
Stigma in Supportive Online Spaces: Special Challenges for Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

Digital well-being is especially crucial for marginalized populations who may not have access to social support offline. However, while supportive spaces online may help contribute to the over well-being of marginalized individuals, these spaces can also become sources of stress in and of themselves, especially those who have stigmatized identities within already marginalized populations. To better understand how supportive spaces online both do and do not support the well-being of doubly marginalized people online, we conducted an eight week Asynchronous Research Community with 27 non-monosexual individuals to understand the sociotechnical characteristics of supportive and non-supportive spaces online. Our results suggest that future community spaces should be designed with an eye towards supporting strong moderation and codes of conduct in order to mitigate the potential harms for doubly marginalized people. Future designs for digital well-being should take into account the human cost of maintaining community spaces that allow for personal growth.

KEYWORDS

digital well-being; supportive spaces; stigma; research results

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INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of this proposal, we understand digital well-being as the state of being content and comfortable with the role that technology occupies in an individual's life. As with other aspects of health, this requires a balance of boundaries, behaviors, and goals that is unique to each individual's circumstances and context. Currently, we tend to view digital well-being through a detractive lens, ensuring well-being by lessening the role of technology in one's life. However, for some people, particularly those from marginalized groups, online spaces may be some of the only socially supportive spaces available to them [5]. Thus, the ability to exist in these spaces is crucial for digital well-being. For these groups, reducing the role of technology may have unintended adverse impacts. At the same time, participating in nominally-supportive online spaces may not have an exclusively positive impact. For people with who have stigmatized identities within already marginalized populations (e.g., bisexuals within the larger LGBTQ+ community), some supportive spaces may still be the site of implicit and explicit negative interactions, decreasing their supportive benefits in the long-term [2, 3, 11]. To better understand the factors that influence the complex interplay of technical affordances and social norms at play in nominally supportive spaces online, we conducted the following study. With this deeper understanding of how vulnerable users can derive benefit from access to online spaces, we can better recognize and design for how online community spaces contribute to overall digital well-being.

STUDY DETAILS

Stigmatization from outside groups alone can already have serious effects on LGBTQ+ well-being, ranging from decreased engagement with the health care system [1] to decreases in self-efficacy [4] and life satisfaction [15], which can in turn have long-term effects on physical and mental health [7, 14]. For those whose intersectional identities can also be impacted by intragroup stigma, such as those who identify as non-monosexual (e.g., bisexual, pansexual, and queer individuals) and face stigma from straight and monosexual queer people alike, these effects can be even more pronounced [6, 10]. As such, non-monosexual populations, and especially those with even more layered identities (e.g., bisexual nonbinary people) have an extra incentive to carefully manage disclosure of their potentially intragroup-stigmatized identities, even within online spaces that may broadly be considered supportive for queer people [2]. Understanding how intragroup stigma can be enabled and amplified by the technical structures and pre-existing behavioral norms of online spaces is crucial to understanding and mitigating intragroup stigmatization while increasing the benefits of engaging with affirming online communities, such as social support and increased resiliency.

In order to address these issues, we conducted an eight-week Asynchronous Remote Community [13] study via Facebook group with a diverse population of 27 individuals who identify as

non-monosexual. Each week had a core prompt, spanning methods from diary writing to visual elicitation, and the entire data collection period was followed up by in-depth interviews. Additionally, participants interacted with one another within the Facebook group, allowing for observation of relevant group dynamics.

Our results point towards the role of moderation and codes of conduct that specifically address doubly-stigmatized communities in whether an online space is positive for participants' mental health. In particular, the presence of strong, well-coordinated advocates as moderators and as educators provided protection and a sense of exploratory freedom to those whose identities were most stigmatized (e.g. non-binary individuals). Additionally, participating in these online spaces can force a decision between being an advocate for one's identity or protecting one's own mental health. Being an advocate often opens people up to more possibilities for negative mental health outcomes. However, protecting their own mental health, usually by self-censoring, negates many of the protective benefits of participating in a so-called supportive space. This is a crucial tension, and appears to be an additional source of stress for highly stigmatized individuals.

Our findings contribute to the literature on how the well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals is impacted not just by the social interactions they have online, but by the combination of the technical structures they take place in and the group dynamics fostered by these online infrastructures. Additionally, these findings complicate our understandings of how the interactions that take place in nominally supportive online spaces might influence LGBTQ+ social media users overall well-being, beyond more obvious bullying behaviors. Finally, these findings provide an in-depth approach to the underserved bisexual and nonbinary communities, as the literature on computing's impact on LGBTQ+ well-being thus far has been focused on cisgender gay men [8, 9, 12].

FUTURE OF ONLINE WELL-BEING

Digital well-being requires balance, and this balance will look different for everyone. For some, it may necessitate significantly higher proportion of time spent in online spaces than for others. However, this time spent in online spaces will continue to harm well-being if we cannot better understand how to shape online spaces to support constructive conflict and personal growth, rather than the more negative interactions that tend to proliferate in spaces left unchecked. To achieve the necessary balance for digital well-being, people will need access to a variety of technological tools, but also, we will need to better understand how to shape and support the social norms and behaviors necessary to mitigate the potential negative impacts of being online. The future of digital well-being will have a better understanding of how online spaces fit in to the fabrics of our social lives. In the coming years, digital well-being will encompass not only how we do and do not spend time with our devices, but also a nuanced understanding of the trade-offs necessary to make supportive spaces a functional part of digital well-being practices.

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