

Discuss Issues With Strangers Online, Why Do We Do It?  
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### Abstract

**Objective:** The objective is to provide an analysis of the characteristics that make an important contribution to opening up and talking about problems in an Online Support Group (OSG). Four aspects of OSG have been selected: recognition in other stories, lower costs in comparison to traditional, face-to-face support groups, higher levels of anonymity in regard to traditional support groups or support from family, and the accessibility of an online forum.

**Method:** Participants were OSG users ( $N = 117$ ,  $M_{age} = 35.61$ ,  $SD = 12.48$ ), which consisted of 27% males and 73% females. To investigate what the influence of the four variables is on Opening up, a survey has been used. **Results:** Some variables show high correlations. However, only Recognition shows a significant influence on Opening up ( $p = .02$ ). **Conclusions:** This study has shown that only the independent variable Recognition is of influence on Opening up in an OSG. There is no significant relationship between Opening up and the other variables.

**Keywords:** online support groups, opening up, recognition, lower costs, anonymity, accessibility

### **Introduction**

It is common knowledge that social media continues to influence our lives on a daily basis and keeps expanding into more areas of our society. People use media for all kinds of reasons: keeping in touch with friends and family, finding work, sharing interests and finding support from people in similar situations (Wood & Smith, 2001). OSGs, as a specific issue within social media, attract considerable attention. According to Chung (2013), an OSG can be described as communication about a shared problem. Studies have shown that many people make use of OSGs for reasons ranging from the expression of feelings, discussion of personal issues, information sharing and finding mutual support and empathy (Finn, 1999; Kummervold et al., 2001). The literature on OSGs show that many people experience benefits when participating in these groups such as: feeling empowered by sharing emotions, building relationships and learning new skills related to the management of their illness or issues, all from the comfort of your own home (Chung, 2013; Finfgeld, 2000; Finn, 1999; King & Poulos, 1998; Stommeh & Meijman, 2011; Weinberg, Schmale, Uken, & Wessel, 1995). A study by Kummervold et al. (2001) shows that people use forums to fulfil a need for information, to find social contact and support and to function as a supplement to traditional health services.

In this study, we aim to find out what qualities of an OSG are influential when it comes to opening up and talking about problems. The study will explore four different characteristics: Recognition in other people's stories, lower costs in comparison with traditional, face-to-face support groups, higher levels of anonymity in comparison with traditional support groups and the accessibility of an online forum.

#### **Online support groups**

Online support groups can often be experienced as a form of social support (Burggraaf-Huiskes, 1999; Unger & Powell, 1980; Wandersman, 1987). There are OSGs for a large number of (mental) health issues, including depression, anxiety, ADHD, MS and autism (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008). The large number and variety of OSGs justify that there is a need for these groups. They allow people to share stories with people who experience similar difficulties, conditions or distress, offering mutual support (Barak et al., 2008). Consequently, studies show that sharing is a powerful manner of coping with emotions; it can even stimulate personal growth (Feigelman, Jordan, & Gorman, 2009; Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2013).

In support of the last theory, Barak et al. (2008) showed that commitment to an online community often impacts the actual behaviour and the decisions people make. Some research even shows that OSGs might be considered as a possible supplement to face-to-face support groups or other traditional, professional treatment (Bragadottir, 2008; Barak et al., 2008; Bender, Katz, Ferris, & Jadad, 2013; Horvath et al., 2013).

These studies show that OSGs have considerable benefits. It can lead to solutions for problems or just to find some form of relaxation or stress-relief. Opening up is a particularly important aspect of the use of these OSGs. By opening up and talking about problems, people find a form of social support to help them with these issues (Burggraaf-Huiskes, 1999; Unger & Powell, 1980).

### **Reading similar stories**

An important characteristic of OSGs is the chance to read stories from people who have been through similar situations. Studies have shown that people who share similar experiences are often better capable of supporting each other, and that recognition causes people to get into contact with each other (Dekker, 1997; van der Meulebroecke, van Crombrugge, Janssens, & Colping, 2008). Moreover, reading each other's stories can enable people to bring changes into their own way of life, taking an example from other people. By discussing dilemmas and problems, it becomes possible to experience different perspectives and gain new insight into these problems (Braithwait, Waldron, & Finn, 1999).

Reading personal stories within an OSG can evoke memories in the reader. This aspect has been defined as memory priming (Tulving & Schacter, 1990; Scheufele & Scheufele, 2012). Reading these stories trigger hidden memories, which cause people to gradually start to disclose their own personal stories. To encourage participants of an OSG it might be helpful if a group leader or moderator stimulates the interaction between members, by mentioning the similarities between stories and by asking if participants would like to share similar or related stories (Birren & Kochran, 2001).

Similarly, Christianson (1992) has shown that reading stories of others triggers emotions in the reader. These emotions are often connected to (hidden) memories, which make it easier for these memories to come to the surface. These emotions and memories often trigger various reactions, including the need to share their own personal stories.

Based on the previously described studies, the following hypothesis has been added to this study: Reading similar stories in OSGs increases the likelihood to open up and talk about problems.

### **Anonymity**

Anonymity seems to be an important aspect when it comes to using OSGs. McKenna, Green, and Gleason (2002) made a fitting comparison between anonymity on the internet and strangers on the train. People travelling by train have the tendency to share intimate information with complete strangers, because chances are slim that they will ever meet these people again. Similarly, users of OSGs might never meet the people they are talking to, creating anonymity.

Research among 107 OSG users showed that the most mentioned advantage of OSGs was fewer stigmas due to anonymity (Wright, 2000). People often feel that therapists are prejudiced, which is why they turn to OSGs, where they cannot be judged (Cuijpers, Straten, & Andersson, 2008; Davison, Pennebaker, & Dickerson, 2000; Houston, Cooper, & Ford, 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Houston et al. (2002) showed that people feel they can share embarrassing conditions openly when they can do this anonymously. Moreover, users of OSGs do not have to share information on status, wealth, gender or race, which can help prevent stigmas and improve opening up and talking about problems (Barak et al., 2008; Hopps, Pépin, & Boisvert, 2003).

There are many other advantages of anonymity, including the unlikelihood that information will leak out, people feel more uninhibited and express themselves more openly due to their anonymity and, contrary to face-to-face support groups, there is no social pressure to share their thoughts and feelings (Barak et al., 2008; Buchanan & Coulson, 2007; Christopherson, 2007; McKenna et al., 2002; Suler, 2004; Weinberg et al., 1995; Wright & Bell, 2003).

Anonymity also comes with certain disadvantages. It causes some people to use harsh language, express harsh criticisms, anger, hate and even threats (Barak et al., 2008; Haas, Irr, Jennings, & Wagner, 2011). These negative reactions can cause people to become anxious and affect their willingness to open up in an OSG. Anonymity can also cause people to disclose too much, too soon, which they later regret and can hinder further opening up (Barak et al., 2008; Tanis & Postmes, 2007). Based on this information, the following hypothesis can be set: Anonymity helps to open up and talk about problems in OSGs.

### **Lower costs**

Compared to face-to-face treatment and support groups, OSGs seem to have an advantage when it comes to costs and the amount of spent time (Finn, 1999; van Rooijen, 2012; Townsend, Gearing, & Polyanska, 2012). Van Rooijen (2012) indicated that the amount of time spent for a user of an OSG is much lower than in formal mental health treatments. Townsend, Gearing, and Polyanskaya (2012) showed that 14% of the 2532 respondents of a National Survey on Drug Use and Health, found time to be an important issue. They chose OSGs over mental health treatment, as the traditional treatments are often time-consuming. However, OSGs give users the ability to divide their own time, and ask for help or support 24 hours a day (Eastin & LaRose, 2005). Moreover, OSGs are often open forums, which mean users can join and leave any time they want (Barak et al., 2008).

Other than having to spend less time in OSGs than traditional treatment, lower costs are also an important issue. Van Rooijen (2012) indicated that OSGs have lower costs than face-to-face interventions. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health showed

that 44% of participants could not afford formal mental health services, and thus chose OSGs over these traditional treatments (Townsend et al., 2012). The same study showed that inadequate insurance coverage prompted people to look for support online.

Time and money are important factors in the life of everyone, when making decisions. Since OSGs require little-to-no costs and enable people to arrange their own time, they are experienced as beneficial. The hypothesis for Lower costs is as follows: The little amount of time and the lower costs for individual users increases the use of OSGs.

### **Accessibility**

Another point of interest regarding the subject of OSGs is the accessibility of these groups and if ease of accessibility increases the use of these groups when looking at opening up and talking about problems online. Accessibility is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as 'able to be easily obtained or used' (Accessibility, 2014). OSGs are often open forums, where people can join in and leave whenever they want, making them accessible to people with internet access (Barak et al., 2008).

A study by Leung (2003) investigated the current generation of young adults, defined as Net-geners. Net-geners are the new generation that have grown up with the internet. The study by Leung (2003) has shown that Net-geners are emotionally open people, who use the internet for social purposes, like establishing social bonds, show affections and escape from the real world. This study supports the idea that the internet creates opportunities for new personal relationship and communities, and could be a functional alternative for face-to-face interaction. In addition to this, a study by Sun et al. (2005) has shown that adolescents with more psychosocial risk factors were more likely to use the internet. However, a review by Crutzen (2009) has shown that while adolescents might be more likely to use the internet as a medium for support, they often are not motivated to participate in interventions aimed at changing health behaviour.

Other than user characteristics, use of OSGs is also influenced by the website itself (van Rooijen, 2012). If the support group looks attractive and there is support from a therapist, there is a bigger chance that someone will use the website. On the other hand, websites that are not user friendly, have technical issues, are not easy to read or navigate can cause people to not use it (Ritterband et al., 2003). Several studies (Crutzen, 2009; Cuijpers et al., 2008; Wantland, Protillo, Holzemer, Slaughter, & McGhee, 2004) have shown that websites that used chatrooms and other features aimed at the needs of users showed better results, including more website visitors and longer amounts of time spent on the website. Crutzen (2009) stated that use of combined strategies were most effective. Based on the described literature, the following hypothesis has been added: The accessibility increases the ability to open up and talk about problems in OSGs.

Overall, it would seem that OSGs are a good way for people to find support, information and empathy regarding their issues. The four characteristics that have been discussed all seem to contribute to the use of these groups. In this research, it will be explored whether recognition, anonymity, low costs and time and accessibility increase the ease of opening up and talking about problems in OSGs.

The research will focus on opening up and talking about problems as a dependent variable. This will be studied as the motivation behind sharing stories on the internet, like feeling the need to reply to other people's stories, feeling the need to share own stories or feeling relieved when sharing.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants in the current study included randomly selected people, based on the specific characteristic of being an OSG user. A total of 206 participants started the survey, of which 117 were completed, which consisted of 32 males (27%) and 85 females (73%). Ages ranged between 14 and 67 ( $M = 35.61$ ,  $SD = 12.48$ ). Most participants (25%) have been active in OSGs for two to five years. The majority (71.2%) of the participants are only active in one OSG. While visiting these OSGs most participants responded regularly to others (50%), it was uncommon that people did not react at all (1.7%).

### **Instrument**

#### **Operationalization**

The next paragraph will contain the operationalization for the variables and explain certain definitions regarding the study.

Opening up and talking about problems: Opening up can be defined as speaking about inner feelings and thoughts on an online forum, in a traditional support group or with family/friends. By opening up people make these thoughts and feelings accessible to others. Oxford dictionary states: 'Make available of more widely known' (Opening up, 2014).

Online support group (OSG): An online group of people, who provide each other with moral support, information, and advice on problems relating to some shared characteristic or experience (Chung, 2013).

Recognition: 'a phase in the vision, from an unordered quantity of signals, an object or phenomenon as such is constructed, which corresponds to information in the memory' (Recognition, 2014). A characteristic from recognition is priming; recognizing or responding to a particular stimulus if it has been dealt with before. In regard to this study, recognition is seen as recognizing yourself in stories from other people.

Anonymity: 'The quality or state of being unknown or unacknowledged' (Anonymity, 2014). Anonymity in this study is seen as the ability not to let people know your true identity, or merely disclosing the information you want to disclose.

Low costs and little amount of time: These constructs are hard to define. There are no limits to high or low costs and much or little time, as these are subjective opinions. Low costs and little amount of time in regard to this study are seen as the mostly absent costs and the ability to limit the amount of time you spend on OSGs.

Accessibility: 'Easily approached or entered' (Accessibility, 2014). Accessibility in regard to this study is seen as the ability to easily find the website, the ease of use and registration, but also the ability to use the OSG on mobile devices.

The survey contained 37 items, divided into the five set variables. First, the dependent variable measured opening up and talking about problems, henceforth Opening up, which contained items such as 'I feel the need to open up in an OSG' and 'I think an OSG is a good place to talk about problems'. Second, the independent variable reading similar stories, henceforth Recognition, was measured with items such as 'I recognize myself in stories of others' and 'Reading other people's stories makes me feel like I'm not alone'. Third, the independent variable containing the ability to stay anonymous, henceforth Anonymity, was measured with items such as 'I value anonymity while using OSGs' and 'I feel that people are less judgmental'. Fourth, the independent variable measuring low costs and time, henceforth Lower costs was measured using items such as 'I can ask for help when I need it' and 'Low costs are important to me when I look for help'. Lastly, the independent variable concerning the ability to approach and use an OSG, henceforth Accessibility, used items such as 'I'm more likely to use and OSG when I can post without having to register' and 'I think it's important that the OSG is accessible whilst I'm on the move, for example through my phone or tablet'.

The items were derived from previous literature, put together for the first time in this study. The respondents answered in which degree the statement was applicable to the respondent on a 7-point Likert scale (1 strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree).

### **Procedure**

To collect the data a convenience sampling strategy was used. This strategy has been chosen, as there is no list available stating all OSG users. In part, this has to do with maintaining the anonymity of users. Benefits of this strategy include low requirement of time, because of the possibility of placing a survey on every available forum. On the other hand, the sample does not represent the entire population. Moreover, bias could appear, as the group that voluntarily fills in the survey might have different characteristics from the group that chooses not to reply (Neuman, 2012). Data has been collected through an online survey among users of OSGs. The survey has been posted on twenty-five different OSGs. These groups are focused on physical,



psychological and/or emotional problems, including OSGs for anorexia nervosa, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and depression. This gives the target group a high degree of diversity. In analyzing the results, the OSG users have been approached as one group.

### **Data analyses**

The raw data has been analysed with a correlation analysis and a multiple regression analysis. Through these analyses, a decision could be made whether the dependent variable is influenced by the independent variables, as described in the general hypothesis. For the analysis process SPSS Statistics has been used.

### **Assumptions**

In order to assess the quality of the results, derived from multiple regression analysis, an examination is made of the extent to which the assumptions were met. The assumptions include (A) absence of outliers, (B) multicollinearity, (C) homoscedasticity, (D) normally distributed errors, (E) normality and (F) linearity.

A. Examination of the data shows that there are some outliers in the different independent variables, but because there are no outliers on the model as a whole (maximum Cook's  $D = .07 < 1$ ), there is no need to delete these (Cook & Weisberg, 1982). B. The Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) for Recognition (VIF = 1.00), Anonymity (VIF = 1.06), Lower costs (VIF = 1.00) and Accessibility (VIF = 1.00) are less than 10 (Myers, 1990) and the tolerance of the variables are above .20 (Menard, 1995), suggesting that multicollinearity is not an issue. Important to mention is that the VIF for all independent variables shows an average above 1 ( $M = 1.10$ ), this means multicollinearity may be biasing the regression model (Bowerman & O'Connell, 1990). C. The scatter plots all shows different funnel-shaped clouds of dots, this might indicate a violation of the assumption of homoscedasticity. D. The Durban-Watson statistic was computed to evaluate independence of errors of Recognition (2.20), Anonymity (2.30), Lower costs (2.27) and Accessibility (2.15). This is considered acceptable, as it is around two (Field, 2009), suggesting the assumption of independent errors has been met. E. Review of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality for the dependent variable Opening up ( $D(117) = .13, p < .01$ ), skewness (-1.17) and kurtosis (2.44) statistics suggest that normality was not a reasonable assumption, as the kurtosis is above two. Review of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality for the independent variables suggests that normality was a reasonable assumption. The Q-Q plot and histogram suggests normality was reasonable for the dependent and independent variables. F. Review of the scatterplot of the dependent variable Opening up and the independent variables Recognition, Anonymity, Lower costs and Accessibility indicates linearity is a reasonable assumption.

Considering all the assumptions, the quality of the data can be described as reasonable. Because the kurtosis of Opening up was above two, the assumption

regarding normality was slightly violated. The assumption of homoscedasticity was also violated. However, because the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and the skewness show normality and the scatter plot was not notably funnel-shaped, the data is considered fairly qualified.

### Results

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation for every item for the independent variables and dependent variable included in the survey. The table shows that most items for Anonymity, Recognition and Lower costs are above the average of four based on the 7-point Likertscale. This shows that in general, people tend to 'agree' with the given statements.

To test the reliability, Cronbach's alpha was conducted for the five main variables. Cronbach's alpha for the set of items of Opening up (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ) was above the limit of internal consistency ( $r_{xx'} \geq .70$ , research among groups) (Evers, Lucassen, Meijer, & Sijtsma, 2009). For Recognition, Cronbach's alpha was .64. Anonymity had a Cronbach's alpha of .80. The set of items of Lower costs had a Cronbach's alpha of .59. The lower Cronbach's alpha for Lower costs might be explained by a divide in the construct, namely lower costs and time investment. Regarding Accessibility, after removal of Item 5 ( $r = .20$ ), Cronbach's alpha was increased to .73.

Table 1  
*Means and Standard Deviations for All Variables*

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Recognition</b>		
1. I visit an online support group to read other people's stories.	5.47	1.36
2. I recognize myself in stories of others.	5.92	0.85
3. I find support in reading other people's stories.	5.70	1.03
4. I get emotionally involved in others by reading their stories.	4.95	1.30
5. Reading other people's stories makes me remember more of my own experiences.	4.98	1.35
6. Reading other people's stories makes me feel like I'm not alone.	5.85	1.15
<b>Opening up</b>		
1. I reply online when I read something on the online support group.	5.24	1.41
2. I feel the need to open up in an online support group.	4.84	1.41
3. When I recognize myself in other people's stories, I feel the need to react.	5.55	1.16
4. I find it important to talk about my problems.	4.99	1.50
5. I think an online support group is a good place to talk about problems.	5.30	1.40

6. When other people tell their stories, I am more likely to tell my own.	5.22	1.40
7. I feel the need to offer other people support.	5.51	1.34
8. I talk to other people about their problems.	5.19	1.41
<hr/> Anonymity		
1. I feel that people are less judgmental	5.20	1.48
2. I value anonymity while using an online support group	5.26	1.61
3. I find it agreeable that other members have no access to my social network	5.20	1.57
4. I consider it positive that you cannot see each other	4.59	1.61
5. I can tell my story without also having to tell my friends and family	5.38	1.52
6. I am afraid that people from my social network will recognize my story	3.89	1.91
<hr/> Lower costs		
1. Low costs are important to me when I look for help.	2.31	1.68
2. I choose an online support group, because this is cheaper than professional help.	4.95	1.67
3. I use online support groups, because my insurance does not cover professional help.	5.53	1.26
4. I can ask for help when I need it.	5.26	1.61
5. I can divide my own time.	5.20	1.57
<hr/> Accessibility		
1. The look of the website, for example a simple lay-out, influences whether I use it or not.	3.53	1.55
2. I think an online support group is of better quality when it has more than one component (i.e. a forum, videos, information, etc.)	2.77	1.43
3. I'm more likely to use an online support group, when it is easy to find through a search engine (like Google).	3.17	1.57
4. I'm more likely to use an online support group, if the website-address is easy to remember.	3.31	1.63
5. I'm more likely to use an online support group when I can post without having to register.	4.21	1.88
6. I think it's important that the online support group is accessible whilst I'm on the move, for example through my phone or tablet.	3.73	1.91
<hr/> <i>Note.</i> Items were scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1, 'strongly disagree' to 7, 'strongly agree'.		

Before conducting the multiple regression analysis, the correlation of variables was determined. Table 2 shows significant correlations between some independent

variables (Lower costs, Accessibility and Anonymity). Moreover, the correlation matrix also shows the variables Recognition and Opening up to be significantly correlated.

Table 2

*Correlation Matrix containing All Variables*

Variable	Opening up	Recognition	Lower costs	Anonymity	Accessibility
Opening up	1.00				
Recognition	.24**	1.00			
Lower costs	.08	.17	1.00		
Anonymity	.11	.09	.22*	1.00	
Accessibility	.09	.12	.31**	.15	1.00

*Note.* \* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

A single regression analysis was conducted containing the dependent variable Opening up and the four independent variables. The independent variables Anonymity, Lower costs and Accessibility do not show a significant prediction on the dependent variable Opening up. All variables in this model as a whole do not explain a significant proportion of the variance ( $R^2 = .07$ ) in Opening up. Recognition significantly predicted Opening up ( $b^* = .29$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $F(1,115) = 2.29$ ).

### **Conclusion and discussion**

This study examined what qualities of an OSG are influential when it comes to Opening up. The study explored four different characteristics: Recognition, Anonymity, Lower costs and Accessibility.

The correlation matrix showed that only Recognition had a significant influence on Opening up. Therefore, the first conclusion is that the only and most important predictor variable in the present study was found to be Recognition. The results of this study are consistent with the findings of several studies assessing that Recognition causes people to get into contact with each other (Dekker, 1997; van der Meulebroecke et al., 2008). Recognition especially leads to Opening up. The need to support others is also an important aspect when it comes to Opening up. This can be explained by the study of Christianson (1992), which shows that reading stories from others triggers emotions, causing people to disclose their own personal information sooner.

Secondly, this study does not show a relation between Opening up and the variable Lower costs. Townsend et al. (2012) explained that people often choose to join an OSG, because they could not afford formal mental health services. However, the study has been conducted in a different country, which could explain why the current study did not show significant results for Lower costs. The Netherlands has a good health

service in comparison to other countries, which might explain why there are less concerns regarding money.

Eastin and LaRose (2005) mentioned the advantage that people in an OSG could divide their own time, and ask for help whenever they need it. There are some effects in accordance with this study; the means for Lower costs are above average, which shows that participants consider it important in the use of OSGs. However, the total construct Lower costs is not significant for Opening up.

Third, no relationship was found between Opening up and Anonymity. This is a remarkable finding when considering results from other studies. Several studies show the importance of Anonymity when talking online (Barak et al., 2008; Hopps et al., 2003; Wright, 2000). Especially the prevention of stigma in an OSG was an often-mentioned advantage (e.g. Cuijpers et al., 2008; Davison et al., 2000). In this study the results show that only a small group considered this aspect as important. The reason this finding differs from previous studies may have to do with the fact that in this study no distinction was made in the kind of problems people have and want to talk about online.

Finally, there was no relationship between Accessibility and Opening up. The results of this study are inconsistent with the findings of a study from van Rooijen (2012), which explained that the exterior and lay-out of the website positively influences the use of the OSG. Studies also showed that OSGs aimed at the needs of users show better results (e.g. Crutzen, 2009; Cuijpers et al., 2008). However, the current study does not show any of these effects. This could be explained by the idea that these aspects affect people more subconsciously, which could be why they do not think to report it.

### **Implications for practice**

From this study, a few interesting conclusions can be drawn with regard to interventions and recommendations for mutual support. For practitioners, the results give insight into the reasons why people would register for an OSG. The fact that there is a relationship between Recognition and Opening up shows that reading stories from other people positively influences the use of an OSG. When practitioners see people who have a distinct need for reading stories from others, an OSG could be recommended.

However, studies also show that Anonymity, Accessibility and Lower costs might contribute to Opening up in an OSG. The current study could not establish a relation between these aspects, which could be of importance to practitioners. Being aware of these aspects, a more fitting approach can be used to meet the wishes and expectations of people who feel a need for support. By meeting these expectations, the therapeutic relationship will improve, after which the support can be adjusted to the individual needs of the client.

### **Caveats and guidelines for future research**

Despite the positive outcome of our study, we would like to mention three caveats. First, this study did not randomly select the participating OSG users, because there is no overview of all the existing OSGs or OSG users. The study approached several types of OSGs, so that different types of OSGs were included. This refers directly to the second caveat, the fact that the study did not focus on one type of problem, for instance physical illness or autism. Consequently, this might be why few significant effects were found. It is likely that anorexia patients attach more value to Anonymity than someone with cancer. Distinguishing between different types of problems might have meant different results. The advantage of this study is that statements could be made about the group OSG users as a whole. An interesting question for future research would be to find out whether the characteristics significantly explain Opening up when the different types of problems are distinguished.

Third, although there is a gender imbalance in this study, gender has not been taken into account in the analyses due to limited time. Future research could investigate whether there is a relation between gender and one of the independent variables in relation to Opening up.

An important recommendation for future research is to assess what influences the choice between the use of online support, or traditional face-to-face support. The current study shows that Opening up is only influenced by Recognition, an aspect one would expect to find in face-to-face groups as well. The aspects that were expected to be of relevance specifically for an OSG were deemed insignificant. The results for Opening up have not been affected by users who only read stories and do not reply, as statistics show that the participants often reply on their OSGs.

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