Up Close and Hyper-Personal:
The Formation of Hyper-Personal Relationships in Online Support Groups

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Several studies have shown that despite the lack of social cues in online interaction, people have still turned to the Internet to relate with others. This study explores the formation of relationships in the context of online support groups through the analysis of conversations and transcripts from interviews with chatters in an online community for Alzheimer's disease. Walther's theory of hyper-personal relationships was used to describe and explain the formation of different kinds of relationships online. To explore the development of online relationships from impersonal to interpersonal and to hyper-personal, the researchers looked at the motivations, level of participation, topics discussed, and level of disclosure of the chatters in an online support group. The study concludes that through the unique features of online communities (i.e., anonymity, communication styles, and patterns of interaction), the formation of hyper-personal relationships may be formed to substitute or even surpass face-to-face relationships.

The Internet has revolutionized the way people interact as it can transcend geographical and cultural borders. Its accessibility has resulted in the (re)surfacing of diverse kinds of virtual communities. Its ability to personalize information enables it to satisfy the specific needs of different people (Williams & Rice, 1983 in Barnes, 2003). Moreover, its structural features increase the probability of people with common

interests to find each other, get support from each other, and belong to a community (Wellman & Gulia, 1999 in Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

Several studies show that people in virtual communities act in a manner similar to the way people in face-to-face communities do (Barnes, 2003; Hine, 2000; Stone, 1995). However, virtual communication has two features that distinguish it from face-to-face communication. First, the absence of social cues (such as gender, ethnicity, race, age, socioeconomic status, or physical appearance) benefits those people who are discriminated against due to these cues (Harasim, 1993). Second, the nature of virtual communities allows for the anonymity needed when talking about stigmatizing topics (White & Dorman, 2001). Because of this anonymity, people are able to disclose more fully their inner feelings and true selves (Tao, 2001). This does not mean, however, that computer-mediated communication (CMC) is always truthful and honest. There could be deception and manipulation in a text-based communication. However, although a person communicating online may use false personas, Tao (2001) argued that "these are also part of a person's true self" (para. 33).

Virtual Communities and Online Support Groups

Rheingold's (1993) definition of a virtual community best suits this study:

> Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. Community seems to refer primarily to relations of commonality between persons and objects, and only rather imprecisely to the site of such community. What is important is a holding-in common of qualities, properties, identities or ideas (5).

Rheingold (1993) believed that a virtual community is a "response to the hunger for community that has followed the disintegration of traditional communities around the world" (62). Ridings and Gefen (2004) concurred, saying that virtual communities are "filling in the social void in conventional communities" (Implications section, para. 1).

Online support groups are one of the rapidly proliferating virtual communities. These groups can use chat rooms wherein interactions among members take place synchronously or in real-time. They can also utilize asynchronous channels such as bulletin or message boards where participants can post and read messages anytime, or through Listservs, wherein every member subscribes to receive emails regarding the community (Colon, 2001).

Walstrom (2000) noted that, "for those with easy access to the Internet, online support groups provide inexpensive, 24-hour, relatively anonymous avenues to information and support" (765). Moreover, according to Bakardjieva and Smith (2001), socializing in the internet due to life events such as sickness, unemployment, and retirement, can create the following consequences in the real lives of users: "restraint from suicide, break-up of an abusive marriage, and self preservation" (73). Walstrom (2000) also found that "online support groups benefits also entail reduced: dependency needs on caretakers, communication apprehension, access to social status markers, and mobility barriers to participation" (770).

A review of the studies on the effects of online support groups showed that there is little (or none at all) evidence on the "health benefits of virtual communities and peer to peer online support" (Eysenbach, Powell, Englesakis, Rizo, & Stern, 2004, Discussion section, para. 1). Eysenbach et al., (2004) argued, however, that such negative conclusions of previous studies can be attributed to the lack of rigorous studies on online support groups since doing such studies give no financial and

professional benefits. In response to Eysenbach et al., (2004), Barak, Grohol and Pector (2004) asserted that online support groups have a significant impact on their users and these "may be an effective means of relief, but not as an isolated remedy" (para. 2).

The Development of Online Relationships

Online personal relationships develop when the individuals "come to depend on each other more deeply and in more complex ways" (Parks & Floyd, 1996 in Chenault, 1998, Invisible Friends and Lovers section, para. 6). Several studies have identified the factors that determine the nature and extent of relationships that are formed online. Two such factors are 1) the frequency of visiting and time spent online; and 2) the orientation of the virtual communities (Hellerstein, 1985 and Parks & Floyd, 1996 in Chenault, 1998; Utz, 2000). Very active users pursued their online relationships offline or in the "real" world. Moreover, their interactions resulted in the discussion of more diverse topics and the use of communication channels other than the Internet.

Online relationships can be described according to several dimensions: the level of interdependence, the breadth and depth of interaction, the changes in communication codes, the degree of predictability, understanding and commitment to the other person, and the convergence to other networks (Parks & Floyd, 1996). Online relationship formation can also be cyclical—where liking leads to revealing and revealing leads to more liking of the person to whom the information was disclosed (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958 in Chenault, 1998). The process of disclosure eventually leads to building trust and permits further disclosure, ultimately leading to a relational closeness that can transcend normal relationships.

Walther (1996 in Kim, 2000) asserted that the development of relationship in a virtual community can be

perceived as a continuing interaction (which intensifies feedback) among participants. In this interaction, it is necessary for the participants to understand other people's behavior towards them because it can help them assess whether they should disclose information to the people they are interacting with (Mehrabian, 1981 in Chenault, 1998). Trust and commitment are also salient elements. Whitty and Gavin (2001) noted that "allowing someone to know your email, then your phone number and finally your address, represents increasing levels of trust and commitment in the relationship and in one's online partner" (625). Skepticism towards CMC and the sociability of an individual were predictors of online relationship formation (Utz, 2000). "If individuals do not believe that it is possible to express feelings in CMC or to become acquainted with others in virtual worlds, they refrain from doing so," according to Utz (2000, Discussion, para. 3). Moreover, Utz's study supported previous studies which argued that the Internet provides a venue for people to overcome their shyness.

Stages of Formation of Online Relationships

Different kinds of relationship can emerge online ranging from the "cold, professional encounter, to hot, intimate rendezvous" (Chenault, 1998, An Introduction to CMC and Emotion section, para. 2). Walther (1996 in Turner et al., 2001) asserted that online venues as CMC environments can foster relationships that range from the impersonal to interpersonal to the more hyper-personal.

Impersonal relationships focus primarily on performing certain tasks rather than on developing relationships with others. In contrast, friendly and casual interactions between and among users characterize interpersonal relationships. When individuals disclose more intimate details about their lives and consequently forge stronger bonds, a hyper-personal relationship develops between or among people online (Walther, 1996 in Turner et al., 2001).

Hyper-personal relationships develop when individuals who do not personally know each other create idealized perceptions about the persons they talk to through personality cues present online (Walther, 1996 in McDowell, 2001). In online communication, people are allowed to have optimized self-presentations, i.e., to create and present more favorable identities, leading others to create a more positive impression towards them (McDowell, 2001). In turn, the absence of nonverbal cues enables them to suspend their judgments and prejudices towards the other chatters. The distance and safety in CMC also help create hyper-personal relationships because these characteristics allow people to disclose more than they would in face-to-face relationships (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997 in McDowell, 2001). Consequently, such relationships are seen as deeper than what people get from real interactions.

Walther (1996) clarified, however, that while CMC environments could potentially create hyper-personal relationships, they did not live up equally to this potential since an "optimal match" must be created (in Kim, 2000). Certain contexts provide an optimal match for hyper-personal relationships to develop because a specific type of stress should be matched by certain forms of support (Curtona & Rusell, 1990 in Turner et al., 2001). Online support groups, in particular, foster hyper-personal relationships because of the perceived common life experience that guides users' term of interaction, disclosure and trust-formation (Walther, 1996 in McDowell, 2001).

Research Problem

Health is the focus of some of the most visible and most important support groups online. *Google.com* lists about 500 health-related online support groups ("Health support groups," 2007) while *Dmoz.org* lists 324 ("Health-related support groups," 2007). Health-related support groups are important because they

render mutual aid and self-help for people afflicted with chronic ailments, life-threatening illnesses, and other dependency issues (White & Dorman, 2001). The primary purpose of these groups is to serve as a venue for people with similar problems to meet and share their thoughts, experiences, and knowledge. Given these features of health-related online support groups, this research determined whether this particular context provides an optimal match for the creation of hyper-personal relationships as coined by Walther (1996 in Turner et al., 2001). That is, this study used this particular context to answer the research question:

RQ: How are hyper-personal relationships formed in online support groups?

The possibility of forming a relationship online, which may exceed the depth of face-to-face relationships, will help establish the utility of these support groups to people who are in need of care and support.

Study Framework

To reiterate, hyper-personal relationships can potentially be formed through online communications due to: "a) [an] idealized perception of receiver [and] b) [an] optimized self-presentation of sender" (Walther, 1996 in Turner et al., 2001: 235). Walther (1994) focused on online groups with asynchronous channels (e.g. forums) and found that such channels provide a context for real relationships to develop since people are given time to read, reflect and optimize their conversations with others. This study, on the other hand, focused on online groups that are *synchronous,* which may likewise facilitate hyper-personal relationships since chatters can communicate in "real" time. Using Walther's theory on the formation of hyper-personal relationships through optimal matching, this study endeavored

to understand how hyper-personal relationships develop in online support groups. In connection with this, the study examined the chatters' communication styles and patterns of interaction to understand the kinds of relationships they were able to form in the context of computer-mediated communications. The study also looked at the motivations and levels of participation of the chatters and the particular characteristics of the health-related online support group —all of which may affect the level of self-disclosure, comfortability and trust, and the content of the disclosed messages.

Levels of relationships as determined by chatters' motivations, levels of interaction, and self-disclosure

The process of forming relationships starts once the chatter decides to participate in the online community. Motivations guide the chatters' decisions as to which community they would join and how long they would stay in that community. In a health-related online support group, for instance, motivations for joining may range from getting information, sharing knowledge, sympathizing with others, to finding companionship and acceptance. Shared topics are determined by the kinds of needs they seek from the chat room. When their expectations are met, the chatters may be encouraged to increase their level of participation in the chat room. As the chatters' increase interactions with the members and realize that the group is able to provide things other than support and information, they obtain a new purpose for visiting the chat room—to create interpersonal relationships with the other members. Through continuous interaction and communication, topics discussed change and levels of self-disclosure increase.

A hyper-personal relationship is developed when chatters continue to increase the frequency and length of their participation in the online community. They also become motivated to initiate and maintain genuine and deep

relationships with the other chatters. As the interactions increase, the topics that the chatters share with each other and their level of self-disclosure also increase. Eventually, their online personal disclosure will exceed that in face-to-face interactions.

*Context of online support groups as an optimal match
for the formation of hyper-personal relationships*

The context of online support groups makes possible the formation of hyper-personal relationships by increasing and enhancing chatters' motivations, level of participation, and level of self-disclosure. The anonymity, perceived common identity among the chatters, idealized perception of receiver, optimized self-presentation of sender, and the synchronous characteristics of online support group chat rooms provides one of the best venues for people to feel comfortable in disclosing more personal information to other chatters, which can ultimately lead to the development of hyper-personal relationships. The specified characteristics of CMC leading to hyper-personal relationships are recognized to exist in online support groups (see Figure 1).
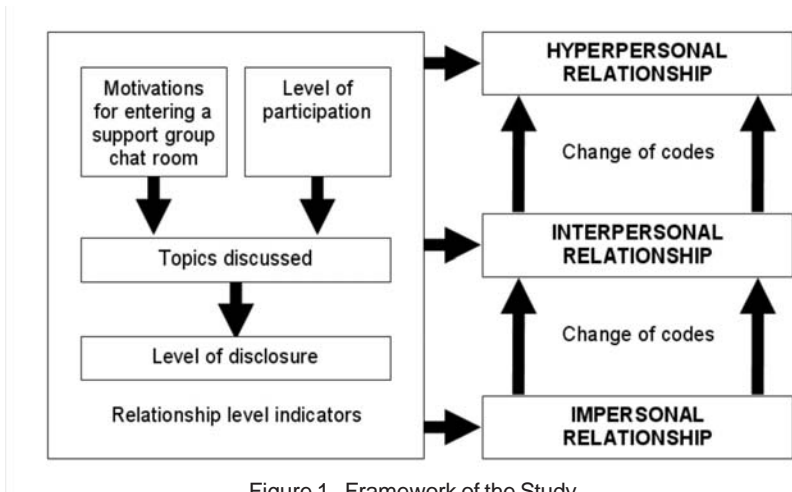

Figure 1. Framework of the Study

Methodology

An online support group for Alzheimer's Disease (AD) patients and their caregivers was chosen as this study's specific case because unlike other online support groups, this group does not require individuals to register to be able to enter and participate in the chat room. The group can be accessed in http://www.alzinfo.org/community/index.asp.

Alzheimer's Community is only one of the services offered by the Fisher's Center for Alzheimer's Disease, a foundation for AD. It is an international interactive community divided into message boards and chat rooms. Of these, the study focused on a chat room for AD patients and caregivers. Based on Grohol (2001), the AD chat room fits a "quality online support group" where the members are "caring and compassionate," i.e. when people enter the chat room either as guests or members, they are welcomed warmly by the others. Members are also "active and vibrant" and foster a "true sense of community." Many of the chatters go online everyday to get updates on each other's lives. Although some may not return after chatting more than once, many of the chatters in the AD chat room have been chatting for six years, i.e., since the chat room's establishment.

Units of analysis

The study focused on two primary units of analysis: transcripts of online interactions among the chatters and interviews of caregiver and patient chatters, which were conducted to obtain information on the deeper meaning of the chatters' online interactions. Conversation transcripts were gathered between January and February 2007. The researchers disclosed their intentions of conducting a study about online support groups the first time they chatted there. They also secured consent from the moderator and the chatters to observe interactions in the chat room.

Since the chat room is open to all (AD patients, caregivers, and others who are curious of the AD disease), the study sample consisted of AD patients and caregivers. Before conducting actual online focused interviews, the researchers made acquaintances and chatted casually for three weeks to make the resident chatters comfortable with their presence and to ensure the chatters' participation in the interviews. For the eight online focused interviews, convenience sampling was used. The interviewees were individuals regularly chatting during the times the researchers visited the chat room. The interviewees have also expressed their willingness to participate in the research. Their usernames were changed to protect their privacy.

The participants varied in terms of the duration and the frequency of chatting in the support group. Interviewees who have been members of the online support group for more than a year already were classified as "long-timers"; those who have been in the chat room for less than a year, as "newbies". Those who chatted for at least five hours a day were further classified as "heavy" chatters while those who chatted for less than five hours a day were considered "light" chatters.

The interviews were conducted in February 2007. Online interviews were supposed to be scheduled, but the moderator requested that the interview guide be sent to her and she volunteered to forward it to the willing participants. Once the emailed answers to the interview guide were received, chat dates for further probing were set. Actual interviews were accomplished in the "privacy" of one of the rooms, and through *Yahoo! Messenger*.

Concepts and indicators

To understand the kinds of relationships formed in the chat room, the researchers focused on two major concepts: 1) the chatters' communication styles and patterns of interaction; and 2) the chatters' perceived relationships with the other members of the online support group.

The communication styles and patterns of interaction of the chatters (as manifested in the words they use) were indicated by the following: a) the tone and attitude of the chatters when communicating with others, b) the topics discussed by the chatters, c) the way they showed support and comfort for each other, d) the information that they disclosed with the other chatters, e) their greetings, acknowledgments of and terms for each other; and f) the manner by which they welcomed new members.

To determine the relationship of the chatters with the other members, the following indicators were examined: the chatters' a) motivations and reasons for staying and participating in the online community, b) level of participation (measured by the length of time they spent chatting each time they logged in and the frequency of their visits), c) level of disclosure and intimacy with the other chatters, d) knowledge and familiarity with the personal lives of the other chatters, e) the topics they chose to discuss with each other, f) level of comfortableness with each other, g) the perception of support, comfort and companionship that they received from each other, and h) the formation of close affiliations within the online community.

For both concepts, the analysis focused on identifying the relevant patterns and themes from the chatters' online conversations and answers in the interview.

Limitations

This study only looked into the motivations of chatters for entering an online chat room support group and how these motivations, within the context of the group, facilitate relationship formation and development. There may be other motivations leading to the development of hyper-personal relationships. Further, the development of hyper-personal relationships in other online contexts may vary from the way it develops in a health-related support group.

During the course of the research, conflict surfaced among some chatters. This stemmed from the desire of some AD patients to form a chat room that would not be accessible to caregivers. Since the study was primarily concerned with the development of relationships and not their "un-development", the researchers did not involve themselves in this issue. In doing so, other "kinds" of interactions might have been overlooked, thus the study is limited to the formation of positive relationships.

Because the study focused on the formation of relationships among chatters, the researchers did not consider them as dissimilar units to be analyzed. Also, differences in the motivations and perceptions of the patients and caregivers were not noted, although these could have provided further insights with regard to the formation of different kinds of relationships.

Lastly, factors other than the informants' interactions in the chat room that influenced their motivations for visiting the chat rooms were not taken into account.

Results and Discussion

Profile of chatters

The informants in the international AD chat room were a mix of AD patients and caregivers who resided in Canada, Britain and Australia. Eight informants were interviewed; four were AD patients and the other four were AD caregivers. Their ages ranged from 40 years to 65 years. Most have joined community AD support groups but have found the online support group "more helpful and supportive" than face-to-face support groups available in their communities.

Initial motivation of chatters

The informants discovered the online support group through different online search engines. Since their doctors did not fully disclose information about AD, the informants decided to find details about it on their own. In the course of searching for information about AD from the Internet, they came across the online support group. Some of them encountered the chat room through other links from online acquaintances or through other online support groups that they have been previously affiliated with.

There were a variety of reasons why the chatters joined the AD chat room. Patients and caregivers alike enlisted in the chat room to find support. They sought individuals going through similar experiences with whom they can share the experiences and difficulties they have encountered or were encountering. As *XSnowladyX* explained: "No matter how hard you try, it is impossible to relay to someone else what you are feeling and going through, unless they too are going through the same thing."

Some preferred chatting online because of its accessibility. As *XSnowmanX* pointed out, it is more convenient to join an online support group since it can be accessed within the confines of their homes while caring for the AD patients. Other AD patients looked for a support group where they can interact with others on a daily basis without fear of being ridiculed or talked about behind their backs. One of the informants added that joining an online support group served informational purposes. *XQueenX* said that online support groups provide 24-hour support compared to support groups in her area that meet only once a month.

Initial interaction: Formation of impersonal relationships

First-time chatters usually discussed and disclosed information about topics that were closely related with, if not exclusively about AD, such as at what age the patient was diagnosed and how long he or she has been dealing with AD.

A caregiver-chatter usually focused on the diagnosis of the patient: the age of the patient during diagnosis and the nature of the caregiver's relationship with the patient. On the other hand, a patient-chatter talked about how long he or she has been diagnosed, the stage of dementia he or she is in now, and the medications he or she has taken or is currently taking.

In this "getting-to-know" stage the newbie typically answered and asked only AD-related questions. Chatters were warm but were still cautious in answering and asking questions. Jokes were not yet cracked. Initial interaction of members with other long time chatters could be characterized as *impersonal*, with the long-timers asking and answering questions related to the task of the support group, which is to provide support and information for people.

According to the interviewees, the topics they discussed initially were more general, and limited to issues about AD. *XJBX* asserted, however, that after conversing about general details, if the newbie still stayed, discussion moved on to other issues that were not exclusively about AD.

XFurX related that the first time she entered the chat room, she was immediately greeted by everybody and asked whether she was a caregiver or patient. The first thing she disclosed was her age and her diagnosis. It was easy for her to do so since the other chatters created a welcoming atmosphere. Long timers showed support by asking more details about the problem, offering advice, saying that she was perfectly understood there, offering ways to cope, and relaying information afterwards.

The emotional assistance shown by the members and the warm, caring atmosphere they created help new chatters to feel comfortable, facilitating ease of disclosure. The level of participation of newbies afterwards was determined by whether or not their expectations were fulfilled during the initial interaction. Although the frequency and length of chatters' stay may increase the range of topics discussed, the purpose for visiting the chat room still largely affected the level of disclosure, determining the kind of information the chatter was willing to share.

Motivations of chatters for succeeding interactions

If the chatters decide to continue chatting, their primary motivations of gaining information and/or support are supplemented with the motivation of having friendly relationships and casual conversations with the people. One of the informants, *XTexasX*, said that the experience of being welcomed every time he entered the chat room motivated him to keep coming back.

All the informants affirmed that the overall initial impression of the chat room played a decisive role in their choice to continue chatting. The hospitable nature of the chat room encouraged the chatters to stay and maintain their affiliation with the AD chat room.

Succeeding interactions: Formation of interpersonal relationship

Chatters visited the chat room and interacted with the other chatters frequently because they felt that the room could give them more than information and support. Formerly living in Australia, *XSnowmanX,* for example, has been going back to the AD chat room to talk about the country with an Australian chatter. During this stage where the range of topics increases, the level of disclosure changes as newbies become more familiar,

comfortable and trusting of the other chatters. Chatters deviate from the "defined" flow of initial interaction. Some topics are still AD-related but the bulk of discussion is composed of other details. The interviewees all related that they began to "loosen up" and discuss issues not directly related to AD, sharing more personal experiences with some chatters, as they continued chatting.

The newbies now give advice to other chatters, unlike before when they only received it. They also begin to feel at ease and share day-to-day life events as well as things of common interest like movies, books, animals, and food. They also begin to feel comfortable such that they joke with and about others (in the chat room) and the disease. One informant disclosed that in his succeeding interactions, he was able to share personal experiences with his wife to other chatters. However, emotionally-laden topics were not yet disclosed. As *XPearlX* said, no matter how open she was, she did not disclose her personal problems to all the chatters there.

Rather than just acknowledging other chatters by their usernames, some chatters address those they are familiar with differently, calling them by their first names or their nicknames (shortened usernames in this case). Greetings are no longer just plain hi-hellos but may be based on previous conversations. For example, *XJBX* inquired about how *XSnowladyX*'s particular event turned out, demonstrating knowledge about the other chatter. Some of the chatters also make it a point to "have coffee or tea together," describing even the process of making a cup for the chatter.

The changes, both in breadth and depth of topics discussed, imply a relationship exceeding the impersonal level. Heavy chatters have better chances of forming interpersonal relationships than lighter ones. Again, their motivations are strong determinants of the kind of relationships they will eventually form in the chat room.

Formation of hyper-personal relationships

As the chatters visited the chat room more frequently, they started to view the other people in the room as important people in their lives. As one informant related:

> *XFurX*: I have a very close tight knit group of friends... they call me their 'daughter'... I have some members that I will talk about very personal stuff, that I won't disclose with other members. These are people that I truly trust and have worked hard to develop that level of trust with them.

Aside from day-to-day life events, the chatters shared problems that were not related to AD with particular chatters when the others are not around. Topics became more intimate and personal, such as the status of a car loan or an accident a chatter was involved in. The moods of conversations were more varied than the impersonal and interpersonal relationships; they could be very humorous and later be quite serious. Conversations were more fluid, with topics changing from time to time. Most of the informants said that they can express themselves more openly to their virtual friends than their "normal" friends.

In this stage, the primary motivation is to maintain and strengthen the bonds formed. Real friendships as perceived by the chatter are created. Chatters also now consider each other as "family". *XJBX* calls one chatter his "cyberdaughter" while *XSnowladyX* calls *XJBX* her best friend even though they have not met in person.

These relationships exceed face-to-face relationships, as the chatters confessed. According to them, they just found themselves more open to certain people in the chat room than those in their homes. They also began to see the ties formed online as more enduring than offline relationships or that the

online relationships as more "genuine" than others formed offline since when they chat, their online friends are always there for them, consistently chatting with them and supporting them through soothing words. Some interviewees also noted that after having the disease, their "offline" friends started to move away from them, and family members refused to help them. The online support group filled the void left by their old friends and family members.

> *XSnowladyX*: One young lady who's [sic] Mom also has EOAD [Early Onset of AD] has become like a daughter to me. Another gentleman who looks after his wife has become like a brother to me. A number of the ladies also diagnosed, have become like good sisters to me. We have a very caring and supporting relationship. Sheesh...without these friends, I don't know where I'd be, probably sitting in a corner in a depression. When the doctor tells you you have a deadly disease that is going to kill you, and here are some pills to slow it down a bit, what do you think? You think: "OK XSnowladyX, time to curl up and die." It wasn't till I found my friends here, that I discovered I have a whole bunch of living to do.

Walther (1996 in Kim, 2000) explained that the patterns of true human interaction online unfold in a long-term period. The development of relationship in a virtual community can be perceived as a continuing interaction among participants that entails a longer process of building relationship within a virtual community. One of the interviewees claimed that time was a factor in relationship formation.

> *XClockX*: The length of time I spend here helps in forming relationships. The more you know about them, the closer you are to them.

Chatters who were previously light chatters became heavy chatters after forming hyper-personal relationships. According to *XPillX*, if she could not, she made sure that she connected with the others by sending emails to her chat buddies for support or updates on how their days went.

Environment fostering hyper-personal relationships

The structure of the chat room contributed to the relatively easy formation of beneficial relationships.

In most virtual communities, chatters need to register a username to be able to log in and access the chat rooms. But in the AD chat room, users can log in as guests without having to remember a password. After signing in, chatters may enter one of the five chat rooms. Canned messages such as "*XSnowladyX is your moderator*" as well as "*Please visit the Alzheimer's website*" automatically appear in regular intervals. The chatters in the room are also notified whenever a person enters or leaves the room. Anyone entering the chat room is seen as soon as he or she enters any room in the site. Chatters are greeted and welcomed immediately by all chatters in the room. They cannot use invisible mode to avoid being seen by other chatters, unlike what happens in other chat sites.

Users can choose avatars, or pictures placed before their name. On the right bar of the chatting area is a list of chatters in the room. Users can also tell if a person they are talking to is typing a message or has gone idle. They are also free to set the font color and size and use emoticons and flash emotions for further ease of identification and self-expression. One interviewee disclosed that she uses flash emotions for humor, flavor, and easier understanding. The chat room has given these chatters liberty to express a parcel of their "true selves". They can also send private messages to each other, or view other chatters' profiles. They can also view the conversation history

to find out what topics were discussed before they entered. Conversations in the public log are there for that day only.

It was evident that the environment of the online support group provided an optimal match for the creation of hyper-personal relationships. The online support group facilitated the development of hyper-personal relationships because of the following: it provided a venue for anonymity; it allowed the creation of idealized perception of the other chatters; it facilitated the development of optimized self-presentation; and it utilized a synchronous channel. These characteristics were important for chatters to become more motivated to be a part of the online community and to disclose more intimate details to the other chatters.

When they decided to join an online support group, the chatters already had an idealized notion of the kind of people they would meet. In the AD support group, they expected that members are more understanding, sensitive and attentive to their needs, and supportive because they more or less go through the same things. Their experiences of the disease, either as patients or caregivers, give rise to common life experiences. Since chatters do not see each other face-to-face and they can choose to remain anonymous, CMC provides an environment for the creation of idealized perceptions and optimized self-presentation. While chatting, they create images and personality representations of the other chatters in their minds. This makes the other communicators seem more caring and supportive than they might otherwise be in person, encouraging the chatters to disclose more.

> *XLipX*: You form your own pictures in your mind and most are pictured as kind folks who need help or who want to help. These are folks who either care for someone with dementia or have dementia and need a friendly screen name. As long as one is treated with kindness there is no need for pictures. It is the

> nature of the disease that makes you reach out and find comfort from those going through or from those who have been through this.

The chatters' optimized self-presentations are closely related with the creation of idealized perceptions of the other chatters. Since the online group has supportive members willing to share information, the chatters present themselves similarly to "fit in" and to reciprocate the support given to them. The online community, being a support group, influenced them to be "helpful". As McDowell (2001) has posited, in CMC, one can project a more favorable personality because of the lack of nonverbal cues. For some however, there is a need to go beyond chatting online. Pictures, email addresses and telephone numbers are exchanged. Some are also able to see each other face-to-face. However, face-to-face interactions with other chatters do not indicate that those who decide to only chat online have not formed hyper-personal relationships. The interviewees expressed that they do not need to see each other personally (offline) to know that the online relationships they have formed are true.

Another important contextual consideration for the development of hyper-personal relationships is the synchronistic characteristic of the chat room. Because interaction happens in real time, members feel that they are actually talking to another person in the convenience of their own homes. Immediate feedback is given. The international chat room assures that chatter gets 24-hour help from different people. Compared to other support groups available offline, online communities are easily accessible.

Conclusion

The study shed light on the development of relationships in the context of an online support group and demonstrated that virtual communities can foster genuine relationships and even have the potential to supersede face-to-face relationships. Appropriating Walther's theory of hyper-personal relationships in CMC (1996), the study has explored the different kinds of relationships formed online. The study was able to confirm the development of online relationships from impersonal to hyper-personal as asserted by Walther (1996). The progression of relationship formation from impersonal to interpersonal and finally to hyper-personal is facilitated by and manifested through the topics the chatters discuss with one another, their level of self-disclosure, their level of comfort, their level of trust, and the changes in the communication patterns and codes they use in each stage of the relationship.

The participants' initial motivations to join an online community are to gain support and obtain information, forming an impersonal relationship. At this stage, the chatters are more detached. Though the other chatters are warm and welcoming, the newbie does not disclose emotionally-laden topics offhand. When the initial expectations are fulfilled, the chatters are motivated to create friendly relations and conduct casual conversation with other chatters. This interpersonal stage is then characterized by a broader range of topics and an increased level of disclosure. This eventually paves the way for the hyper-personal stage of the relationship, characterized by an increased level of disclosure and discussion of more intimate and personal topics. People in the chat room become important individuals in the chatters' lives.

The study's findings ascertain that the context of online support groups could provide an optimal match for the development of hyper-personal relationships. The characteristics of an online environment such as anonymity, perceived

common identity, optimized presentation of self and the synchronicity of the channel of interaction foster the development of a deep and genuine relationship that can even exceed face-to-face relationships.

The formation of hyper-personal relationships is determined largely by the chatters' motivations and level of participation in the online support group. From the early motivations of finding information and people with the same life experiences, to casually relating everyday experiences, they now have the primary motivation of maintaining the strong bonds. The information on Alzheimer's Disease become secondary only. Chatters feel the strong urge to "be there" for these online friends. A way of further strengthening the bonds is to chat as frequently as possible. Heavy chatters are more able to develop hyper-personal relationships than light chatters. It could also be said that those who now have hyper-personal relationships become heavy chatters, from starting off as light chatters. Creation of hyper-personal relationships does not necessitate participants to meet face-to-face, as confirmed by the chatters. The fact that the needs of the chatters are fulfilled online is enough for them to maintain the relationship online.

Implications and Recommendations

The contextual factors recognized by Walther as important elements in the formation of hyper-personal relationships were validated by this study. Future studies can help enrich the theory by examining other virtual communities to determine whether or not these environments also provide an optimal match for the creation of hyper-personal relationships and develop in the same manner as online support groups. As this study did not delve into the varying motivations of patients and caregivers, future studies on health-related online support groups might consider looking deeper into the two groups' differing

motivations that may have an impact on online relationship formation.

Suler (n.d.) has pointed that online text relationships "may be more optimal for the person" especially when that individual "may not be able to understand face-to-face nonverbal cues, may be overwhelmed by complex and especially emotional nonverbal stimulation during in-person encounters" or traumatized by face-to-face interactions. This study's findings have shown that indeed, people with diseases that prevent them from socializing outside are given new venues to find support and information from the Internet, provided that these sites or chat rooms are moderated and set up by legitimate institutions or individuals. Because of their accessibility and the first-hand information from the patients, online support groups also benefit caregivers who are required to be with the patients most of the time.

Although this study substantiated the formation of hyper-personal relationship as indicated by the chatters' pattern of interaction and fostered through the context of online support group, cultural context, deemed to have great impact on relationship formation, was not taken into account. Thus there is a need to situate the process of relationship formation vis-à-vis cultural context of the Filipinos.

In the Philippines, the lack of alternative venues (both offline and online) to interact and find support other than the immediate family is evidenced by the dearth of health-related support groups in the country. This situation may be attributed to two factors. First, many of the elderly Filipinos are not adept in using new communication technologies. This is a manifestation of the digital divide phenomenon, which pertains to the "perceived gap between those who have access to the latest information technologies and those who do not" (Compaine, 2001). In developing countries such as Philippines, the elderly are among the societal groups that are less computer-literate (Cullen, 2002). In developed countries, however, special

attention is given to the older population in terms of computer education (The 2007 E-Readiness Rankings, 2007). The online chat room explored in the study is predominantly comprised of chatters residing in developed countries such as Australia, Britain and Canada. That is why the sustenance of the online support group is feasible.

Second, the high-context culture of the Philippine society influences Filipino communication preference. Generally, Filipinos feel more comfortable interacting face-to-face as compared to computer-mediated communication because of the availability of non-verbal cues (DERP, 2006). It would be interesting to see whether Filipinos with high-context culture may be able to develop hyper-personal relationships online, where nonverbal cues are not available, if the Internet were made accessible to more people.

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