysis of the CoDA online levels of self-disclosure seen in the chat room in first the meetings and then in the after meetings. A data collection worksheet with standard questions and answers for each meeting and after meeting and chat room transcripts serve as the primary data sources.
I prepared a standard data collection worksheet with a set of questions to answer for each meeting. I filled out this worksheet as I followed and read along in the chat room (see Appendix C) and saved a new copy for each meeting to review at the end of data collection. I did not revisit the completed worksheets until after all four weeks of data was gathered. My specific focus was to collect the answers to the questions in this worksheet along with my general observations about the meeting to discover communication norms that exist by meeting day of week.

Alongside the data collection worksheet, I had the meeting chat open on my computer so I could follow along in the meeting and after meeting. As the meeting progressed, I would save a copy of the chat transcript to a Word document. The chat window would only hold a set amount of text, so every few minutes I would copy and paste the text into a Word document so as to save the entire meeting and after meeting. I did not review the chat transcripts until the end of the data collection phase of the study.

In addition to participant observation, content analysis was used to examine the CoDA online self-help group. Content analysis is a scholarly method in which the content of written documentation such as texts, books, websites, and other artifacts are closely examined with an end goal to find new meaning and insight (Babbie, 2010; Hodder, 1994; Tipaldo, 2014). The function of content analysis is to answer who is communicating what to whom and why and then to consider the resulting impact (Lasswell, 1948). The analysis is done to produce valid and trustworthy conclusions to inferences (Tipaldo, 2014).

Content analysis involves identifying repeated words and phrases in text. As these recurrences are identified, they can be assimilated into categories. Content analysis involves a process in which words can be counted and time or space given to topics can be quantified and sorted out into themes. It is important for the data to be coded in a systematic fashion, and I did the categorization of thematic elements.
As the first step in my data analysis, I sorted my field notes by the day of the meeting; Monday notes, Friday notes, and Saturday notes were all sorted separately. I then began the communication norms analysis for the formal meetings followed by an analysis of the after meetings. I then analyzed the data, examining instances of self-disclosure for the formal meetings and a secondary analysis on the after meetings. Lastly, I looked for any variances and similarities and any relationships between the communication norms and the levels of self-disclosure.

**Content Analysis of Communication Norms**

First, I analyzed the data collection worksheets and chat transcripts in search of communication norms that emerged in the online CoDA chat meetings. In each meeting I attended, I had a data collection worksheet and the confidential chat transcript. As part of the content analysis, I read and reread these notes by day of the week until common themes appeared, specifically identifying the norms that reoccurred in each Monday meeting, Friday meeting, and Saturday meeting. If a group rule or agreed upon behavior happened in a weekly meeting more often than not and was supported by the group facilitator, it was considered as a communication norm. A theme was identified as repeated words or phrases or similar routine behaviors within the environment. With the listing of common communication norms and themes identified by meeting day (Monday, Friday, and Saturday), I then compared the notes overall to determine if any of the norms aligned across all meeting days.

Next, I analyzed field notes to study the communication norms that were observed in the subsequent 30 minutes in the after meeting, again grouping the notes by the meeting day of week. A review was conducted to look for common communication norms and themes by day (Mondays, Fridays, and Saturdays) before continuing to broaden the analysis to determine if commonalities existed between all of the after meetings. Chat transcripts and notes were
reviewed in search of repeated behaviors. If a group rule or agreed upon behavior happened in a weekly meeting more often than not and was supported by the group facilitator, it was considered as a norm and identified as a theme. Specific emphasis was placed on looking for how conversation compared in the after meeting to the preceding formal meeting including what occurred immediately following the meeting’s close.

Last, themes were analyzed that were found in the formal meetings and after meetings by meeting day of week to determine if there were any resulting universal themes, evident across both the formal meeting and the after meeting as a whole. Observations between all formal meetings and after meetings were considered. If a theme appeared across meeting days, I considered it a universal communication norm.

**Content Analysis of Levels of Self-Disclosure**

First, chat transcripts were analyzed by day with Glaser and Eblen’s (1986) four levels of self-disclosure: basic data, preferences, beliefs, and feelings. Chat transcripts were reviewed for the four levels of self-disclosure and differentiated by four colors of highlighting. In the chat transcripts, the levels of self-disclosure observed were highlighted in both the formal meeting and the after meeting as follows: level 1 basic information: orange, level 2 preferences: blue, level 3 beliefs: green, level 4 feelings: pink. While specific participant commentary was not shared, types of comments were categorized by level of self-disclosure. Next, the different levels of self-disclosure were analyzed to see how they relate to determine if there were common themes about types of information shared by meeting day. Then, a comparison of the levels of self-disclosure in the CoDA meeting versus the after meeting by day (i.e. by Mondays, then Fridays, then Saturdays) was completed. Specific focus was placed on examining to what extent the levels of self-disclosure change between meeting and after meeting time. Data was analyzed to determine if there are commonalities between all of the meetings by day of week in terms of what levels of
self-disclosure are evident and when. Last, themes were analyzed by the formal meetings and after meetings by meeting day to determine if there were any resulting themes that were evident across the formal meetings and the after meetings overall (i.e. regardless of day of week.)

This chapter reviewed the participants, online CoDA registration requirements, procedure, data collection method, and the analysis process. The results of the study will be discussed in the next chapter. The original research questions will be reviewed to consider the findings in the data analysis including what communication norms emerged within and outside of the online CoDA meetings by meeting day and time and universally across all meetings. The levels of self-disclosure observed within and outside of the online CoDA meetings by meeting day and time, and universally across all meetings will also be identified.
Chapter 4

RESULTS

The six research questions will be individually addressed and answered as related to the study. The themes resulting from the analysis will be identified. Several forms of data were collected and analyzed in this study including full meeting chat transcripts, after meeting chat transcripts, and answers to predetermined questions on the data collection worksheets for each meeting and after meeting. After compiling the data and completing a full content analysis, several themes began to emerge. The resulting themes by meeting day will be identified and discussed. Then overall themes that span all meeting days will be reviewed.

The first two research questions addressed communication norms in the online CoDA meetings. Communication norms in the online CoDA meetings were analyzed by meeting day (Mondays, Fridays, and then Saturdays) and then across all days for general themes. Each of these two research questions will be addressed separately in the sections that follow.

RQ1: What communication norms are established in the online CoDA meeting?

Meeting Communication Norms

After analyzing meeting communication norms by individual meeting day (Mondays, Fridays, and then Saturdays), some commonalities were found and clear communication norms were evident across all of the meetings. I will begin by describing some variances between the meetings and then I will address the norms I found across meetings and the resulting universal themes.

While the Monday night CoDA meeting is open to any registered users, the meeting is set up for beginners just starting to use the CoDA program and tools. Although one of the meetings was hosted by a substitute facilitator, the same structure was applied and the meeting flowed the same. The average number of meeting attendees was 10 and the average length of the meeting
was 60 minutes. There were clear meeting topics presented by the facilitator towards the end of the beginning section of each meeting. These topics acted as a prompt to get the audience to respond with requests to participate and share. The topics differed week to week and were related to the self-care process. Monday topics I observed were handling personal spirituality, allowing oneself time to rest, seeking peace, and remaining a positive person.

While the Monday meeting was targeted to beginners to CoDA, the Friday night CoDA meeting was simply categorized as a topic meeting with no targeted CoDA audience. Any registered users were able to join and the material was suitable for anyone using the CoDA program. The topics were on different aspects of using the CoDA tools and program. While three of the four Friday meetings were facilitated by the same host, one of the meetings over the course of the four consecutive weeks was unexpectedly without a facilitator, so the result of this was examined. With the exception of the meeting that was without facilitation, the same structure appeared in each meeting and some clear communication norms were evident across the Friday meetings. Furthermore, these aligned with the communication norms seen in Monday meetings. The average number of meeting attendees was 8 and the average length of the meeting (excluding the night without a facilitator) was 70 minutes.

The Friday meetings also had clear meeting topics presented by the facilitator towards the end of the beginning section of each meeting that prompted the sharing process. The topics differed week to week and were again related to the self-care process. The topics involved how to use CoDA recovery tools, learning to relinquish controlling behavior, and practicing the CoDA program.

While the Saturday CoDA meeting was open to any registered users, the meeting differed from the Monday and Friday meetings in that it was a meeting devoted to “relationships” and tended to attract more seasoned CoDA followers. Some of the regular Saturday participants
stated they have been following the program for many years. The meeting covered topics about seeking a higher power and self-care while building relationships. These topics, like in Monday and Friday meetings, were again presented by the facilitator and at the end of the beginning section of each meeting prior to opening the middle of the meeting for individual turn taking and sharing. The topics differed week to week and were again related to the self-care process. The topics I observed were around the concept of a higher power, accepting the present moment, and learning to value oneself as a priority.

While three of the four Saturday meetings were facilitated by the same host, like the Friday meetings, one of the Saturday meetings over the course of the four consecutive weeks was unexpectedly without a facilitator as well. The result was examined. The same structure was evident in each meeting and some clear communication norms were evident across all of the Saturday meetings. Furthermore, these aligned with the communication norms seen in the Monday and Friday meetings. The average number of meeting attendees was 11, and the average length of the meeting (not including the meeting without a facilitator) was 72 minutes.

**Universal Themes Across Meetings**

**Anonymity.** First, participants were able to remain anonymous by selecting a user name, or alias, of choice. A user name is prompted to be chosen upon initial sign on to the chat room. The user name can change meeting to meeting. It is technically possible to leave the meeting and return with a new user name. Participants typically chose a one word name (a first and last name was not seen on any occasion) and many were repeat attendees across the four weekly meetings I attended. Additionally, some user names would appear in more than one meeting per week. For example, some of the same user names seen in the Friday meeting were found in the Saturday meeting as well. While some of the user names matched the name the users in the CoDA group
called themselves, this was not always the case. For instance, user “michael3” might have introduced himself as “Ronnie” or “courteous93” might have introduced herself as “Linda.”

Also, a personal avatar, or cartoon picture, can be chosen once inside the chat room (see Appendix A) and is changeable or removable at any time. Many users did not select an avatar at all, so the screen would default to a faceless profile. This could have been to remain mysterious or to add another layer of anonymity. Perhaps their message was they wanted to remain as hidden as possible, supporting the research that individuals may feel more comfortable disclosing while being anonymous in the online environment.

Avatar options included human selections of various ethnicities with long and short hair, possibly signifying masculine and feminine traits. Choosing one of these options would be one way to feel more like oneself, compensating for the lack of face-to-face communication, supporting the social information processing theory. Also, non-human options including animals and aliens were available. For those choosing a non-human figure, this could be another tactic to hide true identity, to be funny, or to just express one’s unique personality.

The use of avatars was frequent. Some names and avatars repeated in meetings signifying a repeat attendee and others did not. There were also new names week to week and because the online CoDA site allows participants to self-select and change user names as frequently as they wish, it was unknown whether these were new attendees or returning attendees under a new alias. I personally kept the blank avatar option in all meetings at all times.

Meeting Structure. Next, the structural elements were the same across meetings. There was a very distinct beginning, middle, and end to each meeting. Meetings were opened by the facilitator welcoming the participants to the meeting and introducing him/herself. The facilitator explained the agenda and covered the ground rules. The rules included using “!” to signify hand raising to ask for permission to share, typing only a couple lines of text at a time to avoid words
or comments being truncated when sharing, and not interrupting, or typing concurrently, while other participants were sharing. The middle section would be the time designated for the attendees to share their thoughts and feelings in response to the topic posed by the facilitator. The end of the meeting was signified by the facilitator clearly stating the meeting was closing. This predictable and repeated order of the meeting items delivered by the facilitator was seen in every meeting with a facilitator. This was the format for every meeting I attended, even the one night a substitute facilitator was hosting.

**Clear Order of Discussion.** There was also a stringent order in which the comments from the facilitator were delivered. This was demonstrated with a clear beginning, middle and end to the meeting. This same order was evident across meeting days.

In the beginning section of each meeting, the meeting facilitator relayed the CoDA prayer and requested a greeter. Then the facilitator would read the Preamble, 12 Steps, and the 12 Traditions and discuss that participation is not required but helpful in the healing process. Next, the facilitator posted and solicited announcements such as upcoming CoDA meetings. The facilitator encouraged participation and explained that crosstalk, or unrequested advice, is discouraged in the meeting. Acronyms such as “tyfs” and “kcb” were recommended as responses to peers. Ground rules would be posted. The facilitator would introduce a meeting topic, often times reading a few lines from a book or CoDA resource. A reminder to the group was relayed to not use private instant messages to other attendees outside of the main chat room in an effort to fully respect one another’s boundaries. Lastly, the facilitator officially opened the meeting by stating “the room is now open for sharing.”

The middle of the meetings was comprised entirely of the participants’ time sharing their comments and reactions to the meeting topic prompt. Participants were encouraged to share but not all did so; some attendees remained completely silent while still appearing on the chat list in
“available” status (see Appendix B). While they could have walked away from their computer, their avatar was still showing in the listing of meeting participants in the chat, or meeting room. Participants communicated a desire to share by typing “!” to denote hand raising. The facilitator would call upon participants to share by the order in which they typed “!” in the chat. All participants that raised their hands were called upon for a turn to chat. Participants were never prodded or pushed to speak up in any meeting. The facilitator would at most ask if anymore, or anyone else, wanted to share but the facilitator did not pinpoint if someone was not participating. While a time limit rule for shares was not ever explicitly stated, the average share was 5 to 10 minutes a person and most meetings would have three to six shares in total.

I believe there is something to be said about how fast a person typed chat messages into the chat room. I noticed the posts were steady and consistent in the formal meetings. I wondered if there was a delay in timing, say a minute or two rather than seconds, was the participant typing slow or thinking through their thoughts and words? Also, if they typed quickly this could have signified being upset or angry. These questions could not be definitively answered but were interesting to ponder in an effort to learn more about the CoDA online communication.

The end of the meeting was signified by the facilitator ensuring all that asked to share were given time to do so. Then “Closing” was officially stated in the chat room by the facilitator and a few repeatable comments from the facilitator were seen in each meeting. These included first a statement that CoDA is self-supporting and relies on volunteer contributions and a reminder to preserve anonymity of the meetings and the confidentiality of participants. Then the facilitator read the CoDA 12 Promises followed by announcing to the meeting attendees an opportunity to share personal affirmations freely in the chat without the requirement to take turns or raise hands. Personal affirmations were self-nurturing comments like “I am enough” or “I am kind and loving and know my limits.” Last, the facilitator closed the meetings with first the
serenity prayer and then the CoDA closing prayer and announced the meeting as officially over. The facilitated meetings followed this order each and every time. Meetings would range from 5 to 13 participants and lasted 67 minutes on average.

**Roles and Labels.** Roles and labels were communication norms as well. The meeting was dependent on the facilitator to lead the group and keep the meeting on course. With this, the meetings usually started precisely on time with the facilitator calling the meeting to order. The facilitator also appointed a greeter in each meeting. The greeter’s role was important as well to minimize interruptions in the meeting from late arrivals. It was common for people to arrive late or leave early, but they did not announce themselves to the group, and in reverse, the group did not acknowledge them. The greeter was to send a side private message to the late arrival to greet and relay the meeting topic, getting the late attendee up to speed so as to avoid any of this discussion within the meeting space. Other than for the greeter’s role in welcoming late participants, side chatting was discouraged as deemed an interruption to the meeting and potential boundary violation. As far as labels, often times the facilitator would introduce him/herself as a “recovering codependent” and then participants seemed to frequently follow in this self-labeling as well. This typically was evident in the introduction stage of the opening sharing when the participant was stating his/her name followed by the “codependent” label. For example, “Hi, I’m Dan, recovering codependent,” would be a typical participant opening statement.

During the Friday meeting when the facilitator did not show up, things quickly went off track. First, by about three minutes after the meeting start time, attendees began to comment that attendance was low. By seven minutes after the meeting start time, an attendee suggested having a session with sharing and no crosstalk. A couple participants proceeded with this plan and used the “!” to signify hand raising and the common response “done” upon completion of their shares. The meeting was much slower without the standard beginning, middle, and end supported by the
traditional facilitation style, and was basically like an open chat room with hand raising, no crosstalk, and turn taking.

As the meetings usually start right on time, when the Saturday facilitator did not show to a meeting people began to notice fairly quickly. At 10 minutes into the meeting, a late arrival had joined and typed into the chat inquiring if the meeting had started. Without the host, there was the loss of the beginning, middle, and end structure, rules were not established, and no turn taking or formal sharing occurred. Instead, people began to freely chat about their personal struggles. Some of the comments began to turn a bit negative and 21 minutes into the meeting start time, a few people began to leave the chat room completely, perhaps giving up on the meeting. Even 30 minutes into the meeting start time, attendees were still joining late and asking if a meeting was underway. Furthermore, participants already in the chat room were stating they were still waiting to see if a meeting was going to come to fruition. Some asked if meetings ever start this late and a few more open chat comments were posted and exchanged. Participants continued to enter and exit the room and only six were left after an hour into the meeting, all of which remained silent.

**Acronyms.** Another communication norm was the usage of standardized acronyms for communication. These acronyms may only make sense within a CoDA online meeting. For example, “ga” was used for “go ahead,” and was used when the facilitator was responding to a meeting participant’s request to share. The facilitator would typically type “Please ga and introduce yourself when ready” to give the participant the floor to speak. Another acronym was “tyfs” for “thank you for sharing” and “kcb,” or “keep coming back,” both of which were the preferred standard expected responses to use after a meeting participant shared in the chat room. While it was also acceptable to type out the words for these acronyms, any other typed response after a share was not common.
**Turn Taking.** There were also communication norms seen in the chat room relative to the individual sharing process. The term to describe an individual’s turn taking to type in the meeting is called a “share” and the “!” is the recognized symbol used to signify raising a hand to request to speak. The facilitator would acknowledge the “!” in the order in which they were typed and give each the opportunity to share in order. The “!” were only acknowledged in the middle section of meetings, when sharing took place. In one Friday meeting, a participant typed “!” during the beginning of the meeting when the facilitator was relaying the CoDA opening information and the facilitator continued forward without acknowledging the “hand.” It was unknown if the greeter sent the attendee a side message outside of the chat room. Also, while there was not an overt rule about how long individuals could share, the facilitator did request to hit the send button after a couple lines of typing; if too much was typed, words could be lost. Lastly, participants would type “done” to inform the group once they were finished sharing and until doing so they would be allowed to speak freely without interruptions. This was strictly adhered to throughout all meetings. In one Friday meeting, a participant was taking a turn sharing and left the chat unexpectedly. Although it was silent in the chat room, no one said anything and she reconnected within 60 seconds stating she was having a computer connectivity hiccup. I wondered if the facilitator would have resumed speaking if the participant would not have been able to reconnect. It was unclear if so and at what point that would have occurred if the disconnected participant did not return.

**RQ2:** To what extent do communication norms affect self-disclosure in the online CoDA meeting?

**Communication Norms Enabled Self-Disclosure**

The communication norms established in the CoDA online meetings enabled the participants to self-disclose freely. A few specific communication norms were especially helpful
in facilitating this process. As I have identified some communication norms in the online CoDA meetings that were identical and repeated across Monday, Friday, and Saturday meetings, this research question will be answered relative to all meeting days. The communication norms described all contribute to creating a positive, respectful, and safe place for participants to self-disclose without fear of being challenged, judged, or discounted.

**Anonymous Environment.** First, due to the multiple layers of anonymity available, a safe space for self-disclosure was created. The process for signing up for using the website prevented open attendance to the public and some anonymity for attendees. Also, at the end of each meeting the facilitator asked the group to respect confidentiality and not share participants’ comments. The ability to choose a changeable user name and avatar to preserve anonymity seemed to provide a comfort level and some privacy. While over the course of the four weeks some of the same user names and avatars were seen, there were also new user names. It is unknown whether these were truly new attendees or previous attendees with new aliases.

**Timing and Order of Messages.** Second, the timing and order of the messages the facilitator shares play an integral part in helping comfort the attendees and providing a safe place to open up emotionally. For instance, the CoDA background that is shared at the beginning of a meeting is assumed as the belief system for all of the members attending the meeting. The Preamble, 12 Steps, and 12 Traditions includes some “we” and “our” statements, categorizing all of the CoDA attendees in the same mindset. There is no crosstalk, so participants are left to just read, or listen, to the readings without stating if they agree or disagree. This creates some ambiguity as to how the individuals truly feel about the CoDA program. Furthermore, while it is unclear if the group actually truly agrees to the CoDA principles, it is assumed that the attendees will adhere to the guidelines and belief system presented by the facilitator. This silent assumption enables the self-disclosure practice to take place as the ground rules are accepted implicitly.
Participants may feel more respect from the group as a whole with the rules in place and the assumed acceptance of the CoDA belief system. Perhaps some disagree with portions of the CoDA program or principles and simply remain silent.

The clear beginning, middle, and end to the meeting seems to also help with the self-disclosure process. Attendees see there is a clear time to raise one’s hand to offer to share their personal contribution to the meeting. Having the shares towards the middle of the meeting gives attendees a chance to relax a bit and feel out both the structure of the meeting and the audience. Repeat attendees may learn a routine for the meeting flow. For a shy member, it would be possible to watch others self-disclose and see the reactions of the group and then maybe feel more at ease participating in turn.

**Clear Roles in the Room.** The role of the facilitator further assists the participants to self-disclose. The facilitator takes on a leadership role, almost as if he or she is a mentor, sharing the CoDA background information and some of his or her own personal life experience with CoDA. All facilitators proclaimed they were practicing the CoDA program themselves. With this, the facilitator seems to build some common ground with the attendees and really keeps the meeting on track and flowing smoothly. Without the facilitator, a formal meeting was deemed impossible as evidenced in part of the research. An online CoDA meeting without a facilitator became essentially an open and unmonitored chat room and many attendees would either speak without following ground rules or simply leave the meeting altogether.

The greeter also plays an important role in enabling participant self-disclosure. While members are allowed to arrive late to the meetings, if everyone entered the chat and typed “hi” or “sorry I’m late!” or left a smiley face emoticon, the meeting might lose some of the serious tone and become less directed. Although the possibility exists that a participant could still communicate this way, it was not seen in any of the meetings. The greeter’s role is to promptly
acknowledge the late attendee through a side chat pop up to greet them and alert them the
meeting topic of what was missed so far. This minimizes interruptions in the chat room and
keeps the meeting flowing without unnecessary questions posted to the entire chat room. This
also is helpful if the late attendee joins during the time a participant is sharing.

**Specific Acceptable Responses and No Crosstalk.** Standard responses and no crosstalk
also aided in the self-disclosure comfort level. With the standard responses to shares being
“thank you for sharing” and “keep coming back,” there is little risk in feeling judged or
uncomfortable saying deep thoughts and feelings. In no meeting did I see someone respond in a
different way to a participant’s share. No matter what was said in an individual share, the group
did not offer whether they agreed or disagreed or had a similar or dissimilar experience. Never
did I see an instance of crosstalk. The meetings were not a place of debate but rather an open
forum to get anything off your chest and just hear the almost robotic “thank you for sharing” and
“keep coming back” in response.

Additionally, specific communication responses helped self-disclosure. Using symbols
such as the “!” for hand raising assisted keep things in order and to prevent talking over one
another. While leaving early and arriving late was permitted, participants other than the greeter
did not acknowledge this behavior. This kept the meeting flowing and avoided potentially
interrupting someone self-disclosing. Also, as there were no time limits on the personal shares,
participants did not have to feel rushed to get through their time talking and did not have to worry
about being cut off by anyone. The word “done” would signify they were complete with their
self-disclosure. At no point was anyone cut off prior to stating “done” in the chat room.

**Formal Meeting Self-Disclosure Topics**

To respect the privacy and confidentiality of the CoDA program and all participants,
verbatim comments will not be shared. Across meeting days, self-disclosure relayed during
participant chat time in the meeting shares were all very different and personal. While each participant relayed unique points of view, similar and recurrent topics of conversation were seen. For purposes of this study, I categorized these topics of self-disclosure and have provided some general examples and the resulting topic themes.

**Codependency Self Label.** Many participants would label themselves as codependent or recovering codependent upon introducing themselves to the group. During the course of their self-disclosure, often times participants would refer to their codependency as being an illness. Comments referred to understanding the need to “work on my illness,” or reflecting that “I am not perfect but making progress,” or statements that “I know I have this disease” and further description of their past being part of the cause. Some of the past issues shared included growing up with abusive relatives, broken homes, family issues, divorce, and unhealthy childhoods. It was also part of this theme that individuals would refer to the specific CoDA program step they were currently working. “I’m still working on step 1,” for example, or “This takes me back to step 3” were typical comments that accompanied the participant’s admittance of having a codependent personality and their journey through the program.

**Personal Struggles.** As codependents are categorized as having low self-esteem, being overly self-sacrificing, known to be heavily reliant on others for approval (Johnson, 2014) it made sense that the online meeting would be a place where details around these kinds of personal struggles would be revealed. Most all of the shares revolved around some form of a personal relationship struggle and often one with the self. Shares about lacking confidence, feeling lonely, dealing with marriage or family issues such as fighting or separating with a spouse, fighting through a marriage, dealing with mental illness of oneself or others, and coping with death were seen. These were complicated and heavy topics. Those sharing tended to really open up and spill details about their deepest feelings and the audience would respond with the standard “thank you
for sharing” and “keep coming back.” There were also other personal struggles shared including finding time for oneself, balancing family commitments, and allowing oneself to rest and not be perfect.

**Loneliness.** Loneliness was a recurrent conversation topic. In most meetings, someone would make a reference to loneliness, isolation, or feeling separated socially. One described a feeling of loneliness at work and fear of standing up for himself due to the reactions of coworkers. Others were lonely because they were going through a break up, afraid to socialize with others, or finding themselves contacting ex relationship partners and knowing it may not be the best decision to do so. One described being on a social outing and wanting to contact an abusive ex so bad, knowing it was the wrong thing to do, but continuing to feel this pull to do so to cure a deep loneliness. Some expressed childhood issues that they feel have contributed to their lack of confidence in connecting with others. By the end of shares, many would express the CoDA meeting was just what they needed to help them through this rough patch of feeling alone.

**Changing Negative to Positive Thinking.** Many participants described, “I just needed to change my negative attitude today to one of positivity,” or “I feel so sad and lonely today and am in need to lift my mood.” Comments like this revolved around learning to take personal responsibility for changing thoughts. Participants came to realize there are choices how to think and react in situations. Other comments included descriptions of being uncomfortable in social situations and learning to choose to face them with a more positive attitude, retraining one’s brain to accept the past and learn from disappointments and pain, and letting go of the negativity and hurt. Several participants gave thanks for God or higher power for helping them to let go and find a peaceful and positive life. Many stated trusting and praying to their higher power helped them to find a new sense of positivity, calm, and focus in life.
**Relying on Higher Power.** There were references to looking to a higher power for help during personal struggles. When participants made the reference they would spell out the words or abbreviate “Hp” as well. Comments seen included references to giving up control to a higher power, accepting, “I can’t do this alone and instead give it God.” Many participants would describe this process as, “I realized when I gave this over to my Hp everything would be ok,” or “I knew my Hp was working.” Based on these comments, the higher power sounds like a close friend. Sometimes participants would also talk about the power of prayer and talking with their higher power. Others would say their Hp helped them understand, accept, or eliminate their loneliness. It was interesting that codependents are in this type of self-help group striving to be less reliant on others and yet are rechanneling their dependence to a spiritual and physically invisible figure. Participants often described the higher power as all powerful, comforting in times of turmoil, and unfailing when all else fails. Sometimes participants would express they were thankful to their higher power for all that life has to give, and many gave the CoDA program credit for a new understanding through the higher power.

**Finding Peace.** Often times participants would describe stressful situations with kids, spouses, exes, finances, school, or sometimes even with finding or believing in their higher power. Many would talk about how things seemed completely out of alignment in their lives. During the share, sometimes the participant would talk about how they were handling the challenges. The techniques described included reading, listening to music, breathing, expressing gratitude, enjoying hobbies, or finding some other stress management technique. Repeatedly, as a step to finding peace, participants would refer to, “giving up trying to control others,” and remembering, “we are powerless over others.” Many would describe the steps to finding peace as involving becoming more “aware” and “responsible over oneself,” and also, “turning control over to a higher power,” and “giving up the need to control other people.” Participants shared that the
steps to achieving a calmer life included putting oneself first and letting that be personally acceptable. References were repeatedly made to setting healthy boundaries and making better choices. For example, one participant described working on setting a personal relationship boundary to not again date someone that is already involved with someone. Another talked about choosing to be in more positive social situations with people with shared interests.

The second two research questions addressed communication norms in the open chat room immediately following the online CoDA meetings. Communication norms in the open chat room immediately following the online CoDA meetings were studied by meeting day (Mondays, Fridays, and then Saturdays) and then across all days for general themes. Each of these two research questions will be addressed separately in the sections that follow.

RQ3: What communication norms are established in the open chat room immediately following meetings?

**After Meeting Communication Norms**

The communication norms established in the after meeting were identical and repeated across Monday, Friday, and Saturday meetings so this research question will be answered relative to all meeting days. The communication norms described all contribute to creating an open, relaxed, and conversational atmosphere for participants to chat lightheartedly. The tone of the after meeting is entirely different from the immediately preceding formal CoDA meeting. The beginning of the after meeting is announced by the meeting facilitator stating the meeting time has officially ended. After that point, all of the formal CoDA meeting rules conclude. There are some communication norms that continue and many different ones that come into play in the after meeting time.

**Anonymity.** Communication norms that continue from the formal meeting to the after meeting included the ability to remain anonymous. Participants would keep their user name and
avatar and go right into the after meeting. It is also possible some may have left and returned with a new user name and/or avatar.

**No Clear Structure.** The beginning of the after meeting starts immediately after the official meeting closes. This is signified by the facilitator specifically stating the meeting is over but that he/she will stay in the chat room to answer any questions. There is no clear middle or end to the after meeting. I spent 30 minutes after each meeting and people would slowly dissipate on their own, some saying goodbye and others not. Some did not attend the after meeting at all. There was no clarification from the group of an official end to the after meeting time, so the unofficial end to the after meeting would be when the majority of the chat room participants left or stopped talking. The was usually within 15 minutes and definitely by 30 minutes post meeting.

Typically, there were very few late joins to an after meeting. Those in the preceding meeting would sometimes stay to ask the facilitator questions, make conversation about their experiences in the CoDA program with other participants, or to discuss their plans for the day or week.

**Small Talk and Audience Slowly Dissipates.** Much like the end of a standard in-person meeting, people would usually hang around for a short time and engage in some small talk and then go on their way. Conversation would usually slow and participants really thin out by about 15 minutes into the after meetings. Some would say goodbye and/or thank the facilitator and greeter for a “good meeting,” or for “serving” or “leading the meeting,” and some would not and instead just leave the chat room. Very few new arrivals would be seen in the after meeting that did not attend the preceding meeting. There were some exceptions. At one Saturday after meeting, a person that was not in the formal meeting joined 27 minutes after the formal meeting concluded at 1:30pm, left at 1:30pm, and rejoined at 1:32pm. No comments were seen and this lead me to wonder if he or she was checking to see if there was a meeting or anything interesting
going on in the chat room. At another Saturday meeting, a newcomer joined 16 minutes after the formal meeting had ended stating he/she was new and wanted information about how this all worked. The others in the after meeting helped explain the meeting had just ended and that another was scheduled for a few hours later. Also, in a Monday meeting, someone joined two minutes after the formal meeting ended and stayed for seven minutes. The group advised that the meeting had just ended and the new join made conversation about how he/she was doing and the weather. Also, a second later join arrived five minutes after the formal meeting ended, said absolutely nothing in the chat, and left seven minutes later. Then a third late join arrived 27 minutes after the formal meeting ended and asked if, “anything was happening here.” I believe I was the only participant in the chat room at this point and I did not respond to the comment. My 30 minutes post chat was up momentarily after.

Additionally, very few participants would attend the after meeting, leave, and return to the after meeting. There was one instance of this; in one Friday after meeting, one of the formal meeting participants went to the after meeting and unexpectedly left and quickly returned due to what appeared to be an unexpected computer connectivity mishap. At a Saturday after meeting, one of the formal meeting participants joined the after meeting but unexpectedly left at 1:27pm and then rejoined a few seconds later, leading me to believe it was also a computer issue.

**Roles Change.** Roles change immediately from the formal meeting to the after meeting. The greeter is dismissed and typically thanked for serving in the meeting. The facilitator is always present in the after meeting. The facilitator’s role changes in the after meeting as he or she is no longer directing a formal meeting but rather addressing questions and talking informally with attendees that bring forward questions or comments. The facilitator would stay and address questions until no further ones were raised. I found the facilitator would often not leave the after
meeting right away and would wait until all questions were addressed and the chat room went silent.

**Relaxed Environment.** The communication norms for the after meeting include a very relaxed and conversational environment. There are no longer standard acronyms or responses to communication. In the after meeting, the conversation is free flowing and turn taking is not monitored. People are allowed to say whatever they like and crosstalk is open. Hand raising is not necessary. For example, in one after meeting a participant typed “!” and the facilitator advised it was acceptable to just talk without asking for a turn. Also, the pace of the chat seems to quicken in the after meeting. For example, the lines of text are shorter and comments and emoticons are more prevalent. More than one participant may type emoticons or comments concurrently, further quickening the chat pace.

**Conversation Topics.** Conversation topics are much lighter in the after meeting as well. Conversation often revolved around expressions of gratitude and general CoDA questions directed to the preceding meeting facilitator. Also people would discuss face-to-face CoDA meetings, codependency literature, and wish each other good luck on personal issues and recovery. Sometimes the weather or finding pleasure in life’s simplicity would be discussed. Some would provide the crosstalk that was not allowed in earlier meetings, remembering the share of a participant. For example, one attendee had mentioned how many years she was married in her share during the formal meeting and another attendee congratulated her in the after meeting for staying married so many years.

**Emoticons.** While emoticons were rarely used in the formal meetings, they were very common in the after meetings. Smiley faces and other varieties or facial expressions, a rose, a thumbs up sign, and a cup of coffee were some of the emoticon choices available (see Appendix E). The usage of such pictures as representations of feelings was an example of the social
information processing theory at work. Because we could not see one another face-to-face, the emoticons provided a way to express emotions in an alternate fashion. Most of the emoticon choices in the CoDA chat room were positive emotions. Perhaps this is reason why they were seen more often in the after meetings. I began to wonder how reliable and accurate the emoticons were in describing the sender’s true emotions and feelings. Being in the CMC environment, we miss the in-person vocals, tone, and facial expressions and the emoticon offers an electronic alternative. One could also send a smiley face emoticon when in front of their computer screen with tears streaming in sadness or eyes rolling with sarcasm. The true intention of the sender is unknown and left up to individual interpretation.

RQ4: To what extent do communication norms affect self-disclosure in the open chat room immediately following meetings?

As the communication was more open and relaxed in the after meeting, the communication norms established in the after meetings resulted in different levels of self-disclosure. A few specific examples will be explained. As we have identified some communication norms in the after meetings that were identical and repeated across Monday, Friday, and Saturday, this research question will be answered relative to all meeting days.

The communication norms in the after meeting supported a relaxed, friendly, and happy environment. With this, attendees seemed to loosen up and be less serious. Chat transcripts were analyzed with Glaser and Eblen’s (1986) four levels of self-disclosure: basic data, preferences, beliefs, and feelings. Basic information self-disclosure such as personal demographics or plans after the meetings were sometimes shared. Also, preferences were more common in the after meeting than in the preceding formal meeting. Participants shared how they felt about the CoDA program or meeting or even each other or themselves. Beliefs and feelings were not seen in the after meetings.
Although specific chat comments relative to beliefs and feelings were not seen, emoticons were common. Upon entering the chat room, attendees have a menu of available emoticons they may use which include smiley faces of various sorts and other inanimate objects such as a thumbs up symbol, a rose, a coffee cup and others (see Appendix E). While in the formal meetings it was very atypical to see emoticons used, in the after meetings it was the opposite – very uncommon not to see them. Some emoticons, such as the sad face, funny faces, or face with sunglasses appear to be representations of inner feelings and could be categorized as feelings. For example, a smile may show the sender is happy, a feeling. A picture may speak all the words one might otherwise have to speak. So the question becomes – are emoticons a form of self-disclosure? I would argue they are. The various emoticon choices give the after meeting attendee the option to show his or her feelings while remaining behind the computer screen. While it is impossible to see the user’s actual expressions, this gives us insight into how he or she is feeling or what he or she is doing. The user may actually be sad when typing a smile, so it is difficult to verify if the emoticon is a true depiction of the emotion. This is part of the anonymity and privacy offered in the CMC environment but additionally the emoticon provides a method of accommodating for the lack of face-to-face cues, in line with the SIP theory.

The next two research questions focused on what levels of self-disclosure appeared in the CoDA online meetings and the subsequent after meetings. The levels of self-disclosure in the online CoDA meetings were studied by meeting day (Mondays, Fridays, and then Saturdays) and then across all days for general themes. Then the levels of self-disclosure in the subsequent after meetings were studied by meeting day (Mondays, Fridays, and then Saturdays) and then across all days for general themes. Each of these two research questions will be addressed separately in the sections that follow.

RQ5: What levels of self-disclosure are evident in the online CoDA meeting?
The data analysis for this research question was completed by the meeting day of week (Mondays, Fridays, and then Saturdays) and commonalities emerged. The levels of self-disclosure seen in online CoDA meetings were similar regardless of the meeting day. The structure and order of the meeting enabled the resulting levels of self-disclosure which will be further discussed. The levels of self-disclosure varied in different sections of the meeting. The beginning, middle, and end of the meeting each had repeatable and predictable levels of self-disclosure.

As discussed earlier, two predictable communication norms that guided self-disclosure to occur in the CoDA online meetings were the structure and specified order of the meeting. Specifically, the meeting has a very clear beginning, middle, and end that are guided by a group facilitator. These meeting sections follow a very repeatable and predictable order of implicit agenda items. While self-disclosure was enabled, the levels of self-disclosure were also impacted by this meeting structure and order. The levels of self-disclosure observed in the beginning, middle, and end of the meetings followed a pattern across all of the meeting days.

The beginning of the meeting is opened with the facilitator welcoming the group, appointing a greeter, and explaining how the CoDA program works. This section of the meeting is comprised primarily of the facilitator speaking and with basic information about the CoDA program, not really self-disclosure at all. This is a clear and repeated observation across all of the meetings.

The middle of the meeting is when the participants would speak and share personal stories and reactions to the meeting’s topic. This section of the meeting was comprised primarily of the attendees speaking with little from the facilitator at all. There was an array of levels of self-disclosure seen, but primarily beliefs and feelings were exhibited. Participants were called upon in order of the “!” seen, which signified hand raising. The participant then would share his
or her name (basic information) and many times, immediately after stating his or her name, a participant would place a comma and self-label as “codependent,” which would be beliefs.

Participants would disclose whatever was on their mind without interruption, validation, or questions. For example, they might share a personal experience in childhood such as having controlling or abusive parents or a current life challenge with a marriage or life partner. The participant would typically share his or her side of a story, creating and sharing his or her idea of reality, which would be beliefs. Then often times the participant would continue from there to share his or her reaction or interpretation to those thoughts, which would then be feelings. The sharing process became a very personally descriptive and interpretive process and was characteristic of the beliefs and feelings levels of self-disclosure. There was very little basic information shared. So although the group may not know the person’s real name, location, or physical features, the attendee self-disclosing relayed deeply personal information that often included reference to mental struggles or illness, marriage problems with infidelity or trust issues, money management problems, or conflicts within the family.

The end of the meeting is signified by the facilitator resuming control of the conversation and stating the meeting is closing. He or she shares more basic CoDA information including statements about CoDA relying on voluntary contributions and a request to keep meeting content anonymous. Then more CoDA program information is shared as in the beginning of the meeting. As the CoDA principles become the backbone of the entire meeting, the thoughts and beliefs of the CoDA program are important features. They are the glue that holds the meeting together and the group never questions them. The finding that no attendees question the program information was quite unexpected and interesting. The facilitator offers time for the attendees to state personal affirmations as well before closing with prayers.
RQ6: What levels of self-disclosure are evident in the open chat room immediately following the meeting?

The data analysis for this research question was completed by the meeting day of week (Mondays, Fridays, and then Saturdays) and enough commonalities emerged that it was concluded the levels of self-disclosure seen in the after meetings immediately following online CoDA meetings were similar regardless of the meeting day. The lack of a formal structure and leadership during the after meetings paired with the relaxed and conversational environment enabled the resulting types of self-disclosure which will be further discussed. There were repeatable levels of self-disclosure evident in each after meeting.

In comparison to the preceding formal meeting time, the after meetings were immediately much more relaxed without a clear middle or end, without clear conversational topics or a structured agenda, and without the role of the facilitator or greeter. Once the formal meetings were announced as over, the atmosphere completely lightened. For examples, the facilitator became one of the group, no longer reciting the CoDA scripted information and was completely available to answer questions. Crosstalk was permitted and encouraged. Acronyms and standard responses to comments were no longer needed or encouraged. Hand raising was unnecessary and participants were permitted to just speak at will. In one after meeting, a participant used the “!” and was advised by the preceding meeting facilitator that it was ok to chat freely. Interestingly, although it was a free forum to talk about anything, without the structural elements and rules in place, the levels of self-disclosure changed and became much more basic.

There was very little beliefs and feelings types of self-disclosure seen in the after meetings. These types of comments can sometimes be lengthy and the chat comments in the after meeting were regularly shorter than those in the preceding meeting. This may be a contributing factor as to why there was a limited sharing of these higher levels of self-disclosure. Typically,
the after meeting participants were the same people as the attendees in the preceding meeting and it could be that they already did their deep self-disclosure and did not have a need to continue self-disclosing at the levels of thoughts and feelings. Also, because the after meeting became more of a question and answer session, this may have diverted some deeper levels of self-disclosure. Instead, the levels of self-disclosure in the after meetings would tend to change to levels 1 and 2, basic information and beliefs. Some examples of basic information observed were discussions of personal demographics, the weather, or plans for after the meeting. Preferences disclosures included sharing of likes and dislikes about the CoDA program and opinions about the preceding meeting. Other preferences observed were comments like, “I’m glad you are here,” or the facilitator would often say he or she enjoys serving in response to attendees thanking him or her for leading the meeting.

Additionally, the meeting was less serious and structured. There were no formal readings of CoDA program material, there was no agenda, and there were no rules for communicating like in the preceding formal meeting. This seemed to help keep the meeting on a more surface level. Emoticon usage was very prevalent and participants seemed to be mentally exhaling and letting go of the more focused preceding meeting.

In sum, the communication norms in the online CoDA meetings were similar across meeting days; what occurred in Monday meetings was similar on Friday and Saturday. There were certain structural elements in the meetings that were consistent in each meeting so that an online CoDA meeting participant can come to expect certain characteristics in any meeting he/she attends. The facilitator drives the meeting and ensures the participants follow the CoDA rules. The CoDA principles and guidelines act as a background to support the therapeutic environment and the meeting facilitator always posts these in each meeting and in a particular order. Certain abbreviations are acceptable such as “tyfs,” “kcb,” and “ga.” Crosstalk is not permitted. Late
comers and early departs are accepted but not acknowledged by the group; a greeter welcomes
the late comers on a side bar chat message so as to not interrupt for meeting and provides the
meeting topic.

There is a very clear beginning, middle, and end to each meeting regardless of the day of
week. The meeting is opened with an explanation of some ground rules. The facilitator informs
the group that only one person is to share at a time and to use “!” to raise a hand to be
acknowledged to share and to not interrupt, crosstalk, or private message during the meetings.
Then the facilitator walks the group through the CoDA prayer, CoDA information, and the
meeting topic. Next, the facilitator reads the Preamble, the Welcome, and the Steps, Traditions,
and Promises as these are the core to the CoDA message. The beginning includes the facilitator
opening the meeting with a welcome and a clear explanation of the CoDA guidelines and beliefs,
the middle includes the participants’ shares, and the end is resumed by the facilitator clearly
stating “Closing” followed by a statement about CoDA accepting voluntary donations and a
request to keep everything anonymous from the meeting. Then the 12 Promises of Codependents
Anonymous are read followed by an opportunity to share personal affirmations with the group.
Then the facilitator reads the Serenity Prayer and the CoDA closing prayer and the meeting is
always announced as officially over once it closes.

Additionally, the communication norms in the after meetings were also similar across
meetings days. Emoticons were more prevalent, crosstalk was tolerated, and more relaxed
conversation was seen including no need to raise hands to speak or to await one to finish talking
before typing a comment. While the topics of conversation were more varied, typically the
interaction involved discussion of individuals’ CoDA experiences, talk around where to locate
reading materials, and more basic information such as weather or plans for the weekend. The
facilitator became more of an adviser rather than a leader in that the participants could ask questions or advice and receive personalized responses and assistance.

As the structure of the after meeting is relaxed, self-disclosure seems to change as well. There is more basic information sharing and preferences. Participants talk about what they like or do not like about the CoDA meeting or readings. There is less of the deep sharing of personal life experiences and challenges or deep rooted psychological struggles. Because the crosstalk rule is lifted, there is more validation occurring in the after meeting. Participants might say they agree with someone on a thought or offer support such as, “yes, that’s difficult for me, too,” for example. These types of validating comments are not permitted in the formal meeting space.

The levels of self-disclosure evident in the online CoDA meetings vary by the speaker. The facilitator shares some basic information such as his/her name, the topic for the evening, and some basic definitions. Then the CoDA principles and beliefs are shared and it is assumed that all participants buy into and agree with these beliefs. With this assumption in place, meeting attendees tend to share deeper self-disclosure, including thoughts and beliefs. We may not know their real name, location, or occupation, but we hear deep, dark, challenging and sometimes painful situations with which they are struggling.

The levels of self-disclosure evident in the after meetings are more at the basic information level. Most of the deeper thought and feeling levels of self-disclosure tended to take place in the preceding meeting and the participants are more at ease and shaking it off at the after meeting. Additionally, many of the meeting attendees do not stick around as long afterwards to talk. In the Monday beginner’s meeting, more attendees are apt to stay afterwards to talk with the facilitator or their peers for advice and help maneuvering through the CoDA 12 Steps program.

The results of this study show there are clear communication norms that differ between the formal online CoDA meetings and subsequent after meeting time. The communication norms
contribute to the varied levels of self-disclosure seen within the online meeting time and after meeting time. The levels of self-disclosure tend to be more thought and belief related in the meeting time and basic information and preferences in the after meeting time.

This chapter reviewed the research questions and the results of the data analysis. The themes found with communication norms in and outside of meetings were described as universal themes evident across meeting days. Communication norms in and outside of meeting time were considered as relates to the levels of self-disclosure seen. The themes found with levels of self-disclosure in and after the meetings were described as universal themes evident across days.

In Chapter 5, this study’s purpose will be reviewed and the results will be further discussed. The relation of this research to the literature on computer mediated communication (CMC) including the social information processing (SIP) theory, anonymity, hyperpersonal communication, communication norms, and self-disclosure in online environments will be addressed. The chapter will also acknowledge the limitations in the study and suggest possible future research endeavors to explore as a result of this study.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

This chapter will review the purpose of this study, critique the method efficiency, and delve deeper into the findings. The results will be further discussed in relation to how this study contributes to the scholarly research in communication studies. Limitations of the study will be acknowledged and future areas to explore as a result of this study will be suggested.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to consider what communication norms and levels of self-disclosure exist within the CoDA online self-help group meetings and after meetings. The findings in this study help scholars understand more about communication within a CoDA online support group setting. While these results are unique to the CoDA online environment, the study opens the door to examine other similar online self-help groups. Communication norms and levels of self-disclosure in other online groups would likely vary from CoDA, but this study provides the framework for investigating in a similar fashion and learning more in other settings.

Participant Observation

Participant observation as the chosen qualitative method for this study afforded me a few benefits. First, I was able to view the online CoDA participants in their natural environment. As opposed to other methods such as questionnaires, focus groups, or personal interviews, I was able to see firsthand the way meetings and after meetings flow from beginning to end. Second, I was able to read along and feel the rhythm of the chat room in the formal meeting and after meetings. This gave me a subjective view about what it is like to attend these meetings and what takes place in them. Lastly, I was able to review chat transcripts to determine the commonalities in the meetings and to determine meeting and after meeting themes more easily than I could have accomplished by listening to individual perspectives.
Just like a true meeting participant would be expected to do, as I sat through each meeting, I read each chat message in the room as it appeared and followed along. I observed the pace of the communication, communication norms, and the meeting structure all without typing any comments in the chat room whatsoever. This allowed me to research the communication within the formal CoDA online meetings and after meetings as closely as possible to the true meeting environment without shaping communication results. This allowed me to collect data to address my research questions on communication norms and self-disclosure while minimizing being an influence.

Rules for participating in the CoDA room were available online (see Appendix D) and include no solicitation and an email address as a requirement for membership. Participants are to be respectful and not give personal advice or post links. As I was a silent participant, I followed these rules easily. Although in the formal meetings the facilitators would encourage chat participation, there was nothing specifically called out in the Chat Room Guidelines about meeting participants being required to post chat comments.

**Group Norms**

When I initially built my research plan, I wanted to study group norms. Because the online CoDA meeting allows the ability to change user names as often as a member wishes, it was unclear if week to week the members in attendance were new or just attending under a new alias. With this in mind, I decided to study communication norms instead. Group norms would be more relevant if I knew the membership would be identical in each meeting. Because the online environment gives the opportunity to change your avatar and user name, I was unsure upon initiating the research who to expect in each meeting.

After the completion of the research, I learned there were actually some group norms that could be studied despite the anonymous features of the chat and the changing attendees. Some
members returned week to week and used the same user name. Certain individuals repeatedly volunteered to be the greeter. In some meetings, people would introduce themselves as a name other than their user name. For instance, if a user name was “sillygirl” she might say “Good afternoon, I’m Clara, a recovering codependent.” With this, week to week, sometimes these individuals would be known as their real name instead of their user name and the facilitator would sometimes acknowledge their hand raising and call upon them by “Clara” instead of “sillygirl.”

Also, Monday and Saturday meetings usually had the highest attendance and regular group of attendees. Monday was usually a similar group with a few additional new names each week. Saturday also had several repeat attendees. Additionally, some of the same members that would be in Monday meetings would also be in the Friday and/or Saturday meeting. This led me to believe many of the attendees were attending multiple meetings during the week and were really serious about the CoDA program. Another group norm that emerged is certain individuals would always raise their hand for their time to share week to week, some would share for longer time frames than others, and some would never stay for an after meeting. Most importantly, I learned you could walk into any CoDA online meeting and come to experience some universal components such as the consistent structure and order.

I noticed a certain individual in the Saturday meetings would typically want to share first, signified by a “!” typed in the chat instantly after the facilitator opened the sharing portion of the meeting and then immediately after sharing would depart. I found it very interesting and interpreted this that the individual did not care what others in the meeting had to say. I found it peculiar how the meeting could be helpful at all to just share personal information for 10 minutes to a group of online participants and then say goodbye without even awaiting the meeting participants to say anything in return. I wondered how participants could find healing in a place
where crosstalk was not allowed. At only one point during the 12 meetings I attended did I see anyone provide crosstalk and break the rule and the comment was still a positive one like “great job.” For me, it was tempting to respond to comments to voice disagreement or validation or that I shared a similar experience and yet per the group norms all that could be said was “tyfs” for thank you for sharing or “kcb” for keep coming back.

**Self-disclosure is Subjective**

Self-disclosure differed in the formal meeting and the after meeting. The levels of self-disclosure were challenging because basic information could still be very personal information. For example, if a participant said she was in a huge physical fight with her boyfriend and then decided to just stay out all night with another guy friend, this would be a very personal piece of self-disclosure that is still really basic information, as it is not a belief or feeling. Another example is participants would sometimes share how many years they had been participating in CoDA. While very personal, this would still fall into basic information.

Also, beliefs and feelings would often be seen within the same sentences. Participants would often reveal their thoughts and beliefs and then explain how they felt about them, further discussing their reactions to the situations. Another gray area was the section of the meeting when affirmations were shared. Affirmations could be categorized as personal beliefs. Statements like “I am confident,” or “I am a peaceful and happy person,” for example, are beliefs. As the group cannot verify if the participant’s affirmation statement is true, the participant can say whatever he or she wishes and possibly even try to fool themselves into believing false affirmations are true. If we say something enough, maybe it even will become true.

The communication norms helped to enable the deeper levels of self-disclosure including thoughts and feelings in the meetings and the lack of a strong structure and rules in the after meeting tended to support a lighter climate of communication. In analyzing the levels of self-
disclosure seen, it became evident that there were varied levels of self-disclosure in even single sentences. For example, “Last night I was at home with my boyfriend (basic information) and we began to have a stupid fight (beliefs) and then he got mad at me (beliefs) and I was so upset (feelings) that I took off to my friend’s house (basic information) and then he was so mad at me that he ignored all my calls (beliefs – was he really mad? Was he really ignoring her?)

While I was able to categorize levels of self-disclosure, any self-disclosure seen was really left up for interpretation. For example, as there may be few outside connections with the online CoDA participants, it is not possible to verify all basic data. In an in-person situation it would be easier to verify facts like what the weather is really like or if the person really works in the industry they proclaim. In the online environment, the participant could say his name is Bob but really be a female named Nancy in life off the computer.

Basic information self-disclosure would often change into thoughts and feelings with the addition of adjectives. “I am a Texan” would be basic info whereas “I am a proud Texan” would be a belief. “I found some CoDA information online” is basic information and “I found some great CoDA information online” is a belief.

Sometimes basic information and beliefs or feelings would be revealed within the same sentence. This made it further complex to evaluate the levels of self-disclosure and further contributed to the self-presentation of reality. Also, questions could not be categorized as levels of self-disclosure at all; once an answer was given those could be coded.

Self-disclosure overall was subjective and not verifiable. The meetings became a place for participants to say as they wish, accepting, understanding, and even creating their own ideas of reality. This led to a social construction of reality. What’s real? What’s fantasy? Everything is accepted in the CoDA meeting regardless if it is true or not. This made it very difficult to firmly categorize the levels of self-disclosure because the information seen was not verifiable. While
this is likely the case in the in-person CoDA meeting as well. I feel this was especially challenging in the CMC environment. We do not see the participants or know much about them other than what they say. We have no idea where they live, where they work, who they know, or even their true full name. As the group just accepts any comments with the standard “thank you for sharing” or “keep coming back,” an online CoDA attendee’s reality is completely theirs without any questions. So while many of the self-disclosure comments can be coded into beliefs and feelings, the truth about any basic information is only really known by the person disclosing.

**Codependent on CoDA**

The same identical CoDA introductory and closing comments regarding the program background and beliefs were posted in every formal meeting driven by a facilitator. The facilitator shared the CoDA framework and belief system and used “we” and “our” statements that were not refuted or questioned by meeting attendees. Statements like, “We all have been through times in our lives when we experienced unhealthy relationships,” or “We have come to find our powerlessness over others,” insinuate that all CoDA members believe this way. The CoDA 12 Steps, 12 Traditions, and 12 Promises were presented in meetings as basic information and assumed as what the group believes. These accepted guidelines for the CoDA program often referred to the group’s decision to turn to a higher power and to CoDA fellowship to find healing from codependency. While the collective belief system seems to be ritualistically repeated by the facilitator in each CoDA meeting and not questioned by attendees, I wondered if everyone was in agreement to the program’s steps, traditions, and promises. While not contested by attendees, it was inferred that all did agree, but this is a false assumption because it is not possible to truly know what the participants felt. In one participant’s share in a meeting, she made reference to finding herself learning to be cautious about situations in life in which someone would “think for you or tell you what or how to think.” Ironically, that is exactly what I felt the CoDA online
meeting facilitator was doing. The facilitator, by relaying “we” and “our” statements about the CoDA beliefs and program was basically telling the group what they believed and not being challenged at any point. Codependents are often deemed as having low self-confidence and difficulty expressing emotions or communicating their needs. I came to realize it made sense why these attendees did not want to challenge the program due to their deep need to be accepted by others. With this, I came to the realization that the codependents in the meeting were on some level almost codependent on the codependents anonymous program itself.

**Catharsis**

Building upon what previous scholars found about the virtual community affording individuals a place to safely vent and self-disclose, perhaps CoDA online serves as an environment in which to freely express pain and sadness and be open. The level of self-disclosure within the formal meetings suggests individuals are open to become rather hyperpersonal, sharing deeply personal information. The online CoDA meetings seem to provide a safe place for self-construction of reality, catharsis and venting, and a place to complain or emotionally let go without being criticized, judged or challenged. While the rule is to just listen and thank the person for sharing information, I questioned if there would be boundaries on the information typed and shared. While I did not observe anything that seemed potentially dangerous during the course of the study, I wondered if someone were to threaten to hurt him or herself what the facilitator or group would do or say. Would they continue to chant “thank you for sharing” or “keep coming back?” As the meeting is not conducted by medical professionals, perhaps this level of intervention is not needed, but I found myself sometimes wondering how far things could go.

As interpretation of self-disclosure is subjective, the way the online CoDA participants interpreted shares of others was very introspective. As crosstalk, validation, and advice giving
was not permitted in the meeting, participants would either speak or listen. The speaker would self-disclose information that is not verified as fact. For example, the speaker might tell a story stating, “I got upset and started overreacting and crying.” Is it basic information that he or she was upset? It is a personal reaction to an event that allegedly happened. Some participants would self-label as, “recovering codependent,” yet no one would debate about whether this is an accurate description of that individual. Nothing is verifiable in this environment. This allowed the speaker to self-construct his or her reality without worry for anyone being able to prove what happened and the online environment seemed to further enable this self-construction of reality and self-presentation through CMC. The meeting participants listening to others self-disclose would assume the information shared was honest.

With these self-constructions of reality, there appeared to be some level of healing in simply hearing oneself speak. As thoughts formed in the mind, on his or her turn for sharing, the speaker could type them into the chat room. Sometimes the speaker would share his or her thoughts about the sharing process and sometimes not. The audience never shared thoughts about what was spoken; listeners’ thoughts about individual shares remained a mystery. It is therefore difficult to analyze what impact the individual speakers and shares had on the audience as a whole or individuals within the meeting. The closest we could get to analyzing this is to consider what reaction the listeners had after the share and what resulting chat was seen. Although listeners could not say how the share impacted them once the speaker stated “done,” they could raise a hand and share. Just saying, “keep coming back,” or “thank you for sharing,” also seemed a way to say, “I heard what you said and I respect your thoughts.” This led me to believe that hearing participants speak was encouraging and healing for both the listener and speaker. At times, it really felt like participants were just talking to hear themselves talk and somehow getting some positive result from the experience. It appeared there was therapeutic benefit to hearing
oneself speak. Perhaps writing out thoughts made the participant more self-aware of deep personal feelings. Having a non-threatening environment in which to vocalize thoughts and feelings provided participants an opportunity to get anything off their chest and putting the ideas in writing may make them more real and truly become that catharsis.

**Environment**

The ability for participants to stay visually and discursively anonymous opened the possibility to say things that one might not typically say in person. Without being identifiable, participants would often tend to partake in hyperpersonal communication, revealing thoughts and feelings. In one meeting, a participant mentioned it was a place he could really open up and share at a deep level unlike in many of his other relationships. Interestingly, there was also a comment in one meeting that seemed not to support the research that we tend to relax more in an online environment. Despite being hidden with our anonymity, a participant mentioned that even though we were online she was still uneasy with talking to the group. I wondered if this could be a cultural factor. As we do not provide full self-identification in the meetings, it was impossible to know from what area of the world she was from to potentially further analyze if this could be a reason. Also, this tendency to be hyperpersonal only seemed to occur in the formal meetings and not the after meetings.

As the CMC environment allowed for the deeper levels of self-disclosure to comfortably be expressed by participants, group members also tended to influence one another. For instance, in formal meetings when the facilitator often would self-label as “codependent,” the meeting participants would often follow and do the same. These labels were beliefs. As participants would share, others would raise hands. In after meetings, as attendees began to say goodbye or discuss things like weather, others would follow and keep conversations in the more basic information level of self-disclosure.
Emoticons were seen very seldom in the main chat meeting, and if seen at all, were usually in the beginning of the meeting before the self-disclosing began. This could be because the tone of the meeting is more serious or somber than a light hearted online chat conversation often times might be. Conversely, in the after meetings, emoticons would abound. One member placing an emoticon would often result in more following along with other emoticon posts. Emoticons were contagious in both the formal meeting and after meeting environments.

**Lurking**

Conducting the study as an unobtrusive participant observer posed a concern regarding lurking. As the online CoDA meetings are designed to be an interactive space for discussion, the meeting facilitator encourages each person to take turns contributing individually. Being present without being actively involved in the chat discussion could potentially raise the question as to my intent to being in the room. As all participant names were displayed on the right hand side of the chat window, it is clearly evident who is in the room, when they arrive, and when they leave. It is impossible to remain invisible and just observe and I was in an available state during the study. There are online status codes that users can select to indicate personal online status whereabouts (see Appendix B) but rarely anything other than the default available state was used. Despite this inherent risk, I was infrequently greeted or talked to so I was able to sit outside of the conversation and observe easily. Also, there were other meeting attendees that did not talk and if the group was large enough it was possible to lost in the crowd of participants. My silence in the formal meetings was fairly unnoticed most of the time except for in the meeting with smaller attendance, such as in the meetings where a facilitator did not show.

In after meetings where the membership was lower, I felt more uncomfortable lurking. My presence without speaking impacted the feel of the room. The chat room is configured where you can see when someone enters and exits the room. The chat displays “name has joined” or
“name has left.” Because the users in the room display on the right hand side on a panel in the room, participants would know who remains in the room even if they were silent. You could not be completely invisible. On a couple of occasions outside of formal meetings, attendees called upon me by my user name and asked for me to jump in the conversations. I just ignored them based on my role as the researcher and it actually felt very odd. I felt cold and unfriendly not responding and I wondered if I also made them uncomfortable with my silence.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study is not without limitations. First, this research is applied to only the CoDA online self-help group and results could be different in other online settings. Additionally, as the research is qualitative, the results are subjective through the bias of the researcher. I had difficulty being silent and often times wanted to speak or retort. I successfully resisted this temptation and while I tried to remain completely unbiased throughout the entire data collection phase, it is possible my opinions could have influenced my content analysis in some regard. Despite the fact that the comments are unmatched to the speakers, it was very difficult for me to feel comfortable reporting specific examples of self-disclosure I witnessed. I wanted to respect the privacy and anonymity of the comments seen and felt guilty reporting verbatim.

This research could also have been conducted with the researcher being an actual participant in the meetings rather than remaining completely quiet. I wonder if the results would have been different if I had followed the communication norms and shared stories along with the other participants. Perhaps I would have also gotten something therapeutic out of the sessions. I also contemplated what the impacts would have been to the research if I had purposely not followed the norms, intentionally breaking the rules to weigh the impacts. Watching how the facilitator, the greeter, and the group would handle someone questioning the CoDA program or
being disruptive and intentionally not following the communication norms would be an interesting study.

While it is impossible to conclude with any certainty what my full impact was on the group, I believe my complete silence was impactful to the results, especially in the after meetings. In a smaller group, my silence was more pronounced and it was increasingly difficult to ignore greetings from others in the room. I believe silent participants unintentionally can discourage others from speaking.

**Areas for Future Study**

Certainly more investigation into CoDA online groups could prove fruitful through the eyes of other researchers. Research of additional online self-help groups would also be important studies to help understand more about CMC with anonymity, communication norms, and self-disclosure. There is so much data in my qualitative results that multiple studies could be done with just my data alone. Below are a few examples of ideas for how my data might apply to other qualitative studies. Additionally, examples of how to apply these research questions to future online self-help group studies are listed.

Emoticon usage warrants further exploration in this and in other online self-help groups. Why were they more widely used in the after meetings? I began to wonder how reliable and accurate the emoticons were in describing the sender’s true emotions and feelings. Some of the emoticons themselves may mean different things to different users. Emoticons are certainly a chief component of communication within CMC as they replace facial expressions and feelings we would see in a face-to-face setting, supporting the social information processing theory.

Further research into the role of gender in either this online self-help group or others would be a potential area of study as well. I used a gender neutral name in each meeting, but I do not believe the results in this study were impacted by my gender neutrality. Gender did not seem
to matter overall though in the CoDA online environment to the extent that I could conclude. I believe this is because the only tools to determine gender were the user name and avatar. Also, because participants did not much interact with one another until the after meetings, gender did not seem to be important. A different online self-help group study focused on those speaking in the meetings or the interactions of participants could render different results and research could be done on how individuals reveal their gender in online groups given the limited visibility.

Another possible research avenue would be to look into the user names chosen in either this online self-help group or in others. While for purposes of this study the user name seemed to be a method to add a layer of visual anonymity, there are other questions that could be asked. Do the user name and avatar align? Are there any clues that the user is changing his user name? Does the user reveal any self-identification through the user name? Is there any indication that the user name and gender do not match – for example, is the user name a female name and the participant introducing himself in the chat room as a male?

Building upon gender and user names, use of avatars could also be studied further. More could be studied relative to the gender orientation relative to the types of avatars, how and why they are chosen, and the resulting impact on communication. In instances in which users did not select an avatar, their message seemed to be they wanted to remain more anonymous and hidden but this could be further explored. For those choosing a non-human figure, this could be another tactic to hide true identity, to be funny, or to just express one’s unique personality. These would also be potential research studies.

Another area of potential study is the pacing of instant message responses. The rhythm of the messages being posted in a chat room may reveal something about participants’ feelings and what is on their minds. More research could be done to explore how the typing pace relates to feelings and self-disclosure. Questions such as these could be considered in any instant
messing study and would help researchers gain a new level of understanding about online group communication.

Also, the length of personal sharing could be measured and considered. For instance, some participants share their self-disclosure within 3 minutes while others take up to 10 minutes or more. Others remain completely silent. It would be an interesting study to ask who is sharing what, when, and for how long and to consider if there are some underlying reasons why. This line of questioning could also be applied to other online self-help groups as well.

Another possible study would be to compare the online CoDA meetings to in-person meetings. Questions such as how do the communication norms and levels of self-disclosure compare and contrast between online and in-person meetings would help reveal more insight into the impacts of the CMC environment on results. Is it easier or more difficult to “hide” or be silent in person? Are there differences in personal sharing length or the rhythm of the meeting? Is the after meeting in-person anything like the online after meeting?

These studies could also be applied in other online self-help groups as well. The impacts of CMC on online self-help groups could be looked at from many different angles. Also, this group was free to use and investigating communication norms and self-disclosure in other online self-help groups that have a cost associated with them could be considered. Also, a quantitative study could measure how apt people are to seek online self-help and the reasons why.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have found that the CoDA online self-help groups have some very clear communication norms repeated in all meetings and after meetings as well as repeated and predictable levels of self-disclosure by meeting section in the meetings and after meetings. Meetings depend on the facilitator to keep things on track as without the facilitator the group is like a classroom without an instructor. I believe this is because the facilitator plays a crucial role,
maintaining clear order and meeting structure by leading the three sections (beginning, middle, and end) of the meeting, monitoring hand raising and turn taking, and providing continuous reminders of the background and beliefs of CoDA throughout the meeting. To that end, the social information processing theory is supported as the roles, meeting order and structure, monitoring, and leadership all mimic what we would expect to find in a face-to-face setting. Selection of a user name and optional avatar and emoticon usages are other solid ways to try to reenact in-person communication in CMC.

The meeting participants silently ingest the CoDA background information provided by the facilitator to the extent that they almost ironically become almost codependent on Codependents Anonymous itself. With the underlying structure of the meeting being the CoDA 12 Steps, 12 Traditions, and 12 Promises, participants are then free to self-disclose thoughts and feelings. As the participants hear themselves and others speak, a social construction of reality is developed which is somehow personally healing. The resulting self-disclosure is self-interpreted and validated and ultimately truth is known only within the individual mind. Seemingly, the participants disclosing and listening are filling in the blanks and creating some form of personal understanding by reading between the lines.

I also began to question codependency. I initially selected this self-help group because it was free, accessible, and I felt it would appeal to a wide range of different people. As I learned more about the program and the background of codependency, I began to ask myself questions like what is really wrong with being codependent? Are we not all dependent on others? Being dependent on other people is not something I would definitely consider wrong or unhealthy; I think the learning is that we want to have positive and loving relationships with good people. I think the underlying issues and deeper personal struggles that participants revealed were more of the root causes for their unhappiness and resulting investment in the program, not dependency on
others. It was not about loving too much or being too controlling but rather a deeper issue that needed to be addressed, understood, and handled. I found CoDA to be a great way for these individuals to come to terms with their confidence issues and begin to tackle what is really going on underneath the perceived codependency issue; it is a nice starting place for someone that wants to understand deeper, long standing psychological issues.

The predictability of the meeting structure seemed to enable the meeting to function as an environment for self-disclosure of thoughts and beliefs. With the rules in place, participants could type, or “share,” information readily without worry for someone interrupting or giving them unsolicited advice. This may also allow the participant to feel less pressure, less judgment, and more support. Also, with the facilitator reminding the group members of the CoDA beliefs and principles, the meeting is established as a place of acceptance and respect. This further allows for the meeting attendees to feel they can open up and share deep secrets or experiences without having to fret about someone typing any reactions or comments. Then the after meeting with the lighter conversation topics seemed a place to exhale and let go of the heaviness of the preceding formal meeting.

As I completed this study, I learned that online self-help groups are unique in that there are some very distinct differences from in-person communication. The CMC environment provided a place for participants in the online CoDA meetings to present themselves as they felt most comfortable. The technical abilities to remain visually anonymous, change user names at will, and opt to use or not use avatars provided perceived privacy. As users were faceless and nameless behind a computer, self-identity was unknown except for the pieces they chose to share through self-disclosure. The SIP theory tells us that the online environment is social and that users will find ways to communicate and build social relationships even without the traditional face-to-face cues. This was found in online CoDA meetings as seen with the communication
norms, use of emoticons and avatars, and the established roles of the facilitator and greeter. The structured meeting setting and the rules for communication such as the standard acronyms and communication responses for hand raising, turn taking, and acknowledgement of completed sharing all were evidence of what SIP theory teaches – these were attempts to build the social features of communicating while remaining online.

These rules did tend to shape the levels of self-disclosure that were found in this study and participants as predicted did tend to be hyperpersonal with communicating very personal information. The anonymity of the CMC environment seemed to be the primary reason for this hyperpersonal nature of the self-disclosure. However, once the formal meeting concluded, the hyperpersonal messages discontinued so it was evident that there was more involved than being anonymous. The clear and expected communication norms and rules in the formal meetings and the ritualistic posting of CoDA information to soothe the meeting participants and assure them of the program’s intent to be accepting, tolerant, and patient with disclosure seemed to be the primary reasons for this hyperpersonal nature of the self-disclosure. There was a definite importance of the enforced communication norms that was just as great as both the CMC environmental impact and visual and discursive anonymity for online CoDA meeting participants’ levels of self-disclosure. I welcome others to explore this fertile area in future research to determine if similar findings prove true in other online self-help groups.
Appendix A

Avatar Choices

Can be selected by going to the menu bar “Action,” “Avatar,” and “My Avatar”

These choices then appear.

If user does not go to Action to change the avatar, the default is shown in the chat room.
Appendix B

Chat Room Upon Entering and Selecting an Available Code

Depress the green circle icon and then the below menu of availability choices appears:
Appendix C

Data Collection Worksheet

Field Notes - Day, xx/xx/14: time

My Observations:

Questions:

How is the meeting structured? How are the beginning, middle, and end to the meeting differentiated?

Beginning:

Middle:

End:

Is the meeting facilitated? If so, how?

Are late comers permitted? If so, how are they treated?

Are folks allowed to leave early? If so, how are they treated?

Is there turn taking? How is it managed?

How is sharing permitted?

How many participants attend?

How many participants chat? Are any in attendance but silent?

How do participants react to sharing? Do different participants show different reactions?

Any specific roles? Facilitator and greeter

New members? Repeat members? (remembering the online names can change)

Specific responses that occur prior to, during, concurrently, and after chat posts

Are any expectations violated? (flaming, not following rules, etc.)
After meetings:

Who sticks around? Who joins late?

How does the conversation change from the meeting to the after meeting?

Any host? Specific roles?

Topics discussed?

In the chat transcripts, the levels of self-disclosure observed are highlighted in both the formal meeting and the after meeting as follows: level 1 basic information: orange, level 2 preferences: blue, level 3 beliefs: green, level 4 feelings: pink
Appendix D

Forums and Chat Room Guidelines

Listed below are the rules for engagement in meetings. (Retrieved 2/21/2015 from:

http://www.onlinecoda.net/forums.html)

Forums and Chat Room Guidelines

These guidelines have been written and voted on by a Group Conscience.

Please abide by them so that we all will feel safe here then enter through the button below...

1. **NO SOLICITATION** - Any type of solicitation will be deleted. A warning will be given to the
   member to not post solicitation again and if not agreed upon, the member will be banned. Any
   pornography sites posted will be immediately deleted and the member will be banned with no
   warning.

2. **EMAIL USERS and EMAIL VERIFICATION** - Some members choose to allow their email to
   be accessed through their member profile. This is to be used only for CoDA issues. Please do
   not spam the member list this is a violation of boundaries. The moderators reserve the right to
   maintain a list of all the email users of the site. This list will be kept confidential and used by the
   moderators to send out updates, announcements, membership updates etc. All members who join
   must have a verifiable email address to remain a member and be able to post to the message
   boards. If you sign up with an email address that is not verifiable then you will not be granted
   access to the message boards. During the time of your membership if it is found that your email
   address is no longer active then your membership will be removed. You will be allowed to rejoin
   at any time using a verifiable email address.

3. **BE RESPECTFUL** - You must be respectful of other members in chat and on the message
   boards. Name calling, or profanity directed toward a person will not be tolerated. Blatantly
   offensive posts will be reposted on the "deleted messages" forum with an explanation of why they
were inappropriate. Blatantly offensive posts consist of direct name calling, profanity, yelling or anything that may be considered not conducive to the recovery of the group as a whole and/or other members feeling safe. All moderators will be expected to monitor the board for such offensive posts and it will be up to their discretion what seems offensive and reposted on the deleted messages board. The person posting the offensive post will also be contacted via private message or via email (with cc to all the moderators) to be given a chance to remove his/her own post or address the issue.

4. **CROSSTALK AND GIVING ADVICE**- In Codependents Anonymous we share our personal recovery, experience, strength and hope. We avoid giving advice. The only suggestions and advice accepted would be to direct the person to attend f2f meetings, working the steps, or if the person directly asks for an opinion. *Issues concerning "crosstalk" are not automatically considered "blatantly offensive" and do NOT fall into the category of being deleted from the message board.* Crosstalk guidelines can be interpreted differently by different individuals. Forms of crosstalk *may* include: criticizing, controlling, dominating, minimizing another person's feelings or experiences, giving advice or unsolicited feedback, referring to a person by name. Crosstalk issues should be addressed first between the 2 individuals and if not resolved in a peaceful manner then should be referred to the moderators to be discussed in a group conscience manner via email: moderators@onlinecoda.net

5. **POSTING LINKS**- Posting of links on the message board or in the chat room to other personal recovery sites is not allowed through a group conscience decision. We feel this distracts from our focus here and is against CoDA traditions. We do have a [News and Resources](#) page, if you have a suggestion for an addition to this page please email: moderators@onlinecoda.net
Appendix E

Emoticon Choices

- Depress the smiley face icon and the below menu of emoticon choices appears. When depressing an emoticon and clicking enter, it appears in the chat room.
REFERENCES


http://dare.uva.nl/record/299992.


